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Twitter, Professional Values, and Taking a Stand: Understanding Core Tensions in Librarians’ Professional Identity Construction

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# Introduction

Librarianship has a long history of grappling with its core values. Recently, Twitter has served as a platform for librarians to publicly debate the profession’s core values, particularly diversity and intellectual freedom. These debates echo the tensions identified in the library and information science (LIS) literature. Gibson, Chancellor, Cooke, Dahlen, and Lee (2017), for instance, question whether librarianship can be both neutral and still meet the needs of people of color. In other words, they are asking if librarianship can uphold its values of intellectual freedom and diversity at the same time. Traditionally, librarians have published in magazines and journals and come together at professional conferences to discuss, debate, and find consensus around core values, controversial topics, and the future directions of the field. Social media, like Twitter, have provided additional ways for librarians to explore and consider these issues. What distinguishes social media communication from publishing and conference attendance is its fast pace and the opportunity for open dialogue among geographically dispersed people. In addition, the use of affordances like hashtags mean that ideas and discussions can spread organically throughout a community (Saxton, Niyirora, Guo, & Waters, 2015).

By combining the findings from two studies, this paper will explore the tensions core values bring to librarians’ identity construction. First, the professional discourses librarians use to construct their professional identity will be explored. In addition, a recent study examining how librarians use Twitter to negotiate the collective meaning of their core values will also be presented. This study will be used as a case to better understand and examine not only how librarians use Twitter to debate and discuss issues important to the profession, but also explore how librarians employ their identity discourses as they debate the profession’s core values.

**Methodology**

For study one, a social constructionist-inspired discourse analysis approach was used to examine the discourses librarians used to construct their professional identities. Discourses are the language resources a group, such as a profession, uses to describe itself and its members (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). They consist of words and phrases that provide professionals with a shared worldview and sense of self. Data collection consisted of interviews with librarians, articles from journals aimed at professional librarians, and posts to email discussion lists. Data from all library sectors (academic, public, school, and special) were sought out. Ethical approval for the study was granted by an institutional review board. The analysis focused on the variations and similarities in the discourses used in the data both within individual parts of the data (i.e., an individual interview) and across the entire data set. Attention was paid to how certain phrases or terms were used, the context of and reason for their use, and the intended (or unintended) purpose of their use. The goal of the analysis was to identify when and how each discourse was used and in relation to which topics.

The second study is in its preliminary stages. It will use a case study approach to examine the events surrounding the American Library Association’s (ALA) revision of “Meeting Rooms: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights” and its subsequent debates on Twitter. This approach was chosen because the depth of data required to complete the study allows the complexity surrounding the case to be captured, namely the interactions, communications, relationships, and practices that occurred within the event (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). It is particularly suited to the study of professional communities (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Data will be collected and analyzed in multiple ways to ensure the intricacy of the case is captured. First, a narrative history of the events surrounding the revision of the meeting rooms interpretation was completed, using published literature, reports and other organizational documents from ALA. Second, tweets using the hashtags #NoHateALA and #IStandWithALA will be analyzed using a discourse analysis approach (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Third, prominent voices in the online debates will be interviewed. These interviews provide additional context for the narrative history of the case and will provide insights into how and why these librarians use Twitter as part of their professional practices. This will provide data that can then be compared with findings from the first study. Data collection and analysis of the second part of the study will be completed in time for the LIDA conference in May 2020.

**Results & Discussion**

The first study identified five discourses that librarians draw upon when constructing their professional identities: insider-outsider, service, professionalism, change, and advocacy. The insider-outsider discourse focused on librarians’ relationships with their clients, with particular attention to librarians’ expertise and the need to have clients recognize librarianship as a profession. In this discourse, librarians claimed an awareness of the world, particularly as it related to information and technology, that their clients did not have. This made them insiders whose professional expertise was needed by clients. When this expertise was not recognized by clients, librarians felt like outsiders.

The service discourse focused on the information service activities that librarians provided to clients. It was through the service discourse that librarians were able to enact the expertise described in the insider-outsider discourse. Service was broadly defined as helping clients meet their information needs and was understood to be a natural state of being for librarians.

The professionalism discourse highlighted the qualities and characteristics that librarians believed made librarianship a profession. The overall purpose of this repertoire was to remind librarians that they had chosen a noble profession with a strong knowledge base, as symbolized by the MLIS and the profession’s history, and a unique set of core professional values. Privacy, access to information, and freedom of expression were the most frequently mentioned values in the data set.

The change discourse had two main discursive functions: to highlight the shifting professional roles of librarians and to position librarians in relation to changes occurring outside of the profession. Lastly, in the advocacy discourse, librarians highlighted their desire to ensure non-librarians understood the value of librarians, libraries, and librarianship.

Although data collection and analysis are still in their preliminary stages, aspects of all of these discourses were apparent the second study focusing on the ALA’s meeting rooms debates that occurring on Twitter in 2018. The catalyst for these debates was the revision of the meeting room interpretation of the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights completed by a working group of the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) in February 2018. After extended discussion among members of the IFC and invitations for comment from the ALA membership, a draft of the revised interpretation was presented at the ALA Council Forum in June 2018. The final approved revision included hate groups among those who could use library meeting spaces. Although there was some limited debate about the inclusion of hate groups during the Council Forum (see LeRue, 2018 for a full timeline of events), the majority of the public debate that surrounded this revision occurred on Twitter after the revision had been approved, with the conversations coalescing around the hashtags #NoHateALA and #IStandWithALA. In August 2018, the ALA Council voted to rescind the revised interpretation and sent the draft back to the IFC for further review (“ALA Council Rescinds,” 2018). There is some evidence that the Twitter discussions and debates played an important role in the rescinding of the interpretation. Discursively, the conversations that occurred around both hashtags employed aspects of the discourses identified in study one. For example, the service discourse was employed by proponents of both #NoHateALA and #IStandWithALA to highlight the role librarians and libraries play in meeting the needs of users. Similarly, the professionalism discourse was employed when librarians discussed the various core values being debated, namely diversity, democracy, and intellectual freedom. However, the #NoHateALA conversation drew attention to the profession’s claims to neutrality, core value often associated with librarians’ professional identity that was not highlighted in the first study.

**Conclusion**

Past research into librarians’ professional identity has highlighted the collective nature of its construction (e.g., Winter, 1988). Through their professional practices, librarians develop shared norms, values, and worldviews. Traditionally, professionals become acculturated to their new profession through education and contribute to their professional culture through participation in professional associations, whether by attending conferences, reading trade journals, or participating in email discussion lists (Winter, 1988). Understanding how librarians use Twitter to debate and understand core values will illuminate how the fast pace of information diffusion and open dialogue afforded by social media influence and shape librarians’ professional identity construction.

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