

Expanding Public Library Programming
Through the Use of Social Media.

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Introduction

During 2020 we have seen businesses, schools, families, and individuals utilizing virtual meeting spaces and online services to stay connected while maintaining social distance. The importance of tapping into this capability has become crucial with the COVID-19 pandemic. The socioemotional needs of human beings for community and belonging are second only to the physical needs for safety and physiological life-sustaining needs (Best, et al., 2008). The public library provides both a place of safety and space for the building of community.

Library programs include guest speakers, book clubs, arts and crafts projects, story times, exercise programs, and more. These programs enrich the lives of library patrons by fostering lifelong learning, creating community, and encouraging the socioemotional well-being of the participants. During events, such as a pandemic, the need for these services can intensify while health concerns necessitate social distancing. With the rise in popularity of social media sites and virtual meeting platforms humans have an unprecedented ability to connect without physically sharing space. When libraries use virtual platforms to provide programming, those libraries are able to continue to serve patrons even when close contact is discouraged.

However, the benefits of virtual programming extend beyond worldwide pandemics. There are a variety of reasons people may want to attend library programs and utilize services virtually. Social anxiety, busyness, limited mobility, and proximity to the physical library are just a few of the factors, unrelated to disease avoidance, that may prevent potential patrons from engaging with their public library. Many libraries already have outreach services that deliver books to homebound patrons. In many areas, these homebound patrons are elderly patrons who are unable to leave their homes. The idea of expanding programming services into the virtual

world should be considered an expansion to the homebound services and the digital access resources already offered in many libraries.

Literature Review

Teen patrons are often some of the most difficult patrons to reach with programming and services. Studies dating back to 2004 indicate that “U.S. teens tend to prefer using technology instead of libraries to fulfill their information needs” (Agosto, et al., 2015 p. 319). Other factors that contribute to low levels of teen interactions with the public library include negative perceptions of libraries and librarians and a lack of awareness of library services, especially services not related to books (Agosto, et al., 2015). Library services not related to books include internet-related services and other “Web 2.0 technologies” (Agosto, et al., 2015 p. 319). Teens in 2015 were heavy social media users and used social media to both ask and answer questions from a wide variety of topics (Agosto, et al., 2015). There are “many positive ways that teens are using social media, and they suggest that libraries should help teens to harness these positive benefits” (Agosto, et al., 2015 p. 322).

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) supports virtual components of learning labs in public libraries and considers connected learning programs as critical to the 21st-century library (Valdivia & Subramaniam, 2014) partially because teens spend large amounts of time online. Virtual spaces include instant messaging, blogs, social network sites, video sharing sites, and photo sharing sites (Valdivia & Subramaniam, 2014).

Teens are not the only ones to enjoy online and virtual activities. Preschoolers can also benefit from online programming. Preschoolers reap the same benefits from storytime activities delivered through video conference technology and pseudo-contingent pre-recorded storytime activities as they do with in-person presented storytime activities (Gaudreau, et al., 2020). The

interaction aspect is important; either contingent conversation (video chat) or pseudo-contingent videos (Gaudreau, et al., 2020). It is important for the viewer, in this case, the child, to interact with the content. The significance of the study reaches beyond pandemic issues. Libraries may be able to serve children who do not experience the language exposure of regular story times with these types of virtual reading experiences as part of their routine programs (Gaudreau, et al., 2020).

Social media is a popular tool for libraries to share information about programming, services, and collections (Joo, et al., 2018). Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the library community (Joo, et al., 2018), but other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are popular. Twitter, for example, has been shown to be more effective than Facebook in creating conversations (Joo, et al., 2018). While Facebook can be used to “share diverse events in which people of all ages can engage” (Joo, et al., 2018 p. 942) most “libraries [use] social media simply as a means to deliver news and information to their patrons, rather than as a venue for interactive, engaging discussion” (Joo, et al., 2018 p. 942). Libraries are failing to capitalize on the power of social networking platforms. As social media platforms continue to evolve these platforms represent an untapped medium for libraries to engage with patrons.

Platforms

For the purposes of this paper, social media platforms are any computer-based program or application that allows users to create and share content and/or interact with social networks. The largest social media platforms are currently Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These platforms are largely used to share information and allow text interactions. These platforms and others with similar themes including Tumblr, Reddit, Snapchat, and TikTok allow users to create posts that allow other users to view and interact with. These interactions are often time delayed.

YouTube is known for videos. YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram all have live video options. Twitch is a platform that allows online gamers to stream their gameplay to a live audience. On Twitch the audience interacts via text while the streamer typically responds verbally. While conversation is possible via Twitch, the interaction tends to become more commentary than conversation with larger audiences (Recktenwald, 2018). Library programs that could be delivered through Twitch include online workshops and guest speakers as well as gaming, art, and book clubs (Smith, 2020).

Other social media platforms allow greater real-time, face-to-face interactions. Video conferencing platforms such as Skype, Google Meet, and Zoom have grown exponentially with the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic as businesses, schools, and individuals look for ways to connect virtually. Discord is a newer social networking site that launched in 2015. Discord supports both text messages and real-time voice calls; “each can be used for either dyadic (one on-one) or multiparticipant conversations,” (Baguley, 2019 p. 3). Discord is emerging as a platform for library programming such as “games and gaming-related programs as well as to host book clubs or roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons,” (Smith, 2019) or even showing movies.

