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Twitter: A Collection Development Discovery Tool for and By the People

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What's Next for Collection Management and Managers?

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Much of the current literature on collection development in the digital age focuses on collecting born-digital material through the use of Web crawlers, data mining, and metadata harvesting of the "deep Web," which contains information not easily picked up by search engines (Tennant 2005; Nicholson 2003; Mitchell 2006). While selecting and archiving digital material is important, this article explores how to use Twitter as an identification tool for both print and online collection development material. Twitter allows librarians to find not only material but also what patrons are saying about it. Twitter has the potential to allow collection development librarians to obtain real-time data on what materials their patrons are discussing, requesting, and enjoying. In certain situations, Twitter could be another tool for making just-in-time collection development decisions, which is gaining popularity as a way to more efficiently and effectively meet patron needs.

Twitter is an online network where users post messages (called tweets) in 140 characters or less. Unless your Twitter account is private, anyone on the Internet may search your tweets. Twitter users can "follow" you, which means that your latest tweets will be visible on their Twitter home page when they log on. Likewise, you may also "follow" others and have their tweets populate your Twitter home page when you log on. (If you wish

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to look up and/or follow the authors of this article, please search for the usernames @daisilla and @puckupdate.)

There are various examples of libraries availing themselves of the available technology to identify items for collection development (Nisonger 2001). In the 1990s, Elizabeth Thomsen recommended Usenet groups as a way to keep abreast of the habits of avid readers and as a resource for bibliographies to check against one's own library collection (Thomsen 1996). Thomsen also suggested mining Web sites with reading lists. Search engines remain an essential tool for collection development librarians. More recently, articles based in the Web 2.0 environment give examples of more interactive ways to do collection development. In 2007, William Carey University Libraries in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, created a Web form to enable non-library faculty to recommend material from Amazon.com and *Choice* (Furr 2007). This effort more than doubled faculty book suggestions for the first year of the project. Likewise, Wisneski discussed using Web 2.0 tools such as instant messaging, blogs, and wikis for collection development (Wisneski 2008). However, Wisneski noted that these attempts to engage faculty are not always effective since one must depend on non-library faculty taking the time to visit and leave comments or suggestions on these tools. The social media network Twitter offers one venue for overcoming this difficulty and simultaneously expanding one's collection development news sources.

In practice, however, academics have not signed up for Twitter in overwhelming numbers. Only 35.2% of the 1,372 faculty polled in the 2010 *Faculty Focus* survey on Twitter use this social media network (Faculty Focus Special Report 2010). Still, this is an increase of 4.5% from the 2009 report and a relatively large percentage considering that in 2009, only 10.7% of all Internet users were on Twitter (Faculty Focus Special Report 2010). The survey notes that faculty who use Twitter mostly use it to "share information with peers" and "as a real-time news source." Librarians can take advantage of a faculty's predisposition to share information and use it to build better print and online collections.

However, the fact remains that 16.9% of those surveyed quit Twitter (up 4% from the 2009 survey). Pointing to the fact that a majority of those who quit rarely or never use Twitter to share information with peers (or to communicate with or teach students), the 2010 *Faculty Focus* survey notes Dunlap and Lowenthal's assertion that what you get out of Twitter depends on your network and how much time you take to get involved and contribute:

> With Twitter, as with all social networking tools, the value of the experience hinges on three things: (1) who you are connected to and with; (2) how frequently you participate; and (3) how conscientious you are about contributing value to the community (Faculty Focus Special Report 2010, 18).

If faculty at your institution are not using Twitter, it does not detract from this tool's usefulness to you as a librarian. At a time when "demand-driven" collection development is becoming increasingly relevant, it is important to seek out the comments and suggestions of students, librarians, and non-academics. What better way than in an environment that is conducive to information sharing? Building a network of Twitter users from academia and beyond who will provide relevant resource information and feedback is at the heart of using it as a tool for collection development. However, it is also possible to use Twitter's crowdsourcing capacity to get more immediate results. This article discusses the authors' experiences and suggestions for using Twitter's immediate crowdsourcing capability as well as its more long-term network building function for collection development.

