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# Social Media Use By Ontario University Libraries: Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Gary Collins  
*University of Manitoba*

Anabel Quan-Haase  
*The University of Western Ontario, aquan@uwo.ca*

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**Gary Collins**

**University of Manitoba**

**Anabel Quan-Haase**

**University of Western Ontario**

## **Paper: Social Media Use By Ontario University Libraries: Challenges and Ethical Considerations**

### **Abstract:**

The application of social media by academic libraries is re-shaping traditional ideas of library services. The use of social media in Ontario's university libraries demonstrates the divergent modes by which information technologies are utilized, as well as the challenges facing libraries in both adopting and using these tools.

### **1. Introduction**

Over the past few years, social media has become a catalyst in reshaping the manner in which individuals and organizations collaborate, communicate and create relationships with colleagues, peers and prospective audiences. As libraries yearn to remain relevant with contemporary audiences, social media is viewed as an important tool for enticing and retaining patrons who are already familiar with and immersed into the world of social media.

The employment of social media and other Web 2.0 applications and services has witnessed steady growth in some quarters, whilst becoming largely stagnant in others. Web 2.0 is largely characterized by web-based tools and technologies that enable individuals to collaborate, interact and connect online. Previous studies observing these trends within library settings have primarily focused on earlier forms of Web 2.0 (Chua and Goh, 2010; Linh, 2008; Xu, Ouyang and Chu, 2008). Scholarly research detailing the extent of social media use by libraries, specifically those addressing newer forms of social media and a cross-section of popular social media tools by academic libraries have been slow to appear. Research within this area has primarily focused on examining problems and issues concerning the level of online interaction between students and librarians and student perceptions regarding the benefits of developing library-oriented social media applications (Chu and Meulemans, 2008; Burhanna, Seeholzer, and Salem, 2009; Kim and Abbas, 2010). Other areas of research promoting social media applications have often indirectly raised questions about the information-seeking behaviours of librarians using social media to interact with users (Lawson, 2007; Mathews, 2008).

The present study investigates longitudinally how Ontario university libraries have utilized social media applications. The study's aim is twofold. First, it examines the varied uses for these

applications at both an institutional and provincial level and second, it compares various institutions' usage to discern those elements which shape and define practice.

## 2. Methods

In this study, social media practices and the degree of adoption rates for twenty-one university libraries in Ontario were examined over a period of fourteen months between April 2010 and June 2011 (Figure 1).

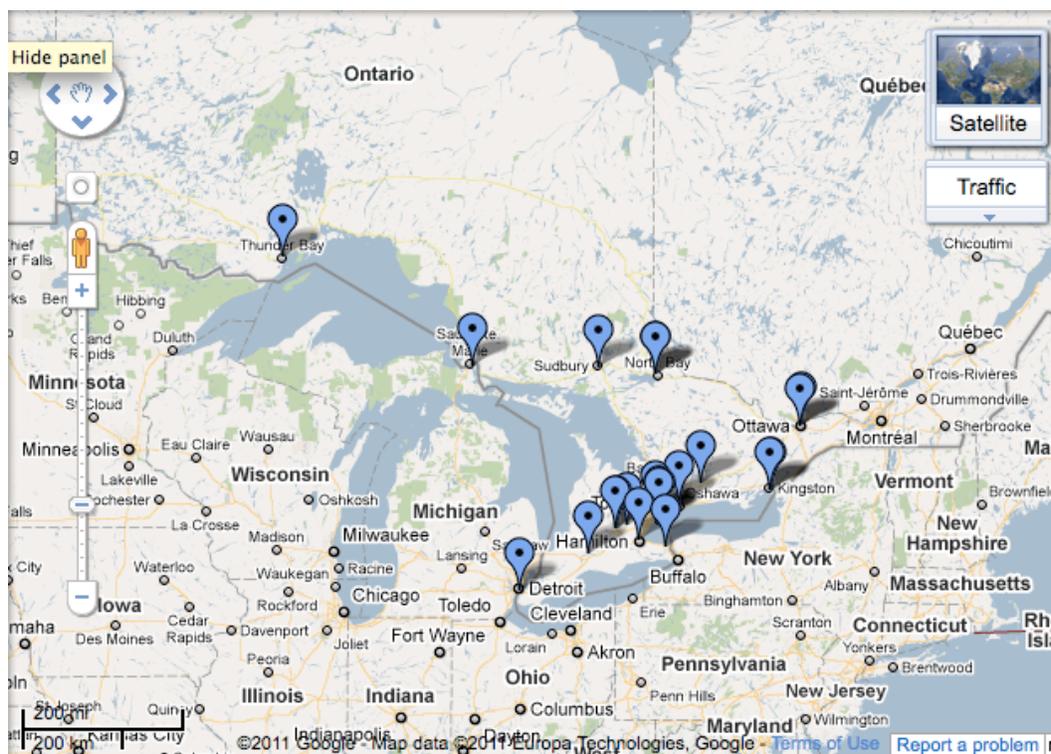


Figure 1: OCUL Member Ontario University Libraries (2011)

The rationale was to uncover the extent of social media use by these libraries, as well as to obtain a greater understanding of the expansion and evolution of social media in an academic library environment. The libraries examined in this study were located on the main campus. If the respective university had more than one library on campus and had subsequently developed separate social media apparatuses for each facility, the library chosen for this study was the largest library facility available on the main campus.

