SOCIAL MEDIA IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN THE SADC REGION

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to bridging the literature gap on the use of social media by university libraries in Africa. Twenty-six public university libraries in the SADC region were surveyed and the majority, nineteen (73%), are using at least one social media platform mainly to promote library and information services to their users - students and academic staff. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the main platforms used. Social media policies and strategies to guide the use of the platforms are largely absent in about 85% of libraries. The libraries are facing several challenges, most of them associated with the ad hoc adoption of social media. Lack of staff with the necessary expertise to manage and monitor social media platforms; inadequate funding, and lack of skills for digital content development, are three major challenges being faced. Despite the challenges, library and information professionals are optimistic that social media has a bright future in university libraries in the region if improved technical infrastructure, especially the Internet, and policy environments favourable to using social media in libraries are put in place.

Keywords: Social Media; University Libraries; SADC; Africa

1. Introduction

Social media use by university libraries, especially in developed countries, has now become mainstream (Taylor & Francis, 2014). Social media is being used to achieve a variety of library objectives including marketing and promoting libraries services. Social media also has great potential to enhance provision of library and information services in Africa, especially in university libraries due to their relatively better access to information communication technology (ICT) and well defined user groups, especially students. There is ample evidence that students in universities in Africa are already using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Zanamwe, Rupere & Kufandirimbwa, 2013; Akeriwa, Penzhorn & Holmer, 2014; Wiid, Cant & Nell, 2014; Chitumbo & Chewe, 2015). Therefore, university libraries should be establishing a presence on these platforms to provide social media enhanced library services and products, and to engage with their digital savvy library users.

While there is substantial knowledge on social media use in university libraries in the developed world, the situation in Africa is not clearer. Research focusing on the use of social media by library and information professionals for personal and professional purposes (Chisenga & Chande-Mallya, 2012; Banda, Grand & Zulu; 2014), and by university libraries (Chitumbo &

Chewe, 2015; Gichora & Kwanya, 2015; Maisiri, Mupaikwa & Ngwenya, 2015; Owusu-Ansah, Gontshi, Mutibwa & Ukwoma, 2015), is just emerging. However, overall there is a general absence of studies on a relatively large scale that could paint a general picture on the use of social media in university libraries on the continent.

2. Research objectives

The purpose of this study was to contribute to bridging the literature gap on use of social media in university libraries in Africa focusing on public university libraries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The study focused on institutional use of social media rather than on individual use by library staff. The specific objectives of the study were:

- To establish the current trends in adoption of social media in public university libraries;
- To identify the challenges being faced and lessons learned if any, and;
- To establish the perceived future of social media in libraries in the SADC region.

In this study, the terms social media and web 2.0 are used interchangeable, and so are the terms social media tools, social media platforms and social media applications; and university libraries and academic libraries.

3. Literature review

3.1 Social media

The literature is replete with definitions of the term social media, and it is clear that there is no universally agreed definition of the term. In the context of this study, social media was used to simply refer to mobile and web-based technologies, platforms and services that facilitate interactions, conversations, participatory digital content generation, and sharing content among users.

There are hundreds of social medial tools available to users and many more are emerging. It is important to note that social media is constantly evolving and its uses are changing and expanding (Cohen, 2011). Below is a selection from the many different categories of social media that have appeared in the literature (Mayfield, 2008; Constantines & Fountain, 2008; Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010)

- Blogs – simple webpages in which the entries/or blog posts are organized in reverse chronological order. Blogging applications include WordPress, Blogger, etc.
- Content aggregators (i.e. Real Simple Syndication - RSS) for aggregating and publishing frequently updated content;
- Content communities (i.e. Flickr, YouTube, Vimeo, etc.) for sharing user generated content such as photos and videos;
- Micro-blogging sites (i.e. Twitter, Tumblr, Weibo, etc.) for distributing/broadcasting short messages (update') online to subscribers or followers;
- Social bookmarking applications (i.e. Digg, StumbleUpon, Delicious, etc.) for organizing, storing and sharing Internet bookmarks;

- Social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Google+, MySpace, etc.) that connect users;
- Collaborative digital content creation (i.e. Wikis, Google Docs, etc.) for facilitating content generation.

