

# **The Use of Social Media in the Work Practices of Information Professionals**

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## ***Abstract***

Enabled and underpinned by the use of the internet, knowledge and information take an increasingly prominent place in modern society. As the technologies of social media create a second wave of innovation and opportunity in the organisational use of the web, this research paper examines the nexus of two important phenomena: various established information practices and the uptake of social media tools to facilitate or extend these practices. The paper reports an investigation of practices in which information professionals include the tools of social media and the theoretical outcomes that follow. This research provides a deeper understanding of the way that social media can benefit information practices.

## ***Introduction***

In recent years, developments in the internet technologies of social media and the increasing use of these tools have seen the web advance from a platform of information delivery to one that includes contribution and collaboration. Social media or web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, blogs, micro-blogs and social bookmarking, are increasingly used within organisations in pursuit of their informational and communicative goals. Made popular in individualistic and open use on the internet, web 2.0 tools or social media are increasingly used as tools for information and knowledge work within organisations. McAfee (2009), who claims significant opportunities for improved organisational communication and knowledge work with the use of these technologies, uses the term Enterprise 2.0 to describe the use of social media in organisations. 'Enterprise 2.0 is the use of emergent social software platforms by organisations in pursuit of their goals' (McAfee 2009, p. 73). This research investigates the detail of Enterprise 2.0 in a specific sector; the use of social media within a variety of information practices in organisational contexts. It examines how information professionals embed the tools of social media in their practice and identifies the advantages, risks and transformations that may result.

Information agencies signal their willingness to incorporate social media in their practices with labels such as Library 2.0 that attempt to associate agencies more directly with the characteristic and technologies of web 2.0 (Black 2007). Bailey's

(2008) 'Records Management 2.0' challenges the scope and theory of the records management tradition in the light of social media. The information sector at large looks to the new technologies of social media knowing that it must engage. Both Plutchak (2006) and Crawford (2006) challenge the use of such labels, suggesting that the radical change that is implied is hype and that innovation and adoption of social media will always be continuous and evolutionary – like all technologies before them.

This research is situated within current Australian and international attempts to provide explicit strategic and policy positions about the use and benefits of web 2.0 technology within government. A taskforce, established by the Australian Federal Government, reported in 2009, the many benefits and opportunities afforded by the adoption of social media in the work of government. The application of web 2.0 collaborative tools and interactivities to the processes of government is one of the three pillars of Government 2.0 according to the Australian Report of the Government 2.0 Taskforce, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0*. The report claims (p. 3) that 'as they have outside of government, these tools and practices can increase productivity and efficiency' within the government sector.

Yet, Nicolas Gruen (2010), the chair of the Government 2.0 taskforce subsequently states that 'Government 2.0 is ultimately about what individual agencies, and yes, individual public servants do to make it happen'. In accord with Gruen's advice, this research moves away from top-down strategy, policy and management that recommends and directs the adoption of social media and seeks increased productivity and efficiency. It disregards the rhetoric of Library 2.0, Records Management 2.0 and Government 2.0. Rather, it investigates the everyday work of the information professional, observing, probing and seeking to understand more fully how social internet technologies are incorporated into various information practices. In doing so, this research uses a theoretical perspective of work and activity that has become known as *practice theory*.

## ***Research Design***

Research using a practice-based approach exhibits a desire 'to shed new light on organisational phenomena by getting closer to the "real" work in organisations' and a move away from structural notions of organisations (Geiger 2009, p. 129). For Gherardi (2009), practice is located in the significant pattern of how conduct or activity takes place.

*Theories of practice assume an ecological model in which agency is distributed between humans and non-humans and in which the relationality between the social world and materiality can be subjected to inquiry' (Gherardi 2009, p. 115).*

This research investigates the materiality of the web based tools of social media and the social world of information work in which they are becoming embedded. Bjorkeng, Clegg and Pitsis (2009, p. 145) describe practice as:

*novel patterns of interaction developed into predictable arrays of activities, changing and transforming while at the same time continuing to be referred to as “the same”.*

A negotiated, shared and recognised way of working collectively means that practices shift and evolve from a relatively firm, but not fixed, foundation. Bjorkeng et al. (2009) extend practice theory and offer theoretical constructs to describe the ‘becoming’ of a practice. However, this research finds greater value in the perspective that information practices, as they adopt the tools of social media, are existing practices that are embracing a new materiality and will morph and be transformed as a result.

The research design is based on qualitative multiple case studies and grounded theory following Eisenhardt (1989) who claims that this research approach is especially suited to novel and emerging phenomenon. Grounded theory is used and provides a systematic and explicit process for conceptualisation from data – theory is constructed (Charmaz 2006). Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) enables the study of information practices and social media within the enterprise to be taken into a social realm – involving people and the complex interactions involved in the use of these technologies in the workplace.

