

The Professional Identity Formation of Librarians on Twitter:

Professional Development, Networking, and Chats, Oh My!

by

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Overview

Professional identity construction in librarianship is constantly shifting with the roles of librarians themselves. Librarians are not one size fits all, no assembly required professionals, but rather an extremely adaptable and highly diverse group of professionals that are constantly engaging in different types of both formal and informal professional growth and development opportunities. Librarians gather, congregate, meet, and discuss library related issues and otherwise. This happens both in person (at conferences and in bars) and more and more commonly, online. The internet allows librarians to instantaneously chat with each other over both the mundane and the profound. Librarians, like many other professionals who engage in continual professional development, can now attend e-conferences, watch web seminars, and engage in discourse with like-minded professionals across the world. One way this is currently happening - both formally and informally - is through Twitter. Much like the listservs of the past, Twitter allows users to subscribe to what they are interested in by following similar users, find content through the use of “hashtags” (#), and participate in weekly, biweekly, or monthly planned discussions facilitated through said hashtags. These are just a few of the ways librarians can engage with each other on Twitter.

These concepts are not distinct to librarianship as a professional field. Other professionals have been using Twitter as a professional development tool for years, and scholarly research is abundant into the use of Twitter by professionals for professional purposes. However, little has been said about the use of Twitter as a way for librarians to identify as growing professionals. Twitter is commonly recognized for its value as a professional development tool in librarianship, but not as much for its use to ground professionals by identifying with other professionals who

share similar goals, values, and opinions. Other fields have explored professional identity formation online through various lenses, with some exploring how their own professional field identifies with similar (or dissimilar) values, beliefs, and experiences. Surprisingly, little has been said about how librarians are engaged with this, let alone through social media like Twitter. However, one look at a planned library chat on Twitter will show how librarians are engaging with each other through both regularized and stigmatized themes and experiences. In the following essay, I will begin by exploring what professional identity formation is and why it even matters. Next, I will explore current literature on how Twitter is used for professional development and professional identity in both librarianship and other fields. I will then explore how current library chats (#libchat and #critlib) facilitate professional identity formation by allowing librarians and other information professionals the opportunity to discuss with likeminded professionals about current issues and trends in the profession, and examine how they identify with key themes and trends. Finally, I will briefly explore possible motivations and deterrents to the use of Twitter by librarians.

Professional Identity: What is it and Why Does It Matter?

Professional identity is not a new concept. The formation (and deterioration) of professional identity is explored in fields that run the gamut: from sports to education, and from medicine to social work. One author even discussed professional identity in literature by analyzing the authors of poetic schools of thought (Goldberg, 2007). Professional identity formation can fall under the realm of psychology, sociology, and even business management. A commonly cited vocational guidance book by Schien (1978) defines professional identity formation as a way for professionals to “anchor” themselves within their career by finding

common themes or values that they resonate with. While Schien probably did not intend for his work to be the widely cited voice on professional identity formation as it is today, his points are still relevant. For any professional to find success in their career, he or she must identify with both themes and trends in the profession as well as with other likeminded professionals.

Recognizing the importance of professional identity formation in any field is important. Slay & Smith (2011) recognize that “career success is often associated with successful professional identity construction’ and how “this association is especially important for contemporary careers that are characterized by shifting boundaries in occupational, organizational, national, and global work arrangements” (86).

Clearly, librarianship is quite characterized by these shifting boundaries, at least within its occupational and organizational standpoints. Librarianship is constantly changing, and librarians must both be adaptable to this change while understanding how their goal is to ultimately serve their user base. Preer (2008) makes the distinction between “identity” and “image” in relation to ethics:

Professional identity is what we do; image is someone else’s idea of what librarians are about. To a large extent, we can shape our identity, and ethics is an important element in this...every dimension of librarianship, how we approach social issues, how we interpret access, and how we seek funding, can all be viewed through an ethical lens (xiii-xiv).

