

# Social Networks as a Platform for Academic Interaction: Possibilities and Challenges for Indian Academic Libraries

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**Abstract** - Social media encompasses many forms such as social networking sites like blogs, vlogs, instant messaging and virtual communities. Among the social media, Facebook appeared as a major platform and emerged as a winner because of its large user base. The rapid rise of social media provides numerous possibilities for academic institutions to exploit this media to extend its learning and teaching endeavors. Nonetheless, this has no boundary; it is suitable for administrators, managers, learners and teachers in academic institutions too. The Social networking is a medium that lets the users to interact and work collaboratively with others, including the ability to browse, search, invite friends to connect and interact across the globe. Several opportunities have been emerged for academic libraries in augmenting their basic objectives like identifying right users communities, their need and proactive teaching learning services to its users. Social software in the web 2.0 world not only enhances the practical usability in the library but also helps the diminishing librarian's role through value addition to profession itself. In this paper, select cases of social academic networks are described and different perspectives have been given on how academic libraries are participating in this massive social networking drive. Also, an attempt has been made to analyze social media presence of select Indian academic libraries.

**Keywords:** Academic Social Network, Social Software, Web2.0, Library Social Media, Social Media, Academic Libraries

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social media surfaced in a variety of social networking platforms such as, blogs, vlogs, instant messaging, social bookmarking and virtual communities. Social networking is evolving and is *sin qua non* to modern life. It has been doing different roles such as communication, teaching, promoting etc. The rapid rise of social media provides numerous possibilities for academic institutions to use it to extend its learning and teaching endeavors. This media improved teacher learner communication, out of the class sharing of information and knowledge resources and improved delivery of education. It has also improved sharing of learning resources in rural areas and difficult hilly terrains. Because of wide spread accessibility from mobile phones, use of social media for sharing scholarly information is on the increase. It has improved connectivity among learners, increased participation and collaboration and sharing of information including text, pictures, audio, video, etc.

among learners having common interests. As by and large this media has no controls and media checks, it has improved freedom of expression of ideas and empowered everyone for communication of knowledge. Social media evolved due to information technology based tools, social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities. This has now turned into a cultural phenomenon among a wide variety of the Internet users. Participation in web based social media in India is increasingly growing and it is also largely a youth phenomenon. A new information scenario is emerging which involves anytime, anywhere access to information even on the go, reading and responding to information received by instantly communicating messages.

## II. ACADEMIC USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

The social computing is now bringing realignment in social cohesion, as people are extending the tentacles of their social connections to global communities and interacting according to common causes and interests. A new information landscape is evolving where people largely access information and share ideas from hand held devices and making increasing use of mobile apps and social media tools for their convenience. This new information landscape is shaped by emergence of new web technologies, a variety of knowledge management and data analytic tools and content management software. It offers more convenience and saving of time for new generation of information users. Generation 'Y' is now using Facebook as an alternative to email (E Botha, M Farshid & L Pitt, 2011). And "social networks are now growing with mobile technology that has significantly changed the way in which people stay connected" (Shim *et al.*, 2011). Worldwide, there are over 2.32 billion monthly active users (MAU) of Facebook as of December 31, 2018. This is a 9 percent increase in Facebook MAUs year over year. 1.52 billion people on average log onto Facebook daily and are considered daily active users (Facebook DAU) for December 2018 (Zephoria, 2019). Institutions require to conform to popular ways of information access for delivery of content.

Social networks existed before the Internet, now technology made this possible to do online networks, not just face-to-face. "Since humans are so fundamentally social, we have consistently developed tools and technologies through the ages that allowed us to share thoughts and information with others in the form of cave drawings, art, the printing press, the telephone, television, the citizens band radio of the 1970s, and the bulletin boards of the early Internet days all point to the desire of humanity to increase one-to-one communication to one-to-many or many-to-many" (Gossieaux & Moran, 2010). For example, "Facebook and Twitter actually mirrors group behaviors that can be found in whales, monkeys, and dolphins. Intelligent animals 'use' groups to share information with one another - albeit without computers or smart phones - just like humans do online. The sharing of information through social networking sites actually reflects tactics animals have always used to gather information about their social environment" (n.a., 2012).