Situated information practices that have incorporated social media within the everyday work activity are the ‘unit of analysis’ (Yin 2009). Acknowledging the widespread use of social media in many other fields of endeavour, this research attends only to information practices in order to reveal the activity and patterns in the use of social media for the purposeful management and communication of information. In doing so, this research considers the ‘invisible’ work of organising and managing information that is ‘severely underrepresented in the theoretical literature’ (Bowker & Star 2000, p. 9).

Information practices that are located within large and recognisable fields such as records management, archives or librarianship are examined. This research extends across these recognisable fields within the information sector in order to attend to commonality and convergence, and, staying close to practice theory, to ignore any artificial separation which may have accumulated over time. It heeds Nicholas et al.’s (2008, p. 2) insistence that:

*Information professions are insular and tribal and what happens outside their strictly defined discipline boundaries are not their prime concern, even though the user and internet are busy blowing up and redrawing these boundaries.*

Information practices are determined as discrete recognisable existing patterns of activity and selected for study if the practice incorporates social media in the achievement of purpose. Uses of social media may be contained within the organisation or straddle the organisational boundaries to include clients and external stakeholders. Organisations of both the public and private sector are included in the study and whilst the organisation itself may be a dedicated information agency, case

studies are also drawn from the information practices within organisations with a broader purpose. Whilst the private and public sectors are very different environments, it is the detailed nature of information practice that is under investigation and both commonality and difference are revealed by grounded theory analysis and accommodated in emergent theory.

Narratives of practice are collected from two sources. Firstly, they are obtained from recent literature, which reveals myriad descriptions and stories of the practical use of social media in information work. An extensive review of the literature has built a repository of descriptions of practice and narratives of social media use in information work, which serve as data for this enquiry. Secondly, narrative groups of practitioners within discrete information practices are formed to capture the story of how they collaboratively use and embed the tools of web 2.0 in their practice and what benefits, opportunities and challenges arise as a result. The researcher digitally records the narrative for subsequent transcription. To date, twenty written accounts of practice and three verbal narratives from groups of practitioners have informed this emergent theory. However, this paper does not claim theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2006, p. 113); rather it reports early conceptual findings. Data collection will continue until, in grounded theory tradition, the analysis of additional data does not alter the constructed conceptual framework for the use of social media in information practice.

### ***Emerging Findings***

The early findings of this research provide a grounded conceptual account of how social media are used in information practices, uncovering the pitfalls as well as the opportunities. The constructs of practice that are reported in this section of the paper are: *the nature of collected community knowledge; re-imaging and re-positioning information agencies; autonomy, agility and innovation; and projects: planned and orderly*. These constructs form the basis of a larger theoretical framework of practice.

### **The nature of collected community knowledge**

The use of social media by organisations to consult a larger body of voluntary and un-defined contributors for a particular purpose is frequently referred to as *crowdsourcing* (Bojin et al. 2011). This research finds that when information practices engage in *crowdsourcing* the sought after contribution is additional knowledge.

Facts, figures and objects are one aspect of the knowledge that is contributed by community via social media in their participation in information practices. The public is invited to contribute the names of people and places to assist in completing the record of objects in collections. Digital photograph collections are enlarged as community members deposit digital copies of images in their custody, frequently via

the popular Flickr platform. Various digitised objects and memorabilia that are in keeping with a collection are added by individuals from their private collection.

Knowledge is also contributed and constructed in social tags that are applied to information objects by the public. Such tags surround the object with the descriptive language of the user, aiding retrieval and mapping and defining knowledge trends in their accumulation. The knowledge patterns built by social tags quickly adapt to shifts and innovation in the domain of interest.

Holley (2009) describes a large-scale, historical newspaper digitization project in which optical character recognition processes and technologies fail to meet user expectations or to produce a quality of reproduction that guarantees full text retrieval. Digitisation of ageing newspapers, however, is key to their preservation and wide availability. Ambitiously, social media technologies were custom built for this project and the public was given a role in enhancing the quality of the digitised newspaper text. In this practice, the language skills, availability of time and motivation to become involved saw community knowledge in action and resulting in the enhancement of the data representing myriad newspaper articles. The community contribution of contextual knowledge combined with language capability was reported to surpass contracted and dedicated approaches to textual data correction (Holley 2009).