The key point here is that identity is constructed through the values of the times. Trends in library discourses are key to shaping one’s professional identity. This identity is not static, but constantly changing; as are the roles of librarians. The related field of education has a wealth of information on professional identity formation. This is partially due to the similar nature of change that teachers are faced with, and the similar levels of professional development that both

fields engage in. New professionals in both fields may feel they do not “fit in” anywhere (more to be discussed later). As is this case in the field of law (Sommerlad, 2007; Maclean 2010), and in the field of pharmacology (Noble, Coombes, Nissen, Shaw, & Clavarino, 2015), professional identity in librarianship is both developed in theory and in practice, and for new professionals, this formation may determine the success of their career from the beginning. An article in the field of medicine argues that professional identity is constructed by “work-identity integrity violations”, further strengthened by how these professionals resolved these violations (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Identifying with what views as “important” in one’s field sets the tone for the rest of a career, and may be even more important for librarians who are constantly required to justify their existence. A librarian’s role as an information professional in the modern age is still a developing one, and new professionals are required now more than ever to define what their career means to them, whether that be an overt statement, a subvert gesture, or anything in between. In the related field education, Hsiesh (2015) epitomizes the importance of professional identity formation: “Identity reflects our commitments and shapes our behaviors. It is the core of who we are and what we do. As teachers are the most influential factor in student learning, teacher professional identity becomes a critical area for scholars and practitioners to focus on in the collective work of promoting quality teaching and learning experiences.” (189). Much of this work done on professional identity formation can be extrapolated to librarianship, but not many have extrapolated it in regards to Twitter in full detail.

Literature Review

In other fields, Twitter has been noted for its use as both a professional development tool and as a way to construct professional identity. Most of this discussion has come out of the fields

of education, journalism, business, and medicine. Miller & Williams (2013) explore how blogging through sites like Twitter can help preservice teachers identify with professional themes and narratives by the means of reflection. Foote (2014) explores the use of “EdChats” on Twitter, a way for teachers to collaborate and develop professionally through the use of hashtags that can center “chats” locally to help professionals network and develop. In higher education, a recent article stresses the importance of developing a professional online identity (“How to Manage”, 2011). This article iterates that there is a difference between online personal and professional identities, although it is clear that these lines are becoming increasingly blurred. Most importantly to my own readings, a recent dissertation by Brain Casey, PhD Candidate in Education at Edgewood College, thoroughly explores the “why” of professional identity formation and Twitter by studying the use of Twitter by educators in building social capital through individualized professional development opportunities (Casey, 2013). In his research, Casey explores how social capital - a “theoretical model used to describe relationships and social networks among humans” (13) – is developed through Twitter usage. The relationship of social capital to professional identity formation is not clear cut in Casey’s research, but the language is similar. Twitter helps construct professional identity the same way it creates social capital: through the creation of social networks and bonding with professionals over similar themes and ideas. Casey notes that social capital is built through either “bridging” or bonding”. The former is more professional development, while the later are more personal based interactions (Casey, 2013). His codebook is included in Appendix A for reference.

In other fields, Twitter is recognized (and chastised) for its ability to develop (and degrade) professional identity in many ways and forms. In medicine, Twitter is criticized for breaking down the boundaries between patient and doctor, and perhaps undoing much work of

professional identity formation in the field of medicine in particular (Decamp, Koenig, and Chisolm, 2013). A similar study looked at the social media accounts of PhD students and examined how their hybridized identities (both as teachers and learners) were displayed on social media like Twitter (Bennett & Folley, 2014). This can be seen as both positive and negative, and the authors warn of the dangers of Twitter's ability to both develop and distract. Similar arguments are echoed in the field of management; Oiller-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg (2013) argue that social networks like Twitter blur the lines between professional and personal identities, and as a result professionals develop identities that fall under four archetypes (open, audience, content, and hybrid).

On a more positive note, other fields praise Twitter for its transparency and accountability. Revers (2014) argues that Twitter's transparency has allowed journalists to develop their professional identity through professional control. McEnnis (2013) argued that "citizen journalism" has forced sports journalist to adapt to higher standards in order to assert themselves as significant in the digital age (sound familiar?). Relatedly, professional athletes use of Twitter as a means to assert their identity was examined by Jimmy Sanderson (2013). In his article, Sanderson argues that athletes construct their social identity through the use of Twitter, making themselves more likeable to fans who can relate to them as people. Finally, an interdisciplinary, general article (again, from the field of education) by Peter Evans (2015) argues that Twitter creates both formal and informal opportunities for individualized learning. The latter, informal learning, is the development of specialized knowledge, a key component of professional identity (Robinson, Anning, & Frost, 2005). Evans concludes by stating that "learning and identity is framed by social, participative, and on-going performances of what is

legitimate and illegitimate professional learning” (35). Twitter has begun to be seen as more and more legitimate through even these informal development opportunities that construct identity.