The broader categorization of social media is mainly based on three key factors; communication, collaboration, and networking. Nonetheless, the seven building blocks of social media, also called 'honeycomb framework' are Identity, Conversations, Sharing, Presence, Relationships, Reputations, and Groups (Sharma, 2017). Domino effect of traditional social activities can be seen in many of the social media tools also. Research suggests that networked individuals may now carry out community action roles more efficiently than organizations. There is evidence that social media is changing the way social actions are organized: not just collective action but also 'connective' action (Kevin & Angus, 2017). For example 'social networking for a cause' is also growing like a concept, and sites like Patientslikeme.com; Change.org; Networkforgood.org etc. are already in place. There are location-based social networks such as Brightkite, GyPSii, Pelagu, Whos Here and event-based social networking tools like Bizzabo. There are more than 200 social networking sites operational on the Internet. We are evolving into a collaborative work environment which ties people together by leveraging advantages from the knowledge of each other and working together in the areas of common interest.

Academic social-networking sites (ASNS) are a new form of digital platforms where users can upload academic articles, abstracts, and links to published articles; track demand for their published articles; and engage in professional interaction, discussions, and exchanges of ideas. For example, important ASNS like Academia.edu and Research Gate - offer themselves as professional and social networks of researchers, combining characteristics of social networks with the publication of studies, all adjusted to the needs and comportment of academic researchers (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017). However, ASNS is not limited to only to specialized social sites; it may also include citation indexes, reference management tools, general social networks, social bookmarking etc.

*A. Academia.edu:* Established in 2008 in San Francisco by Richard Price as part of the Open Science movement defines its goal as encouraging and stimulating the publication of studies. The site has tripled in size this year reaching 800,000 registered users and more than 3 million unique monthly visitors. 2500 academic papers are posted and 3500 new scholars join every day! This site attracts over 33 million unique visitors a month (Academia.edu).

*B. Research Gate:* It came in 2008 in Berlin by Ijad Madisch, Horst Fickenscher, and Sören Hofmayer. Its purpose is to connect geographically distant researchers and allow them to communicate continuously on the basis of the open-world concept, the elimination of distance as an important factor in working relations and to create access to studies even before they are completed for purposes of peer review and exchange of ideas (Ovadia, 2014). According to the statistics given on its webpage, Research Gate had more than fifteen million members as on October 2018. It organizes itself mainly around research topics. It maintains its own index based on the user's contribution to content, profile details, and participation in interaction on the site, such as asking questions and offering answers.

*C. Method Space:* This is a multidimensional online network for the community of researchers, from students to professors, engaged in research methods. Sponsored by SAGE Publishing, a leading publisher of books and journals in research methods, the site is created for students and researchers to network and share research, resources and debates. Method Space users have free access to selected journal articles, book chapters, etc. which highlight emerging topics in the field.

Social media has now an integral part of the fabric of the scholarly communication system and uses new indicators for social interactions (Sugimoto *et al.*, 2017). The process of formally being cited by other researchers is a very slow process, however, using Altmetrics tool, which focuses on social media and the general public opinion about a research work is much faster than traditional citations (University of Denver, 2018). A number of tweets, blog posts, likes, bookmarks, downloads, click-through numbers, peer collaborations, etc. are some of the major indicators for Altmetrics.

### III. SOCIAL NETWORKS AND ITS POSSIBLE IMPLICATION IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Social media sites become one of the massive online platforms in the world for sharing real time information. Academic libraries are now engaged on social media in order to connect with diverse community groups and move beyond the traditional bounds of the library. For example, in the year 2013, 86% of libraries were using social media and 30% posting are done on daily basis (Harrison *et al.*, 2017). The need of the hour is how best LIS professionals can exploit the disruptive changes for the societal benefit. In the US libraries have been using social media tools to connect

with users and to market programs and services (ALA, n.d.). It is observed from the literature that the most frequent type of postings in social media was related to announcing upcoming events held in libraries. Posts about community news or emotionally inspiring messages elicited much engagement from users and posts having an image or images tend to receive more user engagement (Joo, Choi & Hyun, 2018). Facebook use by libraries falls into five areas of interest; "how-to" kind of studies, library-centered case studies, student-based research, service-provided analysis and perceived-use study (Jacobson, 2011). For example, American Libraries running a blog to deliver answers to frequently asked questions. ALA Library staff blog "Ask the ALA Librarian," is encouraging people to discuss library-related issues and it has a dedicated Facebook page.