CROWDSOURCED SEARCHING

Those users who are not interested in spending a lot of time on Twitter can use it as a crowdsourced search engine, as suggested by Brett Bobley, National Endowment for the Humanities Office of Digital Humanities Director, in this tweet: "Twitter is a crowdsourced search engine. [A c]rowd is made up of people whose interests align with (but extend) your own."[1] Crowdsourcing refers to the practice of allowing a large group of users to perform a task and has also been described as the "wisdom of the masses" (Hempel 2006, 38). In other words, you can use Twitter to search for tweets by people who are interested in and tweet about the subject area(s) you are responsible for. You can start by searching for keywords or authors. Searching for particular authors may yield tweets from people who are reading or have read the author's book(s), people who may recommend similar titles, or people who may link to reviews and interviews. This is an example of how Twitter can serve as a more focused Internet search. Where Google finds everything that is searchable, a Twitter search finds everything people see fit to mention. So, while it is less comprehensive than Google, there is often more of a recommendation element to what is found (Ovadia 2009, 204).

Besides searching keywords or names, it is also effective to search hashtags, which are words, abbreviations, or acronyms preceded by the "#" sign that are used to tag tweets, essentially assigning the tweet a subject. Hashtags may be thought of as semicontrolled vocabulary since they help users find tweets about a particular topic more efficiently. Examples of hashtags that would help you keep up with collection development news are #books, #ebooks, and #publishing. You can also use Twitter to keep up with how people are feeling about new library-related technology that will impact your collection development decisions. For example, searching the hashtag #ebooks would help you learn what kind of eBook formats and titles are popular with the public. When the Apple iPad was released, you could have

searched #ipad to get a sense of how people were reacting to this new product. Managers wanting quick information on how the controversial decision to limit eBooks to 26 loans was unfolding could have searched #hcod (the hashtag for the two companies involved: Harper Collins and OverDrive).

To use crowdsourcing more efficiently, you will have to follow at least a few people. Their tweets will inform you about specific resources for your collection, such as print books or digital collections to link to from your subject page. To find Twitter users who consistently tweet about books, search for book-related hashtags like the ones mentioned above. These searches will lead you to Twitter users like @reviewthisbook, who tweets book reviews. You can also search for users who tweet about books in specific disciplines and follow specific publishers. Or try doing both. This strategy led the authors to @PalgraveHistory, who tweets about Palgrave's new history book releases and @overbooked, who tweeted, "Best fiction, nonfiction[,] and poetry for adults named to 2011 Notable Books List | American Libraries Magazine shar.es/XQRw0."[2] You may also want to follow Twitter users who tweet about Web sites and digital collections to add to your subject page(s), thereby widening the scope of your virtual collection. Take for example @teachinghistory's tweet: "The Smithsonian's Sounds of America features civil-rights-era "freedom songs": http://bit.ly/dyO61z."[3] Another example comes from @HistorySearcher: "Early American Foreign Service database launches: http://bit.ly/8ZNL3l A biographical relational database. Try the relational browser."[4] By following just a few users who tweet about your collection development areas, you will learn about new and noteworthy resources. To search several collection development–related tweets in one shot, create a list. When you log onto Twitter, your homepage will be populated with a list of the most recent tweets by all of the users you follow, without grouping them in any intelligible way. In order to monitor Twitter users in a more organized manner, Twitter users can group the users they follow into lists. For example, to follow tweets by a few academic presses without going to each of their profile pages, follow the list at http://twitter.com/daisilla/academicpresses.

Although hashtags and tweets are relatively new, the idea of using crowdsourcing for collection development is not. In his article on using Google to harness the "wisdom of the crowds" (a term used in James Surowiecki's eponymous book), John B. Rutledge discusses how that search engine "has usually corroborated prior author rankings developed by the traditional qualitative methods" (Rutledge 2005, 7). What makes Twitter unique is that it encourages ongoing communication. Tapping into the crowd by searching and following people on Twitter is just the first step. Once you start tweeting to specific Twitter users and they begin to tweet back or, better yet, follow you, you will begin to engage in two-way communication that may help you to carry out your collection development duties. Building a network and engaging other Twitter users will take more time than using

Twitter strictly for quick crowdsourced searches, as we have covered above, but as Dunlap and Lowenthal suggest, it has the potential to make Twitter a more meaningful tool for collection development (Faculty Focus Special Report 2010).