In librarianship itself, professional identity formation has not been largely examined in relation to Twitter. Twitter’s use by both librarians as a professional tool (i.e. posting on the library account under the libraries name) and a development tool is well discussed, especially in very recent studies. There are three major interconnected ways that Twitter is examined as: a professional development/learning tool; a networking tool; and as a tool for collaboration. None of these are autonomous, and all three as a whole construct professional identity in professionals. Cullingford (2013) discusses how to develop professionally on twitter by quite literally (as the title suggests) conversation with fellow professionals. Suffield (2013) argument is similar, giving recommendations on how to manage your professional network by using Twitter and other forms of social media to talk with likeminded professionals. Werner (2011) discusses Twitter and other social media sites in a general sense, although one could argue that this argument is someone outdated, despite only being 4 years old. LaGarde & Whitehead (2012) discuss Twitter’s usefulness in professional learning and developing by creating “personal learning networks”, which they define as “a group of people who are connected by shared passions or common interests, and who benefit from shared learning” (9). LaGarde & Whitehead go on to explain that there are four ways to develop your PLN: consumption, connection, creation, and contribution (2011, p. 10). Regarding Twitter, they suggest that you “make sure you respond to tweets that really grab you!” (13) in order to develop your PLN. All three major themes found in the literature on Twitter and professional development in librarianship are found in LaGarde & Whitehead’s article, but they do not frame it as a “identity” piece. However, many of the similar themes are found in Casey’s (2013) dissertation: networking, professional learning, and

collaboration in order to find oneself in the profession and build that social capital to legitimize oneself as a professional.

Most of the current literature on Twitter and Librarians focuses on its usefulness for networking. Bosque (2013) recognized its importance, and acknowledged the fact that relevant technologies and social media applications change, so perceptions of the usefulness of Twitter may change rapidly as time progresses. Bosque also recognizes that social media is somewhat dangerous as it may be more of a distraction than a beneficial professional development tool. Jonker (2014) examines the usefulness of multiple social media sites in networking professionally, emphasizing Twitter's usefulness in making professional connections that its useful for any type of librarianship. An early inquiry into the usefulness of social media by Farkas (2008) discusses the benefits of Twitter as a professional development tool through collaboration with librarians, but like Bosque, also warns of potential time wasted on these social media "distractions". Huwe (2012) discusses how Twitter can be used for collaboration by providing real life examples that reach beyond libraries, such as a project between library-based programmers and Labor Center employees that developed a "healthcare calculator" in the wake of the Affordable Care Act of 2010.

The most useful and direct reference to Twitter and professional identity formation is a book by Deborah Hicks titled *Technology and Professional Identity of Librarians: The Making of the Cybrarian* (2014). In this book, Hicks explores how technology has changed the role of Librarians. However, Hicks discussion on Twitter is a mere four pages. Hicks acknowledges that "the ways librarians, as individual professionals and not as spokespeople for their libraries, use Twitter requires more study" (2014, 79). While her discourse on identity is useful in context, her argument surrounding identity does not examine how librarians are identifying on Twitter.

Regardless, Hicks is one of the only authors to write about professional identity in relation to Twitter. She also is one of the only authors to write exclusively on professional identity formation in relation to technology. In her intro, Hicks sums up the reasons for looking into professional identity in the first place:

The study of identity provides insight into what it means to participate in different social groups, cultures, and institutions...By examining how librarians use language when describing their work, their relationships with users, and the role technology plays in professional lives, attention can be brought to how librarians shape their identity. (2014, 11).