Miami University Libraries (Ohio) offers a mobile application built in Drupal that gives users access to the catalog, databases, social media content and library staff; North Carolina State University Libraries has an application called WolfWalk, which guides students to 90 different historical spots on campus, and Shake It! App of the Orange County Library provides suggestions for library books or movies when patrons physically give their phones a shake. OCLC has mobile access to its WorldCat and MedlinePlus mobile app helps to find health and drug information using mobile devices (ALA). Librarians at Coastal Carolina University each created their own Facebook profile and joined a common library group in hopes of updating students of a new product, services, events, and 'Ask a Librarian' service. This has increased the library's visibility across campus and enhanced interpersonal relationships between library workers (Graham *et al.*, 2009). It is increasingly becoming important for librarians to seek the support of social connections, as libraries are known as service-oriented institutions. Today, libraries are finding innovative ways to connect their users and user communities. Hence, social media is an interesting platform for promoting library collection, library services, value addition, for speedy transfer of information and to identify user 'pull' (demand) by attracting new potential customers. Library professionals can also generate funds for the library by creating significant information blogs and generate adequate traffic. There are blogs that earn enormous amount of money. The highest earning ranking Huffington Post monthly earning is about \$ 2,330,000 whereas Mashable blog earns about \$ 560,000 a month (Knapp, 2017).

Academic Librarian can make use of social networks in three ways, i. e. information communication, knowledge organization and access and information dissemination.

*A. Information Communication:* By using social media platforms academic librarian can keep constant touch and effective interaction with teaching faculty, students and research scholars in online collaborative environment. MySpace, Facebook, Ning, Blog, LinkedIn and Twitter are some of the best applications for information communication.

*B. Knowledge Organization and Access (KOA):* Social software can help professionals in KOA environment for getting handy information which can be accessible with the web 2.0 social networking technologies. For example, aNobii, it helps book lovers to share reviews and recommendations. It also prepares due date alerts, lending, and discussions. Delicious - it uses a non-hierarchical classification system in which users can tag each of their bookmarks with freely chosen index terms. Netvibes, Library Thing and Librarianious are other examples.

*C. Information Dissemination:* Information sharing is the major part and crucial area where LIS professionals should think seriously while considering and designing library activities in digital environment. End user satisfaction should be given first and foremost priority by providing right information at the right time in a right way from anywhere. Some of the critical tools used for information distribution are; Flickr, YouTube, Teacher Tube, Second Life, Wikipedia, Footnote, Community Walk, SlideShare and Digg.

To choose and keep a constant track on a wide range of social media tools, we may have to define the criteria for evaluation of these tools and content they carry. It is important to choose a platform, which our customers frequently use and identify. There are several challenges involved when adopting social networking tools in library and information centres, like;

1. *Lack of Awareness and Skills:* Most librarians lack the IT skills that could be required to adopt the social networking sites for effective library services. Some librarians are not even aware of useful features of social networking tools; even the few that are aware are still struggling to find out the productive uses of these for library services.
2. *Weaker Network Bandwidth:* Several institutions have limited Internet bandwidth to implement social media platforms. Poor connectivity can frustrate effective online participation and interaction with users.
3. *Technophobia:* A number of librarians and users are afraid of handling new technologies. They keep on stick to traditional library services, their comfort zone and are not willing to embrace the change.
4. *Unreliable Power Supply:* The interrupted supply of power discourages people from participating in the social media activities.
5. *Copyright Issues:* The free access to information where people copy, paste and edit content without acknowledging the original author is a serious challenge to copyright management.
6. *Lack of Time and Resources:* The biggest challenge that libraries face is lack of time to spend on social media. This is mainly due to smaller staff size and also due to lack of focused approach while using social media tools.
7. *Difficulty in Quantifying and Accountability of Social Media Efforts*

8. *Corporate Invasion of Privacy and Breaches:* Social networking invites major corporations to invade users' privacy and sell their personal information to third parties.
9. *Frequent Changes in Technologies:* Professional growth and development is one of major challenges in today's information age because technologies change very fast.