Discussion

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are significant avenues for the dissemination of information and are popular among libraries for this purpose. However, it is important to note that new social media platforms continue to launch, bringing special features and appealing to different user groups. When deciding on which social media platforms to use, and for which purposes, it is important for the public library to understand the target audience and the platform capabilities.

An important factor in deciding which social media platforms will be useful in disseminating information includes the target audience. For example, teens tend to use different social media platforms than their adult counterparts (Ray, 2020). An informal survey at The Public Library of Enid and Garfield County (PLEGC) completed by more than 260 middle and high school students in the PLEGC service area indicated that Facebook was not a popular social media platform among teen patrons (Ray, 2020). PLEGC began creating content on TikTok to promote teen programming in August of 2020. The page provides event and programming promotions, reader's advisory book talks, and promotes the library culture. In 4 months the PLEGC page has gained almost 300 followers and more than 3,500 interactions in the form of liked videos (Public Library of Enid and Garfield County, 2020). Currently, the hashtag #plegcteens has more than 24,000 views. While it cannot be confirmed that all the interactions come from teen TikTok users, the social media page appears to be effective in sharing information about teen programs, services, books, and the library's culture. Facebook continues to be the primary social media used to reach adult patrons.

Adult library programs often have success with Facebook Live events. The Mid-Continent Public Library (MCPL) in Kansas City, MO has a Facebook page dedicated to virtual programming titled MCPL360 with more than 4,000 followers. Their program, Kansas City Ghost Stories with Becky Ray, which went live on October 1, 2020, logged 68 reactions, 216 comments, and 993 views. While it is very likely that some of the Facebook users who interacted with the event did so after the live presentation ended, this serves to add to the value of the program rather than detract from it. The continued availability after the event means that patrons who cannot attend at the scheduled time are able to benefit from the program.

While social media platforms that allow one-way communication or limited text interactions are ways to promote programs, successful interactive library programs likely require the utilization of newer platforms focused on interaction. Pseudo-contingent pre-recorded videos can be uploaded and made available on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. As demonstrated by MCPL360, some of these programs are quite successful. Additionally, these platforms and others, such as Twitter, can be used to promote videos on a library's Facebook or YouTube channel. YouTube is also a social networking site; is the second-largest search engine behind Google (Wagner, 2015).

It is important to note that pseudo-contingent is an important qualifier for pre-recorded videos when it comes to story time videos created for children. (Gaudreau, et al., 2020). In pseudo-contingent videos, personal interactions are mimicked. For example, while reading a story, experienced out-loud readers stop to interact with the text and invite their listeners to do so as well. When questions are asked about the text, experienced out-loud readers wait for a response. A pseudo-contingent video simulates these types of interactions. Facebook Live and other live streaming services could be used to create these experiences in-the-moment and allow for text responses. Unless there is a moderator most of these text interactions occur between viewers. While these interactions can build community and allow for discourse in some ways, text responses may not be the best platform for interactive story times.

Social interaction is often one of the primary benefits of library programs, especially for young people. When providing virtual programming, especially for younger patrons, it is important to find social media platforms that facilitate this interaction. Video conferencing platforms can provide this real-time interaction. Skype, Zoom, and Google Meet are examples of video conferencing platforms. All these platforms have screen share options as well as

camera options. Many libraries, along with schools and businesses, have used these platforms for virtual meetings, including classes and library programs.

Discord and Twitch are both newer platforms designed around real-time social interactions. The implications for libraries, both during the current COVID-19 Pandemic and for virtual programming in general, have only recently begun to be explored. Both Discord and Twitch are extremely popular social networking services originally designed for young people who play multiplayer online games. Both platforms allow the streaming of gameplay via screen sharing while simultaneously allowing the streamer to interact with the audience. As of June 2020, Discord reports 100 million active users each month (Wikimedia Foundation, 2020). “As of March 2020, an average of 56,000 of [the] 3.84 million monthly Twitch broadcasters are concurrently broadcasting,” (Mansoor, I, 2020).

There are potential drawbacks to publicly streaming library programs that allow audience participation. One such concern is patron privacy and possible disruptive persons joining virtual programming. These concerns can be addressed by requiring registration for events where participants will be able to interact in real-time without moderator interference. Meeting links, regardless of the platform can be sent to registered patrons rather than publicly posted. Publicly posted links provide easy, one-click access to meetings which encourages participation but also allows disruptive persons to join meetings without much effort. Another potential problem is screen fatigue. As schools and businesses alike are utilizing social media and online platforms for daily tasks that previously did not involve computer screens, many people are tired of looking at computer screens and may opt not to engage in additional computer usage for leisure activities. Once many everyday activities resume as face-to-face activities the screen fatigue will likely dissipate. Yet another drawback, and potentially the most significant factor in whether

libraries offer virtual programming on a specific platform, or at all, is librarian familiarity with using social media platforms. With stress levels high, socioemotional needs going unmet, and already busy schedules, learning new ways to create and deliver content or facilitate groups can seem like an insurmountable obstacle. This can be especially true as librarians look to a future where in-house programming is once again possible. However, with the outreach possible through virtual programming in the service area and beyond, libraries and librarians would be well served to delve into the opportunities available through social media platforms.

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