3.2 Social media in university libraries

University libraries are increasingly using social media tools to market and promote their services to users (Taylor & Francis, 2014; Zohoorian-Fooladi & Abrizah, 2013; Collins & Quan-Haase 2012; Rodger, 2012; Ayu & Abrizah, 2011). Libraries are also using social media to update library users with news and events relevant to the library (Tripathi & Kumar, 2010; Maisiri, Mupaikwa & Ngwenya, 2015; Gichora & Kwanya, 2015; Linh, 2008). Using social media, libraries are able to go where their users are in order to create, contribute, and connect to a global community (Kroski 2007, p.15).

Several studies (Taylor & Francis 2014; Ayiah & Kunah 2011; Ezeani & Igwesi 2012; Collins & Quan-Haase, 2012; Chu, Cheung, Hui, Chan & Man 2010) indicate that Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media applications used by academic libraries. Specific use of Facebook and Twitter, as mentioned by Chu, Cheung, Hui, Chan & Man (2010), is for "similar purposes: publicity, marketing , interaction with students and news dissemination" while "Facebook, instant messaging and wikis have all been used for enquiry services". Libraries are also using blogs for various purposes including disseminating general information about libraries, conveying research tips, informing users about new books added to the library collection, and providing book reviews (Tripathi & Kumar, 2010).

3.3 Challenges

Adopting social media by libraries is not without challenges. Zohoorian-Fooladi and Abrizah (2013, p.169), in their study, concluded that use of social media in academic libraries "is challenged by workflow obstacles, technology obstacles, organizational obstacles and personal obstacles". Taylor and Francis (2014, p.6) also identify several challenges related to limited funding to support advanced social media usage; Internet connectivity, technological infrastructure and government restrictions on the use of social media; copyright issues; levels of interest and skills to use social media, among others. Kuikka and Äkkinen (2011) broadly classified the challenges as internal and external.

3.4 Future prospects

Despite the challenges faced, research indicates that the future of social media in libraries is positive. Taylor and Francis (2014, p.27) are certain that social media would "become more important to the library in the future" and that "the future is more integrated, with library services and collections becoming more deeply embedded with external sites". Other studies that envisage a bright future for social media in libraries include McManus (2009), Collins & Quan-Hasse (2012) and Lui (2008). McManus observed that social media applications have prepared the ground work for Library 2.0 for libraries and that the "future holds a greater, inherently richer experience for library users and researchers". Collins & Quan-Hasse maintain that "social media is fundamental for remaining relevant and meeting user expectation, particularly with younger users" and therefore future prospects are richer and more sustainable for those libraries who continue to adopt and use social media.

3.5 Social media policy and strategy

Adoption of social media policy and/or strategy is well supported by literature as the best practice to precede implementation of social media initiatives in libraries. Burclaff & Johnson (2014, p.366) warns libraries that it is "important to take a step back and think carefully about the purpose for using social media", in order to have clear focus, defined deliverables and measurable outputs. A social media strategy, and/or policy will "define the purpose of engaging in social media, moving past what content is shared and how it is shared and to why the library is using social media at all" (Yau & Webber-Bay, n.d.). Most social media experts recommend that the strategy / policy should be a written document.

Despite research indicating the importance of adopting social media policies and strategies, it appears the practice is not common in university libraries. In their study, Taylor and Francis (2015, p.3), found only that about a third of the libraries had a social media policy in place. Johnson and Burclaff (2013, p.403), also noted that 82% of the libraries that were active on social media had no policy or other formal social media guidelines.

4. Research design and method

A quantitative cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. It largely involved collecting quantitative data on several variables from public university libraries in the SADC region to enable us to determine the emerging trends in the use of social media by the libraries. An online questionnaire, hosted on Google Forms, was used to collect data from a sample population of public university libraries.