#### IV. BENEFITS OF SOCIAL NETWORK IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

The real utilization of social media is based on active human networks. Technology is an enabler; one should have IT literacy skills, its social dimensions and where to use know-hows. Creation and application of knowledge are only possible when collaboration, communication, and consolidation happen. The following are some of the key benefits of social network in academic libraries:

1. To identify the individuals, teams, and units who play key roles in academic activities.
2. To contextualize knowledge and to make out opportunities to accelerate knowledge flows across functional and organizational boundaries.
3. To form study groups, encourage research based projects and even help with academic support for distance education.
4. To strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of existing, formal communication channels and improving library's weaker areas
5. To progress innovation and learning
6. Building professional networks
7. Free library promotion is probably the biggest advantage for librarians using social networking tools.
8. By consistently interacting and posting, a librarian can build trust and credibility amongst their user, which in turn can lead to effective communication.
9. Ease of communication – announcement services, special events and more by simply typing your message and posting it to your page or profile.
10. Communicating and collaborating when people can't be physically in the same place.

However, in social network, major transactions are public in nature, even a small mistake can morph into a public relations nightmare and publicity may be negative. It is time consuming because it may take hours together to look into the good pictures, videos and reading clever posts. If there is low interest of librarians in learning and utilizing social media it will lead to missed opportunities. Inadequate training opportunities for library staff, power failure and slow speed of Internet are some of the limitations, which may lead to digital divide and fall in late adopters group.

Especially in the present digital environment, academic professionals need a new bunch of skill sets specific to utilizing and leveraging social networking sites to provide quality services and maintain their role as information

experts in an advanced web. Therefore, basic literacy in evaluating social media platforms is must, for example, knowledge on handling of Fan Page, Advertising Page and Event Pages in Facebook. Administering service level agreements, developing institute level query-answer services, preparing dashboards, media content filtering, visualization of heaps of data and interpretation of social bytes are other important activities to be handled by the LIS professionals.

The following observations and suggestions are made after analyzing some select Facebook pages of Indian academic libraries;

1. Several institutions had multiple Facebook accounts and it was a major challenge to identify the official page. It is assumed that many fake profiles are created for the visibility of either an individual or an institution. Hence, there is a need for qualitative analysis of Facebook pages.
2. Libraries shall decide which social network platforms are to be used based on an understanding of the needs and preferences of their users. For example, keeping static information about libraries is not Twitter's job! If libraries activities need video contents then Youtube channel is a primary source. Likewise, Facebook is not only the place for the library to dump all types of content.
3. The library must focus on the social media pages that are relevant to their community and provide links to user-generated content.
4. Institution-wide policies must be formulated for implementing and managing social media accounts.
5. Strategies need to be worked out for content creation, editing, and the tone of the messages, content archiving and assessment/feedback from the end users.
6. There is a need for promotion approach for social media pages such as online contests, quizzes etc. to attract new followers.
7. Special training needs to be given to library staff on developing quality content and building strategies to attract followers
8. Though there is a growth in automated and algorithm driven content creation tools, libraries must form 'content teams' to manage quality content in line with users' interests.
9. There is a need of creating post of social media librarian with specialized roles and skills
10. Libraries & Information centre should create social media marketing strategies and plans

#### V. CONCLUSION

Due to an implausible amount of content getting generated, a great deal of valuable knowledge gets accumulated and is ultimately lost if not managed well. For LIS professionals content is king – library business depends on the best content that shares its greatest ideas. But how seriously LIS professionals are involved in content customization

activities on social Web? LIS professionals are skilled in analysis, consolidation, access, and are managers of explicit knowledge. Library professionals should step into unattended ways of knowledge management and perform new roles in the wake of availability of better tools and technologies. For example, corporate setups have a robust system of tracking and documenting tacit knowledge of employees through knowledge transfer (KT) process. In order to develop knowledge resources and align such resources to provide impetus to users' work processes, LIS professionals should track users' activities, experiences and look for better practices. LIS professionals can utilize such user inputs for fine-tuning information services, products and even to empower the silent customers of the library. Due to high numbers of internet users and growing literacy level social media is now embedded in almost everyone's daily life. These platforms would definitely help libraries to strengthen their relationship with users and has the potential to pay great dividends in the form of user fidelity.

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