BUILDING YOUR NETWORK

Several respondents to the 2010 *Faculty Focus* survey noted that Twitter serves as part of their Personal Learning Network (PLN), a community of people from whom you learn about a particular topic, regardless of whether you are in touch with them in person or online. As a librarian, you can use Twitter to create a PLN with faculty, students, other librarians, and others outside academia. Following and dialoging with these Twitter users will help you stay abreast of resources and trends.

Twitter has great potential as a way to engage in conversation-based collection development with faculty. If you are a subject specialist, you probably have liaison duties with specific departments. Find out whether faculty at your institution use Twitter for scholarly purposes and "follow" them. They may mention research they are working on, books they have read, or movies and Web sites they have used in class: all things that can be mined for collection development purposes. You can then begin to use Twitter to ask them about collection recommendations. Since faculty on Twitter mostly use the tool to "share information with peers," it is quite possible that some faculty will respond. If the faculty whom you follow begin to follow you as well, they will see your collection development–related tweets whenever they log on and may be encouraged to continue to send you recommendations. If they are not heavy Twitter users (as is the case with the authors), try following faculty at other institutions by searching their Twitter biography, which is limited to 160 characters. Although the biography keywords are not searchable on Twitter, they are searchable on Twitter applications created to enhance this tool's effectiveness, such as the directory Twellow (http://www.twellow.com). Once you start following faculty, you can also look through the people whom they follow in order to build your network.

If you do not find faculty using Twitter, try engaging students at your institution. They may be willing to let you know what they think about your collection and ways to improve it. For example, if you have a student following at your institution, you can ask for their impressions on eBook readers. This can help you to predict usage and make hardware or software purchases. This is admittedly not always easy to do. In the fall of 2010, one of the authors posted flyers promoting her tweets about the City College of New York Libraries' collection and resources in and near the library. No students have followed as a result. However, an undergraduate at the

City College of New York who took an information literacy session with
the author became her follower and vice versa. During this time, he has
tweeted her about two useful sources: "Incredible collection of open source
educational courses and books: http://www.oercommons.org/ @daisilla this
is for you!"[5] and "just discovered this search engine specially designed for
students, researchers, and librarians: www.sweetsearch.com. for @daisilla."[6]
While having a critical mass of students (and faculty) would be ideal, even
having one consistent follower from your institution—or even beyond—is
helpful. If the authors depended upon building a community based only
on people at their institutions, they might have quit Twitter long ago. As
Lessig points out, while the physical world is limited by geographical con-
siderations, the online world has no such constraints (Lessig 2001, 114). If
geographically local faculty are not available to help in collection develop-
ment decisions, Twitter makes faculty from around the world available.

Although building a custom-made network will suit your interests the
best, you can also quickly integrate into a Twitter network by following
lists, which we discussed above. For example, one of the authors cre-
ated a list of librarians whose tweets we want to track for collection de-
velopment purposes at http://twitter.com/daisilla/colldevlibrarians. Another
way to quickly join a like-minded network of Twitter users is to join a
twibe (http://www.twibes.com), a group of Twitter users who tweet about
a specific topic of interest. One of the authors created a collection devel-
opment librarian twibe at http://www.twibes.com/group/colldev_librarians.
Whenever someone tweets the hashtag #colldev or the phrase "collec-
tion development," their tweet will show up on this twibe's page.[7] You
may find it easier to follow this twibe's tweets via the RSS feed at
http://www.twibes.com/group/colldev_librarians/tweets.rss. The twibe only
has five members so far, but this is possibly due to the fact that it has only
been publicized via twibe members' tweets and a plug on the H-HISTBIBL
Listserv.