4.1 Research sample

The study targeted public university libraries in the following 11 out of 15 SADC member countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa, Seychelles, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. These are countries that either have English as their official or one of the official languages. The samples were drawn from public universities listed on the website of the Southern African Regional Universities Association (http://www.sarua. org/?q=content/sadc-public-universities) which, as at 1 October 2015, had 54 public universities (Annex 1) from the 11 target countries. Only two universities, one in Zimbabwe and the other in Mauritius, were not invited to take part in the study due to lack of contacts with their librarians/ directors.

4.2 Research instrument and data collection

The online questionnaire was based on various questionnaires and ideas from the literature review. It was tested on two public university libraries in Ghana and their comments were taken into account in the final instrument. Data was collected on the following aspects: library's presence on social media and goals, social media platforms used, target audiences for social media initiatives, managing and monitoring social media efforts, challenges and lessons learnt, and the perceived future of social media in the SADC region.

Data was collected between 15 November 2015 and 15 February 2016. Twenty-seven (52%) University Librarians/Directors agreed to their libraries participating in the study. Altogether, 26 online questionnaires, from 9 countries out of 11, were completed representing 96% response

rate. The distribution of responses was as follows: eight (30.8%) from South Africa, six (23.0%) from Tanzania, three (11.5%) each from Zambia and Zimbabwe, two 2 (7.6%) from Malawi, and one (3.8%) each from Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Presence on social media

Nineteen (73%) of the participating 26 public universities libraries had a presence on social media. The earliest account was established in 2009 by one (5.3%) library. The rest were distributed as follows: one (5.3%) library in 2010, four (21.1%) in 2011, six (32.6%) in 2012, three (15.8%) in 2013, and four (21.1%) in 2014.

While literature traces social media use to the mid-2000s in the developed world, in most developing countries' libraries it is a recent phenomenon and is picking up slowly. It should also be noted that in general, libraries in Africa have tended be very slow in adopting information and communication technology due to various factors, including inadequate funding, and skills.

5.2 Social media policy and goals

Regarding social media policies and written goals the situation in the SADC region is not different from global trends. An overwhelming majority, sixteen (84.2%), of the libraries that had a presence on social media had no social media policies in place, and the same number, sixteen (84.2%), also had no *written* social media goals for their social media initiatives. However, whether written or not, all nineteen (100%) libraries had social media goals they wanted to achieve, and the main goal, indicated by all (100%) respondents, was to promote library services, collections and activities to their users. Seventeen (89.5%) libraries also indicated to build relationships through engagement with the library community as one of their social media goals.

5.3 Types of social media used

The literature (Taylor & Francis, 2015; Chu & Du, 2012; Rogers, 2011; Smeaton & Davis, 2014) shows that Facebook and Twitter are the most popular platforms used in university libraries. In general, YouTube (Johnson & Burclaff, 2013) or blogs come third on the list of top platforms used. The situation is no different in the SADC region. Facebook was used by all nineteen (100%) libraries, followed by Twitter, used by sixteen (84.2%) and YouTube by eleven (57.9%) libraries. Flickr was used by six (31.6%) libraries, five (26.3%) had blogs and Google Docs by four (21.1%) libraries. Three out of the five libraries with blogs had their pages on WordPress and the remaining two on Blogger.

The findings confirmed the general trend regarding the adoption of social media in Africa. Essoungou (2010) stated that the three platforms - Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the most visited websites in most African countries.

5.4 Specific uses of top three social media tools

Regarding the specific uses of the top three social media tools - Facebook, Twitter and YouTube - the libraries indicated various activities such as informing their users about the library's activities, short courses, seminars, opening hours, etc. and sharing photographs of such as events, seminars, and promotional videos, i.e. on information literacy instructions, library orientation, training, etc. The uses established by the findings matched those revealed in literature, mainly marketing services and interacting with users.

The specific uses of social media in the university libraries were also largely influenced by the nature of their clientele. To reiterate, university libraries users are mainly students and faculty. Literature indicated that students in most universities in Africa are already using Facebook and Twitter, and that targeting them with social media enhanced library services makes good business sense. In the findings, all nineteen (100%) libraries indicated that their primary target for social media enhanced library services were the students. Fifteen (78.9%) mentioned university staff, and four (21.1%) the general public, as their secondary target audiences. The university libraries should also equally explore using social media to support research work by their academic staff and graduate students.