Only social media channels deemed to be official were monitored. A social media platform was considered official if either a link to the website was available on the library website, or one of the library's official social media pages provided a link to the resource. Each social media format was analyzed using an original coding system developed to highlight and emphasize specific attributes unique to each social media application. Statistics were gathered over a period of fourteen months between April 5<sup>th</sup> 2010 and June 30<sup>th</sup> 2011 to catalogue the popularity, growth, changes, content and application of four popular and renowned social media websites commonly used by academic libraries in Canada: Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube. For each social media format, specific types of information were recorded and gathered to best understand the

nuances of that particular application and the context of its use. When possible, this involved classifying each format and assigning an appropriate categorization relevant to its context and coverage.

### 3. Results

The manner of use and levels of application for specific social media formats differed greatly throughout the province of Ontario. The findings of this research indicate that the interests, demands, needs and practices of a respective institution largely dictate the adoption and subsequent role of social media within that setting.

*Adoption rates:* Social media use by Ontario university libraries is prevalent largely in Southwestern Ontario, specifically within a 400km radius between Windsor and the Greater Toronto Area (Figure 2). During the period, the rates of adoption were limited. While there existed moderate growth in the employment of Facebook and Twitter, new interest in Flickr and YouTube remained static. Notably, some university libraries abandoned or neglected earlier applications in favour of social media tools that better suited their aims and needs.

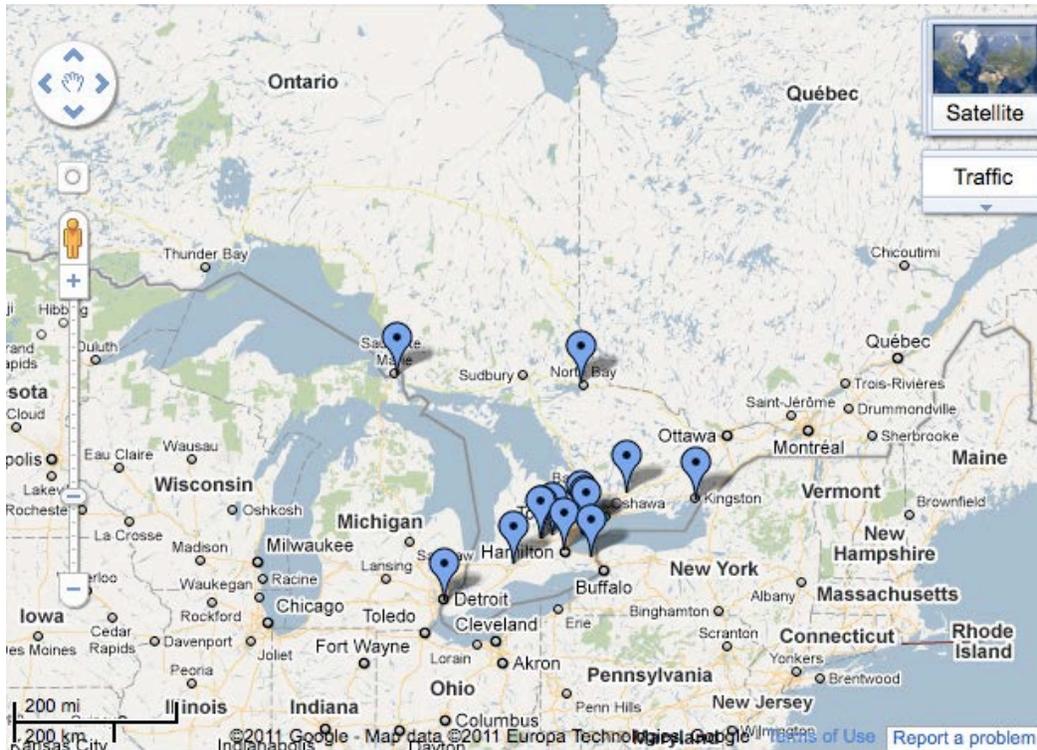


Figure 2: Ontario University Libraries with a Social Media Presence (2011)

*Diversity of usage:* The uses of social media applications occurred in a variety of forms depending on the institution and the tool. Although social media is primarily used to transmit information to current and prospective patrons, the content and method of delivery varies from institution to institution. For example, whereas some libraries used Twitter to promote library services and resources, others used the same medium for disseminating library-oriented news (Table 1).