The other main work, *Libraries and Identity: The Role of Institutional Self-Image and Identity in the Emergence of New Types of Library* by Joachim Hansson (2010), focuses on the identity of librarians in a professional context, but not beyond that. While Hansson does provide a valuable analysis of the changing roles of librarians within this professional context – especially in regards to technological change fuelled by social and political motivations – his work dismisses the importance of social media technologies, claiming that Library 2.0 is nothing more than a “rhetorical term” (Gilbert, 2011). Thus, while there a small amount of inquiry into professional identity in relation to Twitter, little attention has been paid to the discussions themselves.

Many similarities can be seen between the two previously discussed bodies of literature. However, up until now, scholars have not truly looked at framing their arguments in terms of professional identity solely in respect to Twitter. Twitter and other social media sites are clearly a “hot topic” with most of the previously mentioned articles coming out in the past five years. However, Twitter has not been thoroughly examined for its content; instead, Twitter has been discussed in a general sense that examines its usefulness in libraries as a means of outreach or by

librarians as a means of networking, and even more recently, as a tool for professional development. This does not mean that this work has not been happening on Twitter (and other forms of social media) for the past decade. It simply means that no one has taken a more serious look at the various forms of engagement happening on Twitter between librarians and other librarians, as well as librarians and other professions. Moreover, there has been virtually no inquiry into Twitter's ability to construct professional identity in librarians, while literature from other fields has looked into professional identity formation on Twitter for quite some time now.

Library Twitter: Making Sense of it All

For new (and old) professionals, Twitter may appear a bit overwhelming. Even for an experienced information professional, the way Twitter organizes and displays information may not appear so straightforward at first glance. Twitter allows one to follow users they are interested in, which "customizes" one's homepage with content posted by said users. This customization is useful in allowing one to really decide how they will learn, collaborate, network, and most importantly, identify on Twitter as a professional. Identity can be deliberately or unintentionally formed through the use of Twitter. However, as professionals recognize their online presence as professionals (or more commonly, their hybridized identities) this identity formation becomes more and more deliberate.

In order to witness and process this identity formation in action through professional development and networking on Twitter, I separately looked at 10 random questions of #libchat and #critlib discussions, analyzing the question asked, answers given, and how these forms of professional development construct identity by creating valued networks of professionals.

Through both bridging and bonding (Casey, 2013), librarians engage with each other in these chats and identify with professional themes and discourses, creating what is colloquially known as “library twitter”. Hicks (2014) argues that the short length of Twitter posts makes it hard for serious discussion about issues like the “core value[s] of the profession” (79). However, it becomes clear that through these weekly chats that serious, meaningful discussion is taking place, one that librarians as professionals can engage in and identify with. While I acknowledge this type of analysis is not formalized or concrete, this glance into the chats of Twitter provides a way to begin looking at professional identity on Twitter in a somewhat structured manner.

In order to contextualize this argument, I will be drawing from both Brian Casey’s (2013) dissertation on building social capital on Twitter, as well as LaGarde & Whitehead’s short but useful discourse on building one’s professional learning network as a librarian on Twitter. Both of these arguments provide useful context for connection the relevant literature in both library science and in other related fields that look at professional identity formation through Twitter.

#LibChat

As a brief background, #LibChat is a weekly Twitter Chat where a moderator facilitates discussion by asking questions that users then respond to. Participants can suggest questions before and during the chat, which runs on Tuesday’s from 8:00pm EST to 9:30pm EST. Questions vary, and can be anything from service based (How do you deal with an angry patron?) to workplace based (What do you do if you don’t get along with a coworker?) to tech based (How do you feel about <insert latest tech fad> in libraries?), or a combination thereof.

Questions generally do not deal with too much controversial material, but regularly pose questions that are relevant to all libraries.

The following are random questions taken from random weeks of #libchat, grouped into what type of question it is and whether or not the response garnered mostly bridging or mostly bonding experiences.