Another way to quickly integrate into a network of people interested
in a particular topic is to find out what hashtag they use. You can save a
search for that hashtag on your Twitter account so that you can see all the
tweets that mention that hashtag whenever you log on. You can also add
a column for a hashtag onto a social media aggregator like TweetDeck or
HootSuite, which allows you to follow various social media presences in
one shot. There are many other types of hashtags you can use, depending
on your interests. If there is a conference you would like to attend, search
for its hashtag to see tweets that link to attendees' blogs, reports, and other
comments related to the conference.

Librarians can also build a network by relaying information. Several
libraries' Twitter accounts post information about their library. The authors
propose that you take a more engaged approach by tweeting about a book
or resource you think may be useful to others. While at the reference desk a

few months ago, one of the authors got a visit from an alumnus who wanted to sign a copy of her book. The coauthor of this article later tweeted, "Dhalma Llanos-Figueroa authored #book on Afro-Puerto Rican women, *Daughters of the Stone*: http://tiny.cc/gBUqL To talk @ #CCNY spring 2010."[8] In this case, the hashtags #book and #CCNY were used to increase the likelihood that her tweet would be found by Twitters users searching for those hashtags. Later, one of her followers, a Master of Library Science student from Maryland, let her know that he was reading this very book and sent a link to an interview with the author. This demonstrates that you do not need to follow or be followed by faculty or students at your own institution in order for Twitter to be useful.

Using Twitter to post exchange lists is another way that Twitter can be used for collection development. Gayle Williams, Latin American & Caribbean Information Services Librarian at Florida International University, created the Twitter account @LACiCExchange for the Latin American and Caribbean Information Center's Exchange Database. This database contains more than 2,000 volumes that are available for exchange with other institutions, universities, or libraries. @LACiCExchange updates followers about new items that have been added to the database. It is not a novelty to swap books, but the way librarians do it may change in a Twitter-like environment. Since Twitter has an open architecture, someone might create an application that would sync a Twitter post about a gift book with your library's catalog for quicker searching. This might help you respond to a gift book post before all the books are spoken for. Another way to make your budget go farther is to follow Twitter users who post information about grants that would fund the purchase of books or other resources that would build your collection.

CONCLUSION

Twitter is not yet a widely used tool by faculty or librarians, but that should not discount it as a collection development discovery tool. Its ability to help librarians see what kinds of materials users of all kinds are discussing is something librarians may wish to take advantage of. At its best, Twitter lets librarians communicate with students and faculty at their own institution in order to get direct feedback on their school's collection. Twitter has the potential to give librarians a unique insight into the thoughts of patrons, giving librarians more data to use for collection development decisions. However, if users at your institution do not tweet, there are two ways that you may use Twitter to stay abreast of resources to add to your collection. If you do not intend to tweet or spend a lot of time on Twitter, you can use it to search and monitor what users anywhere are saying about your collection development areas, such as recommended books, databases, Web sites, or technology such as eReaders. If you would like to become a more

active user, build a network around faculty, librarians, students, and users outside academia who are knowledgeable in your subject area(s) and tweet using the collection development hashtag #colldev so that more collection development librarians will discover these conversations.

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NOTES

1. Brett Bobley, Twitter, July 15, 2009, http://twitter.com/brettbobley/status/2654524419.

2. Ann Chambers Theis, Twitter, January 10, 2011, http://twitter.com/overbooked/status/24527734969475073.

3. Teachinghistory.org, Twitter, January 29, 2009, http://twitter.com/teachinghistory/status/8382836512.

4. Charles D'Aniello, Twitter, October 19, 2010, http://twitter.com/#!/HistorySearcher/status/27877607539.

5. Avi Burstein, Twitter, August 26, 2010, http://twitter.com/aburstein/status/22201776992.

6. Avi Burstein, Twitter, September 4, 2010, http://twitter.com/aburstein/status/22984360201.

7. Sometimes, tweets by Twitter users who are not twibe members show up on the twibe page because they have used the twibe's hashtag or keyword. Since this is not a consistent rule, it is better to search the twibe's hashtag on Twitter or on an aggregator, which is discussed later.

8. Daisy Dominguez, Twitter, January 12, 2010, http://twitter.com/daisilla/status/7672977611.

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