Table 1: Content of Tweets by Ontario University Libraries Using Twitter

School Name	# of Tweets (2011)	Content: News	Content: Promotion	Content: Response	Content: Campus Life	Content: External	Content: Re-Tweets
Algoma	6	2	3	0	0	1	0
Brock	361	152	102	15	5	55	32
Guelph	101	92	7	0	1	1	0
Laurier	9	4	0	0	0	4	1
McMaster	216	149	25	27	2	11	2
Nipissing	97	67	4	0	1	9	16
Ryerson	208	146	26	10	4	12	10
Toronto	205	101	24	26	9	12	33
Waterloo	157	105	27	5	6	12	2
Western	317	129	96	7	13	72	0
Windsor	166	67	67	5	6	11	10
York	258	59	20	69	12	21	77

*Geographic and language-based implications:* Libraries located outside of Southwestern Ontario, particularly those in Northern and Eastern Ontario were less likely to use one or more social media applications (Figure 3). Barriers to adoption in these areas may be related to factors such as limited access to wireless services, infrastructure and other information-based technologies, difficulty delivering equal services in French and English in bilingual communities and lack of funding for training and resources.

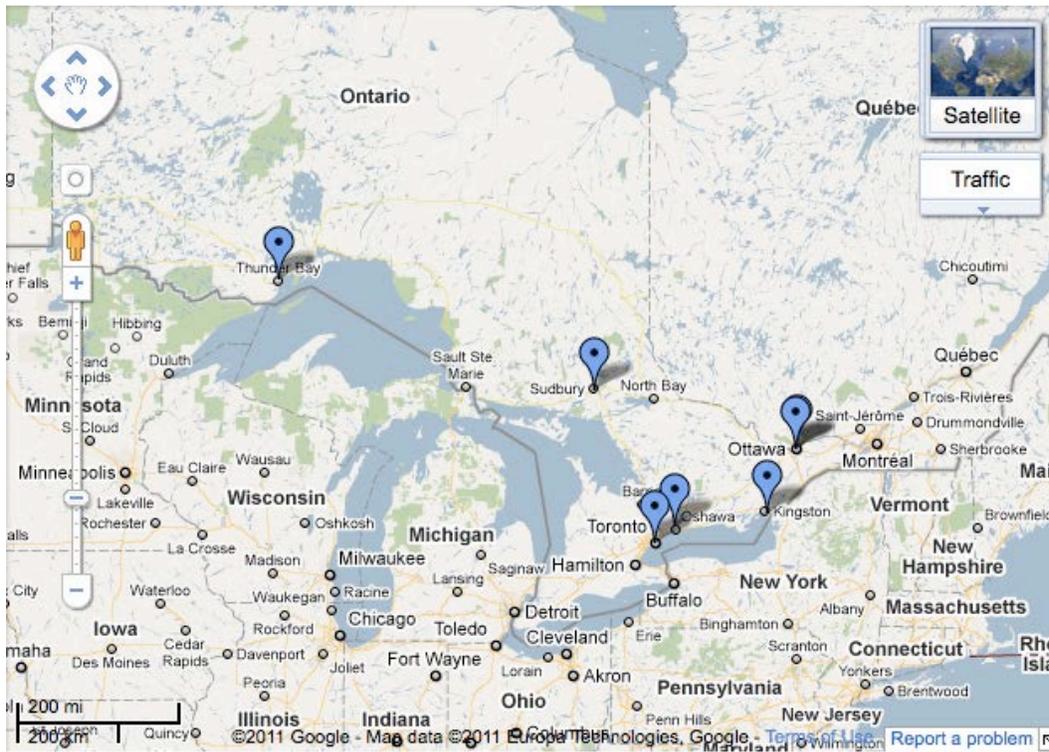


Figure 3: Ontario University Libraries without a Social Media Presence (2011)

*Patron interaction, accessibility and information ethics:* Only four of the libraries studied opted to modify customizable social media applications to provide greater access to existing web-based library resources, such as OPACs. None of the libraries examined had a set of readily available library-centered social media policies defining proper use by staff. A minority of libraries elected to engage in direct interaction with patrons using some form of social media. In limited instances, the methods employed when interacting with patrons suggest patterns of behaviour similar to those displayed by Lawson (2007) and Mathews (2008), in which some librarians may be using social media to gauge opinion about the library and to respond to the personal comments of patrons.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The present study shows that while Ontario university libraries are adopting social media tools, they may not have a clear vision of how to integrate these tools into the overall goals of the library. A number of initiatives have become static, in that social media sites were abandoned or no longer updated. Moreover, libraries could be showing a more in-depth engagement with the possibilities offered by social media, for instance with regard to providing greater levels of customization and a diversity of materials where applicable. Additionally, the libraries examined would likely benefit from cultivating a public awareness for the role of information ethics in developing policies to help better navigate the increasingly grey spectres of public and private spheres on the internet.

The findings confirm on a smaller level, the validity of the macro geographical conclusions expressed by Chua and Goh (2010) and Linh, (2008) regarding the manner in which libraries in different regions adopt digital technologies in divergent ways. While public interest and engagement with social media is growing, this study re-affirms ideas expressed by Burhanna et al (2009) and Chu and Meulemans (2008) that while in most circumstances social media is viewed as an inappropriate tool for providing traditional library services, there is the possibility under the right conditions for it to be a dynamic method for promoting library services and resources.

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