

social media <http://bit.ly/13v2q03>

what is it?

Social media are considered to be the definitive communication tools of the 21st century.

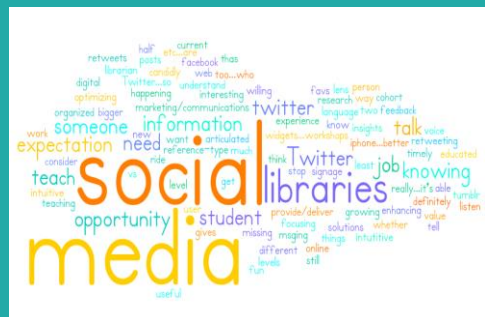
They can be defined as the user-generated content and interactions facilitated by mobile device applications (“apps”), networks and websites.

More typically, however, the term describes a handful of the most popular social networking tools, their content, and even their users.

Use of the term varies by context:

- It is often referred to as a tool, e.g., “I use social media”
- It can also be described as a place, e.g., “in social media ...”

However, social media are most consistently understood as today’s foremost means of communication and interaction.



how does it work?

To appreciate the way social media work, it is valuable to understand how they are used. Generally, these tools and content are used for communication, information seeking, and entertainment and, at the core, display and facilitate social interaction and casual communication through simple and frequent information sharing.

How information is displayed (and therefore understood and recognized) depends on a given social media platform. For example:

- Facebook offers information through a personalized “time line” of the most popular and relevant events, photographs, status updates, and wall conversations, based on one’s previously set user preferences.
- Twitter presents information through a personal news feed of tweets (i.e., messages) generated by one’s following; the main navigation page chiefly reflects the most recent (and typically the most frequent) tweets.

In addition, social media management tools (i.e., Hoot Suite, Tweetdeck) effectively keep track of multiple social media properties and dialogues.

who’s doing it?

In an academic setting, users can include:

- students
- faculty
- librarians
- the community at large

Most academic departments and libraries have some social media presence, but on an organizational level the approach to and management of these virtual properties are inconsistent. However, most libraries cannot commit personnel exclusively to the development and management of social media and these responsibilities are added to one or more institutional portfolios. While more attention is being paid to integrating social media into library services, it is still difficult for libraries to establish a detailed and cohesive social media strategy when the necessary human resources may be unavailable.

why is it significant?

Social media are not a passing trend, nor are they only useful for one particular generation or a distasteful distraction. They are simply the newest form of communication and have taken the concepts of social identity and social interaction and turned them on their heads.

Social media are significant for two reasons. One, although born from websites, they now exist within the lives and conscious mentality of its users. Two, they have an ongoing ability to alter our understanding of marketing, communications, information broadcasting, and user relations.

Ultimately, social media have become tools with which, and through which, the user lives. For many people, they are a necessary part of everyday life and business.

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further reading

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what are the challenges?

Institutions face a number of challenges related to social media.

The most basic institutional challenges centre on simple decisions such as which networks to join, what tone to take, how frequently to post, etc. However, institutions also face more complicated challenges such as time commitment, useful audience relations, and relevant content gathering.

As such, an institutional social media strategy is imperative to resolve key issues and implement thoughtful solutions.

The integration of a successful social media strategy really depends on a consistent understanding of social media as a tool, and the user as an audience. It is important to understand that a successful social media presence cannot simply be about basic broadcast and casual conversation—the challenge is to have the ability to be aware of the library and its community as a whole and to harness the capacity to triage questions and needs in useful ways.

Essentially, the library becomes the ultimate, personalized and engaging help desk.

where is it going?

Where will social media go? What device will they conquer? Which network will gain popularity next? There are no definitive answers to these questions but it is safe to say that social media will remain steady elements of daily social life.

Interest in social media trends, techniques, and uses is growing in the academic library setting, but a disparity between active users and non-users still exists, particularly in a library setting. Planning and communications become challenging when user expectations of social media are so disparate, and are further complicated by organizational apathy towards the tool and its significance.

To move academic library staff from observers of social media trends to committed and engaged participants within social media, further discourse and the inevitable demonstration of tangible value will be essential.

what are the implications for libraries?

Social media offer libraries the opportunity to gain unique insights into and have dialogues with users—interactions that were impossible on such a large, public and personalized scale before. In addition, a thoughtful and curated social media presence allows libraries to reimagine and reinforce their branding and marketing daily through a public demonstration of services, initiatives, and attitudes.

While the reach and influence afforded by social media participation is innovative, the adoption of social media as institutional tools requires resources, plus careful consideration of the goals, needs, and expectations of the participating library.

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