5.5 Managing social media efforts/platforms

Regarding funding and staff for social media initiatives, only one (5.3%) library had a budget dedicated to such. Furthermore, in eleven (57.9%) libraries, social media initiatives were managed by full-time library staff on an ad-hoc basis; four (21.1%) had full-time staff, three (15.8%) had a committee in place, while in one (5.3%) library the initiatives were managed as part of the universities' marketing activities.

The study observed that these libraries are still in the early adoption stages of social media, like all Africa libraries generally. This could be one of the reasons why most of them do not have budgets for the social media initiatives and are managing them on an ad hoc basis. While libraries can easily integrate social media into their existing library operations without any need for additional budgets and staff, dedicating funds and staff to social media initiatives, in addition to having sound social media policies and strategies in place, would accelerate the development of the libraries' social media efforts.

From the findings, only staff involved in social media initiatives in eight (42.1%) libraries had received appropriate training in content creation, and in ten (52.6%) libraries staff had received training in updating content.

While there is a general assumption that social media tools are easy to use and library staff can learn by themselves, the study advocates that staff need to be equipped with necessary skills to enable them to understand the use of social media for institutional purposes as opposed to personal use. Skills for sourcing and selecting content from different sources, creating original and appropriate content, scheduling and regularly updating social media platforms, among others, are crucial for successful social media initiatives in libraries.

5.5.1 Monitoring social media activities

The findings established that while fourteen (73.7%) libraries monitored social media buzz, posts, conversations and news about their libraries; only ten (52.6%) analyzed/measured the success of their social media efforts/activities. Therefore the study appeals that it is important for libraries to monitor the social media sphere as this is the only guaranteed way of finding out what is being said about them, and also to get updated on what is going on, in general, in the library and information field. Measuring the success or impact of library social media initiatives is an activity that should be done to justify the investments on social media.

Monitoring of social media activities should utilize specific tools. In the findings, nine (64.3%) used free tools (or free versions of commercial tools) to measure/analyze the success of their

social media activities, one (7.1%) used commercial tools, and four (28.6%) did not indicate the nature of tools used. Only five libraries indicated the specific tools they used and these were *HootSuite* (used by three libraries), while *Everypost* and *Tweetdeck* were used by one library each. The majority of the libraries, eleven (57.8%), used *site visits* and *number of followers* to measure the success of their social media activities, and nine (47.4%) used *tweets/re-tweets*.

It is worth emphasizing that libraries should be clear about what they want to measure when it comes to social media monitoring. Metrics related to consumption and sharing of the library's social media content, i.e. the number of people that viewed or downloaded the video or document, and number of times the library content was shared by users with others, will provide very useful data on the potential impact of the library's social media initiatives. Unfortunately, relying on site visits and the number of followers does not provide a vivid picture in monitoring terms. University libraries that are using social media should invest in reliable tools for managing and monitoring social media platforms and thereby amplify the impact of their initiatives.

5.6 Challenges with social media

The major challenges associated with using social media faced by the majority, more than 60%, of the libraries were the lack of staff/expertise to continually manage social media efforts reported by thirteen (68.4%) libraries; inadequate funds/budget for social media efforts, by thirteen (68.4%); and lack of skills for content development for the social media platforms reported by twelve (63.2%) libraries.

These challenges are largely internal and have been echoed in literature as linked to the current ad hoc adoption of social media by the majority of the libraries. The study concedes that without a policy and strategy in place, it is very difficult to coordinate the various elements towards successful social media initiatives.

5.7 Future of social media in libraries

All nineteen (100%) individuals that completed the questions on behalf of their libraries agreed that overall social media has a future in university libraries in the SADC region. In addition, about 74% *strongly agreed* that by 2015 most of their primary targets, university students, for social media enhanced library services will be using social media. Also, more than 67% agreed that most university libraries will officially integrate social media in their functions, and social media will be key delivery platforms for library information services. The findings confirm that there is indeed a future for social media in library and information services, as exposed by the literature review, and university libraries in the SADC region also visualize it. Therefore, university libraries need to focus on pursuing long term strategies for social media enhanced services. However, most of the respondents were concerned about improved technical infrastructure, especially the Internet, and availability of policy environments favourable to using social media in libraries, and emphasized that these would be fundamental for social media to thrive in the library and information environment in the SADC region.