Question Asked	Type of Question	Bridging or Bonding?
<user> is starting a Twitter feed for a new mobile library. What are your suggestions for engagement and audience-building?	Library: Service-Oriented	Bridging
What should you do if you learn if (sic) you are the subject of a rumour at work?	Workplace: Interpersonal	Bridging and Bonding (few answers)
What do you think is the most underserved population in your library? Why? Are you doing anything to help?	Library: Service-Oriented	Bridging
Does your library use QR codes?	Library: Technology	Bridging
Do you think wearables will soon be part of the library environment? What uses or programs can you imagine for wearable tech?	Library: Technology	Bridging

What are your policies for listening to music/using headphones if you are library employee or volunteer?	Workplace: Performance-related	Bonding
What are some common pitfall #n00brarians (sic) should avoid at their first jobs? What do you wish you knew when you started?	Workplace: Performance-Related	Bonding
What can individual librarians do to help make and lead changes in scholarly publishing?	Library: Academic	Bridging
How do you decide which information to put in reports? What kinds of information do your supervisor/s like?	Workplace: Interdisciplinary	Bridging
Do you think libraries have a moral obligation to act more like "soldiers/employees" vs "revolutionaries/freelancers"?	Library: Activism	Bonding

As a brief commentary on those questions in particular, it is clear that there is a lot of work happening in #LibChat. Participants often engage with each other, both in serious and jocular tones, and identify with other librarians through work and life experiences. Twitter allows users

to discuss ways their libraries do things, and allows one to “bridge” or “bond” with another by sharing in their experience.

#CritLib

#CritLib is another popular, relatively new chat that focuses on critical pedagogy and librarianship. In a very similar fashion to #LibChat, #CritLib provides a way for participants to engage with each other through planned chats (every other Tuesday). Planned moderators facilitate planned discussions on planned topics that deal with discussing library issues that may not come up in conferences, in professional development discussions, or even in #CritLib. There are even planned readings for participants. Every aspect of these discussions contribute to professional identity formation through both bridging and bonding social capital building, the latter of which “[seeks] to reinforce identity through exclusion and homogenous groups” (Casey, 2013, p. 5).

The following are random questions taken from random weeks of #CritLib, grouped into what type of question it is and whether or not the response garnered mostly bridging or mostly bonding experiences.

Questions Asked	Type of Question	Bridging or Bonding
How do you bring discussions of race, gender, and class privilege into your teaching?	Library: Instruction	Bonding

What library instruction debates/norms should we be questioning?	Library: Instruction	Bonding
Besides the CoC, (Code of Conduct) what can we do as a profession to create safe spaces at conferences?	Professional Development: Conference	Bonding
What does “diversity” mean in context of libraries and librarianship?	Library: Critical	Bridging
What are some barriers preventing librarianship from becoming more inclusive and diverse?	Library: Critical	Bonding
How do we teach these skills (information literacy) when students will not have access to library resources after college?	Library: Instruction	Bridging
Many students pursue education w/ a goal of getting a job, not becoming LLLers.	Library: Instruction	Bridging

How should we approach this in the classroom?		
Is the terminology used by #critlib a barrier to entry to it?	Meta	Bonding
Is "calling in" or general kindness a priority tactic in a critical library? Why or why not?	Library: Service-Oriented	Bridging
What categorical binaries (i.e., public/private; insider/outsider) exist in LIS work? When do you notice them? What are their implications?	Library: Meta	Bridging

As one will notice, there are markedly more cases of bonding in #CritLib chats. These chats are often more discussion focused, with users often tweeting at each other during discussions to expand upon points. In contrast, #LibChat is more organized, focused, and directed. This may create more exclusionary means if anything through these “Bonding” social capital experiences.

Discussion

While #CritLib and #LibChat are not the only library related chats that exist on Twitter, both of them provide good examples of how librarians are engaging with each other and forming identity by identifying with current themes and trends within the profession. While there has not been direct inquiry into how exactly Twitter builds professional identity, there is clearly this work going on through the development of global professional learning networks that allow both new and existing professionals to speak about a variety of topics that relate to libraries. Moreover, Twitter chats are not the only way librarians can engage in professional development on Twitter. Simply being active on Twitter by posting regularly, “favouriting” and “retweeting” others Tweets, and commenting on others Tweets is one way to be involved. Another way to be involved is through participation in “e-conferences” on Twitter. Regardless of the way into “Library Twitter”, the online interactions of librarians are an important in understanding the identity formation of the profession through both casual and structured professional development opportunities as well as the creation of professional learning and support networks.

