EDITORIAL

Late to the Game but Ready to Play: portal Launches a Social Media Presence

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I attended my first portal Editorial Board meeting in January 2009. As a newcomer in the first year of my first term, I was mostly there to listen and learn. During the segment that boards refer to as “new business,” I ventured to share an idea. What if we, I suggested, used social media to share information about portal? My premise was to use social media to promote our articles, expand our readership, and potentially build a community of authors and readers. These seem like desirable outcomes for a journal.

Facebook was five years old and Twitter was two years new, and librarians had begun to establish an early presence on both. University and college libraries sought to build relationships with community members via a Facebook presence that promoted their services and events. Academic librarians used platforms such as Twitter to share information or establish a personal brand for professional recognition. In quick response to my proposal, a seasoned board member, and no doubt a holder of zero social media accounts, said, “Twitter, that’s where people tell you what they are eating for lunch. Librarians pay it no attention.” Given my new-to-the-board status, I left this misconception unchallenged. Conversation over. As many of us learn in higher education, today’s rejected idea is tomorrow’s new latest thing.

Turns out Instagram is where people share what they are eating. Twitter and Facebook, on the other hand, have proved to have genuine utility for academic librarians as communication channels for sharing not only news but also opinions, ideas, and accomplishments. Professionally, librarians regularly use these platforms to reach community members and one another. Amazingly, we have yet to give up on blogs.

Just eight years after my initial suggestion, portal is ready to move into the world of social media. Here is why: portal articles are widely read, well respected, and influential within academic librarianship. As social media matures, portal’s lack of a presence hampers its mission to disseminate important research about academic libraries, librarianship, and the academy to our professional community. What may have seemed like a newfangled idea eight years ago is now a project that demands this Editorial Board’s
attention. When the board last met in June at the American Library Association Annual Conference, there was resounding support for forging ahead with portal’s entry into social media. This new effort will align with the existing Johns Hopkins University Press social media presence but will differ by focusing on this journal’s content, its authors, and readers.

Leveraging social media enables portal to increase its reach and connect with an even wider audience. Within the Johns Hopkins University Press collection, we can draw on the experience of such journals as Shakespeare Bulletin or the Hopkins Review. Both offer excellent examples of how to establish a presence and brand on both Facebook and Twitter. Sharing links to article preprints is one way to accomplish this, and we believe our authors will gain more readership as a result. But we aspire to use social media to also build a community of portal readers. We want to make portal a more participatory experience for them by bringing our content directly into their practice. In so doing, we can improve our readers’ ability to share feedback and ideas generated from our articles.

Social media should be more than a one-way communication by which portal directs information to the academic library community. Just as librarians wish to do within their own library and institutional communities, portal might leverage social media as a platform for engagement with our readership. In what ways can social media be used to enhance the experience of connecting with portal content? One way in which portal will use social media is to open a communication channel from our readers. We want to hear from you. What do you think of the articles we carry? Are our columns providing meaning and relevance to your work? Are there topics or issues we tend to overlook? When readers have something to say about our content, portal can use social media to share it with other members of the academic library community. It is about more than what portal delivers; it is about facilitating learning and conversations.

There are many opportunities to use social media to build a stronger relationship with our readers. Webinars, for example, provide a better platform for readers to ask authors about their research and to learn more about the issues. Not all academic librarians are fans of webinars, but they do offer more opportunity for engagement if appropriately managed. Other options might be even more informal. Using a video-conferencing platform such as Zoom, interested readers could join for a 30-minute “meet the author” session. Fewer yet make use of TweetChats, but almost all of us are continuously learning how to exploit social media.

We should be especially mindful that our academic library colleagues who are newer to the profession are deeply engaged on social media platforms and consume as much content through their smartphones as they do with computers. Considering how our field is shifting and will continue to shift, demographically and technologically, extending portal’s reach to social media has become practically a necessity. Our next generation of colleagues will largely be differentiated by their smartphones and how they use them to connect with family, friends, and professional colleagues. Connecting with Generation Z, those born between about 1990 and 2010, requires more than digital content. portal must reimagine itself as a social gateway that, in addition to disseminating research, invites readers to engage in the scholarly conversation.

Should we be concerned that portal’s status as a subscription-based publication will affect our capacity to develop a following on social media? To a degree, links work best
when they connect followers to full-text content. Despite that, social media will still be an effective communication vehicle for portal. Consider that, in addition to the several thousand institutions with a subscription to Project Muse, there are over 150 other libraries that currently subscribe and have access to portal.2 For subscribers, following portal on social media will provide them with faster access to current issue content. In addition, portal supplies preprint versions of new articles, and our social media accounts will point to them as they become available. Other offerings, such as webinars with authors, podcasts, and additional content will be accessible to all followers.

What can readers expect from portal’s entry into the world of social media? If we accomplish most of what is described here in the first year or two of this new endeavor, readers should find themselves better informed about our authors and their scholarship. They may find that they can make better sense of how the research fits into their practice, how it strengthens their theoretical knowledge of the profession, or what to make of the new ideas presented in each issue. Imagine, for example, after reading an article, having the opportunity to engage with an author to better understand what motivated the article, how it derived from the author’s practice, and why it makes a difference. Those insights, often undetectable when we read portal articles, become touchpoints for conversation that could extend the value of this journal’s content. The idea is to move from a reaction of “Well, that was a good read” to one of “Now I see why the author wrote this and how I can use the ideas to think differently about my own work.”

From our perspective, the going may be uneven as we learn to leverage social media. But we are up to the challenge and eager to explore these new platforms for the dissemination of scholarly communications. Will we ever become savvy producers of catchy, short videos that play well on social media? Maybe not, but a 30-second tip on how to prepare your manuscript for submission? Why not? (My own advice is, “Tell the readers what this article is about and why it matters before page 3.”)

Is it even possible that our authors could venture into the new frontier of engaging the public with their research? While academia recognizes the great value of scholars communicating in ways that engage laypeople, achieving public rapport with academic library research may be out of scope. If we can connect with new communities in librarianship and higher education, be they public librarians, library and information science students, or even nonlibrarian faculty, that would signal a tremendous advance in the reach of portal scholarship and the impact of our authors’ work.

Looking to the future, this current initiative may ultimately be more about portal’s future than its present. The portal board member who questioned the relevance of social media to librarians represents the generation that is slowly fading away from the ranks of professional academic librarianship. portal must look ahead to the next generations, who already have a much different relationship with social media. In fact, portal already reflects that change in the composition of its Editorial Board. Compared to when I first joined, the board is far more demographically diverse. No longer do academic library deans and directors dominate. Instead, the board now includes leaders from throughout the ranks of our university and college libraries, many of whom closely resemble portal’s authors and engage globally through social media. This explains, in part, why this portal board recognized the need for social media involvement and enthusiastically supported my recommendations. Though portal may be somewhat late to the game, we can at least
get off the bench and position the journal more firmly to transition to the expectations of our next-generation colleagues.

I am honored to continue my membership on the portal Editorial Board as its first social media editor. I welcome your suggestions for how portal can best leverage social media to build a better relationship with our readers. Just as we have realized in our libraries, the true value of our work and scholarship is more than just the content we deliver. It is the relationships we build with members of our community that most contributes to their success.

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