5.8 Lessons learned

Three key lessons came out of the findings as follows:

- A social media policy and strategy clearly defining the library's social media objectives is critical to the success of the social media initiatives.

- Start small and avoid creating a presence on several social media platforms as the library may not have the resources, i.e. funds and staff time to manage and monitor all the platforms. The library's social media presence should be allowed to grow naturally.

- Assign staff dedicated to managing the library's social media initiatives, including for content creation, updating social media platforms and monitoring the social media sphere.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The study sought to contribute to the paucity of literature on institutional or official use of social media in university libraries in Africa by establishing the current trends in adoption of social media, the challenges being faced and lessons learned, if any, and the perceived future of social media in libraries in the SADC region.

The findings show that public university libraries in the SADC region, like their counterparts in the developed world, are adopting social media to address several library objectives, mainly to promote library and information services among their target users, especially students in the universities. Social media policies and strategies are missing, an indication that the use of social media is largely being done on an ad hoc basis. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the most widely adopted social media platforms and are mainly being used for library and information services.

The libraries are facing several challenges associated with the ad hoc adoption of social media. Lack of staff with the necessary expertise to manage and monitor social media platforms; inadequate funding, and lack of skills for digital content development, are three major challenges being faced.

Lessons have been learned and libraries are realizing that it is important to start small on few social media platforms, have an appropriate policy environment and strategies for social media to thrive; and have rededicated staff for social media initiatives.

6.2 Recommendations

Three key recommendations are made:

- Adoption of social media in university libraries in Africa should be based on real needs and should be guided by social media policies and strategies articulated in a written document. This would ensure that the vision and goals to be attained by using social media are clear; there is good understanding among staff, consistency, and continuity in the way social media activities are implemented in the library.

- As part of the implementation of the social media strategies, libraries should invest in capacity development for their staff to acquire skills to be able to develop appropriate content, manage, and monitor the libraries' social media initiatives.

- To ensure sustainability, the provision of social media enhanced library services should be fully integrated into the existing library activities. Social media are like any other tools that libraries are using to provide their services to target users, only that they need special attention due to their capacity to reach millions people within seconds.

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Annex 1: Target public universities for the study

Botswana
- The Botswana International University of Science and Technology
- University of Botswana

Lesotho
- National University of Lesotho

Malawi
- Mzuzu University
- University of Malawi
- Mauritius
- University of Mauritius
- University of Technology Mauritius

Mauritius
- University of Mauritius
- University of Technology Mauritius

Namibia
- University of Namibia

Seychelles
- University of Seychelles

South Africa
- Cape Peninsula University of Technology
- Central University of Technology
- Durban University of Technology
- Mangosutho University of Technology
- Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
- North-West University
- Rhodes University Tshwane University of Technology
- University of Cape Town
- University of Fort Hare
- University of the Free State
- University of Johannesburg
- University of KwaZulu Natal
- University of Limpopo
- University of Pretoria
- University of South Africa UNISA
- University of Stellenbosch
- University of Venda
- University of the Western Cape
- University of the Witwatersrand
- University of Zululand
- Vaal University of Technology
- Walter Sisulu University

Swaziland
- University of Swaziland

Tanzania
- Ardhi University
- Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences
- Mzumbe University
- Open University of Tanzania
- Sokoine University of Agriculture
- State University of Zanzibar
- University of Dar es Salaam
- University of Dodoma
- Nelson Mandela African Institute of Science and Technology

Zambia
- Copperbelt University
- Mulungushi University
- University of Zambia

Zimbabwe
- Bindura University of Science Education
- Chinhoyi University of Technology
- Great Zimbabwe University
- Harare Institute of Technology
- Lupane State University
- Midlands State University
- National University of Science and Technology
- University of Zimbabwe
- Zimbabwe Open University