Examining both chats provides a few considerations in this context. First, it is clear that there is both “bridging” and “bonding” happening on library Twitter (Casey, 2013). For the more structured #LibChat, most interactions constitute bridging. Professionals share resources, discuss policies, and develop their networks. Bonding happens as well, but #LibChat is mainly a way for professionals to discuss the daily happenings of libraries and professional work in general. In contrast, #CritLib is a more laid back chat that contains a lot of bonding social capital building experiences. Participants talk to each other, answer questions in detail, and tend to go off on tangents. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it is clearly a less structured way for professionals to engage with each other. However, the very nature of #CritLib – a way for

professionals to engage in activist and so-called “radical librarianship” discourses – is conducive to this atmosphere.

Another feature that stood out as a professional identity formation is the way these chats typically have similar professionals participating this week. In this way, by participating in a chat, one can develop their “professional learning network” (Lagarde & Whitehead, 2012) simply by engaging with other professionals in a structured manner. Each chat is open and accepting, and allows participants to join whenever through an easy use of hashtags that collocate conversations. Moreover, chats are typically curated each week, allowing those that missed the chat the ability to view what happened on sites like Storify.com. Developing networks of professionals through these professional development chats is beneficial especially to new professionals who may have only experienced librarianship as a student at a library school. Moreover, having a network of professionals online separate from work and professional association networks allows for global discussions to happen, further constructing and cementing the identity of the library profession as a whole. This is especially important in a time of changing institutional roles that sees librarians shift from simply “keepers of books” to digitally adept information professionals.

One critique of these chats stems from the potential exclusivity that may seem daunting to professionals wanting to develop an online presence. While these chats are open and available, it may be difficult for one to start the “creation” process of developing one’s professional learning network (Lagarde & Whitehead, 2012, p. 10). Bonding itself creates exclusivity, and this can be seen especially in #CritLib. While Casey (2013) argues that bonding social capital is “still beneficial for social networks because it provides support and trust”, (13) it still may be difficult for new professionals to enter the fold. These discussions are generally centered around

practice, not theory, and one must be familiar with the professional practice itself in order to understand the theory that does come up. While #CritLib is more heavy on the theory side by providing an alternative discourse analysis that one typically would not find on the job, the bonding social capital that is found within is exclusionary by nature. Professionals also may not feel comfortable developing a professional identity online because they may feel it will conflict with their professional practice; for example, through a strict social media policy or absence thereof (Zohoorian-Fooladi & Abrizah, 2014, p. 169).

Conclusion and Future Avenues

Professional identity formation is a widely studied topic, but not in relation to emergent social media sites and technologies, and especially not in relation to librarianship and said sites. However, librarians have been using social media and blog sites to identify professionally extensively, and more and more librarians are becoming aware of the usefulness of Twitter as a way to develop oneself professional. This development is both through the creation of useful and important social and professional networks, and through professional development by discussing with colleagues about key issues and trends in the profession. Twitter's ability to group chats through hashtags makes it an extremely useful professional tool. As more and more of the profession becomes aware of this usefulness, more and more are beginning to flock to it, and for good reason.

There is work to be done with respect to Twitter as a professional development tool. Much like Casey's (2013) article on building social capital, original research must be conducted into the attitudes and opinions of librarians who do use Twitter regarding how it helps them

concrete themselves within the profession. When looking at Twitter chats, there is clearly this work happening. However, a mixed methods study would be beneficial in order to figure out how it is happening and how it differs from regular identity formation in the profession. Fortunately, Twitter is constantly updated, and allows one to keep up with changes in the profession itself. There is a large amount of work currently being done looking at Twitter, and librarians are clearly engaged on it. Figuring out how and why in relation to their professional paths and goals is the next step.

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Appendix A

APPENDIX A

QUALITATIVE CODEBOOK

The qualitative codebook includes the codes created by Forte, Humphreys & Park (2012) and will include emergent codes identified during the coding process.

Bridging social capital codes

- Resource sharing
- General inspiration
- Networking or self-promotion
- Policy- local, national, global, laws and reform
- Philosophy
- Emergent codes related to bridging social capital

Bonding social capital codes

- Concrete advice
- Personal (status updates/ jokes)
- Request
- Response to request
- Events (conference tweets, Chats, tweet-ups)
- Emergent codes related to bonding social capital

(Casey, 2013, p. 94).