

Teaching social media in LIS: a bridging approach

Introduction

People use social media in many situations and contexts of their everyday life. These interactions and arenas entail enormous amounts of information and have also changed the ways many people interact and communicate. Scialdone, Rotolo and Snyder (2011) identified themes for which social media has had large impact and how these are relevant for curricula and goals of iSchools and information science departments: “social media communities, ownership, privacy and governance of user-generated content on social networks, and how social media may impact education and learning at all ages” (Scialdone, Rotolo & Snyder, 2011, p. 514).

The concept social media is elusive, and definitions depend on the context where it is applied, commonly with a focus on technology or marketing. Social media courses are often offered by commercial education companies. The majority of these are practically oriented and focus on the use of social media from a commercial perspective, as in business advantages, and marketing, or on specific technological tools and arenas. Courses taught in academic disciplines have previously had similar narrow foci. Swedish universities currently offer social media courses in disciplines such as media studies; education; and informatics.

As demonstrated by Scialdone, Rotolo and Snyder (2011), many aspects of social media are closely connected to areas already studied within many LIS curricula. Furthermore, LIS is well equipped to understand and handle complex information problems due to its interdisciplinarity. However, teaching social media in a meaningful way for LIS presents a number of challenges. We suggest that in order to make the concept useful in LIS contexts, it is important to understand some basic mechanisms and dimensions of activities and behaviours in social media arenas that goes beyond technical solutions and marketing strategies.

Course example: Social media and social interaction

To illustrate our approach, we present an example from a course offered by the Swedish School of Library and Information Science: *Social media and social interaction*, 7.5 ECTS, to students on the undergraduate and master’s levels in the LIS programmes and the web content manager programme. It was developed with the intention to provide a general, overall perspective on social media. Other courses given at the department focus on specific social media tools and arenas, including *The theory and practice of blogs*; *Filesharing and Internet politics*; and *Programming for dynamics, interactivity and integration*.

The learning outcomes of the course used in our example are: that the students will have the competence to describe and discuss use of social media, social interaction and arenas where social interaction can occur; and to synthesize central theories and concepts concerning social interaction and virtual communities. We believe that it is necessary to go beyond technical

applications and solutions and the commercial marketing perspective to understand, and thus be able to use, social media in a meaningful way in LIS related professions. This connects to another challenge in teaching social media which is related to balancing elements in the course related to either theory or practice. This challenge is neither new to LIS, nor unique for social media: other current LIS examples include aspects of knowledge organization; digital library development; and content management. Finding an appropriate balance depends on factors such as local practices in the curricula and the level of the course.

Theoretical grounding - three themes

The literature used in the course example have been organized into three themes: *theoretical points of departure*; *motivations for participation*; and *contexts and applications*. The literature belongs to a variety of interdisciplinary research fields, such as computer-supported cooperative work, computer mediated communication, information science, and psychology. A guide to approaching the literature is provided to the students, as the bulk of the literature is research papers, whilst the course is given to undergraduate students. An additional effect of this is that the students are introduced to scientific writing and methodology early in their education.

Theoretical points of departure

Theoretical perspectives on social media and related topics make the point of departure for the course. In the initial part of the course, definitions of social media such as social network sites (SNS), are introduced and discussed (Steinfeld, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). This part of the course also covers concepts and applications of information sharing and active participation in several contexts such as scientific collaboration and open source software development. (Ellis, Oldridge & Vasconcelos, 2004; Lassi & Sonnenwald, 2010; Neale, Carroll & Rosson, 2004).

Motivations for participation

Identifying and implementing the right motivations for participation is crucial for the success and longevity of a venture of increasing interaction using social media. The body of literature in this theme represents a broad take on information sharing and active participation. Nardi and colleagues (2004) present the results of an interview study about the motivations of bloggers. Nonnecke, Preece and Andrews (2004) have studied what posters and lurkers think of each others' roles in a virtual community. Lassi and Sonnenwald's (2010) have synthesized previous research, resulting in a taxonomy of factors that may affect the design, adoption and use of a Web based system for information sharing and collaboration.

Contexts and applications

The majority of course literature falls into this theme and includes papers in which several contexts and applications come into play (boyd & Ellison, 2007), as well as papers focusing on specific contexts and applications. Examples of these are: an online pregnancy and mothering group (Ley, 2007); World of Warcraft (Nardi & Harris, 2006); a financial discussion board (Herrmann, 2007); Facebook (Ellison, Lampe & Steinfeld, 2009); and social tagging networks (Ding et al., 2009).

Practical applications - course assignments

The course assignments have been designed to bridge the theoretical focus of the literature and social media tools. In the first assignment we asked the students to contribute to a new collaborative initiative about social media, namely the wiki *Sociamediapedia*. Each student contributed two wiki posts about central theories, concepts, phenomena or tools related to the course. Subsequently they were asked to add to, modify, and make connections between the other students' contributions. The second assignment was to analyze activities and interaction in Internet forums of the students' own choosing, and to connect their observations to theories and concepts within the themes above, such as participation, roles, status, and privacy. The final assignment was to develop a social media strategy for a web site using their knowledge of motivations for active participation and information sharing.

Principal contributions

With our example we have demonstrated an approach to teaching social media in LIS that bridges the gaps between theory and practice, and, furthermore introduces a perspective concerning social interaction to the current technology and marketing focused teaching approaches. We have also identified a body of research from different research fields that contribute to a broad theoretical understanding of social media concepts of importance for LIS and other fields.

Our students have learned to develop strategies for introducing and developing interactivity on the Web, using their knowledge of motivations for sharing information and active participation in social media. Furthermore, the students have used the central concepts and theories in analyzing specific arenas for social interaction and contributed to a wiki on social media.

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