One collecting organisation constructed photographic exhibitions on Flickr to push the organisation's collection to a wider audience and to purposely invite and capture the knowledge of the community about the realities and contexts that surround the images. The opening lines of the exhibition ask directly, *do you recognise any of the people or places in these photographs?*, engaging the audience and evoking their memory and knowledge of these photos as soon as they visit the Flickr exhibition. As well as providing a viewing platform for photographic images, Flickr facilitates the capture of social tags or metadata about the photographic image and free form commentary about each object. In this way, individuals viewing the exhibition can contribute their personal and tacit knowledge of the circumstances that surround the photo that has been exhibited. They are able to tell the stories of the events that are portrayed in the photographs.

"The comments have greatly increased our knowledge of nearly half of the 45 images in the Flickr album". (Faulkner, 2010, p. 9). This collecting organisation uses the contextual knowledge of its audience to update its own corporate records of the collection of photographs and thereby capture and recording community knowledge that is otherwise unlikely to endure. In the process, the findability of the objects in its own traditional searching systems is improved. Community knowledge is invited and used to extend and deepen the contextual corporate record of an image.

At times the collected knowledge of the community is in the form of unspecified and unstructured prose or anecdote. Stories of an individualist nature are collected using social media in public library practices that support local knowledge

collections. Opportunities are reported *to develop the collection to unprecedented levels of depth and diversity* using community participation and social media. This extension to the acquisition of local studies resources adds to those provided by historians, genealogists and journalists. The different and varied insights and perceptions of individual community members enrich the collection. *More rounded characters* and richer memories and anecdotes are captured.

## **Reimagining and repositioning information agencies**

Nicholas et al. (2008, p. 2) claim that the core information professions 'have been rocked, and, in some instances, derailed, by the digital transition'. A sense of digital insecurity and a desire to use social media to establish and enhance appearance is revealed in the information practices of this study. At times social media is used to be seen to be being involved in the Web 2.0 world, to be relevant and to be digitally savvy and engaged. Information practitioners claimed that social media gave opportunity to present libraries in a *different space*, to *reimagine* an organisation and a service and to *re-invent libraries in action*. 'The service would have a "cool factor"' (Holley 2009, p. 4) and the digital reputation of the organisation enhanced.

Deeper change and repositioning is noted in some stories of practice that incorporate web 2.0. Any alteration of image is due to significant and enduring new patterns of practices and paradigms of work and service. An archive for the electronic storage of documents about endangered language is one such example. With a purpose of preserving and disseminating documents about languages that are in decline, these practitioners are vitally aware of the sensitivities that surround their work revealing that:

*endangered language communities and their speakers are under pressures and deprivations, which are, in many cases, the causes of the decline of their languages* (Nathan 2010, p. 112).

Thus, this archive has the special circumstances of requiring a variable and granular set of access levels that are dependent on complex circumstances.

The practitioners within this archive looked to the social networking sites of Facebook and MySpace to find models and solutions that would allow depositors to manage the relationship and degree of access that is given to individuals who request viewing rights to specific endangered language documentation and communication with its author. They acknowledge that the popularity and prominence of Facebook and MySpace has paved the way for them to be able to convince their contributors and audience of the benefits of this approach.

*The archive is no longer essentially defined by its data repository function, but is reconceived as a forum for conducting relationships between information providers (usually the depositors) and information users (language speakers, linguists and others)* (Nathan 2010, p. 112).

The archive shifts from a disseminating service that brokers intricate and sensitive access protocols of diverse information to one that enables greater empowerment and participation of those that lodge their documents and those that seek to read them. The archive has become the people that engage with it and their relationships.

### **Autonomy, agility and innovation**

Web 2.0 approaches and technologies are adopted for specific purpose rather than mainstreamed, and are often implemented as solutions to immediate problems or needs in information practices. The tools are readily accessible and are often agilely implemented outside the jurisdiction of corporate information technology departments.

One information practice described the troubled implementation of an electronic resource management system, which had resulted in a large increase in the volume of problems surrounding access to electronic resources. The situation could not be resolved via isolated emails, phone calls and ad hoc communication – *no-one could keep track of priorities or identify effective processes and procedures*. Pressured by this immediate and critical situation, a group of key practitioners adopted a blog as a knowledge base and describe it as their custom troubleshooting tool. It is on this blog that the vast numbers of issues resulting from the problematic implementation are recorded. With careful structuring of the information, posts to the blog provide an overview of problems and their solutions and the causes and frequencies of reported access incidents. Social media is used in-house for an agile solution to a significant problem that requires coordinated communication and management of information.

Subsequent to this agile and autonomous response to urgent need, the corporate IT group implemented and offered access to formal bug tracking software. This information practice declined the opportunity to switch to the corporate software because they valued their knowledge base and the autonomous and self-defined processes and procedures that had been developed. Web 2.0 tools proved an empowering, agile and immediate solution for an untenable set of circumstance.

Information practices that achieve specific and specialised work find the tools of social media customisable to their purposes and needs. Chen (2009, p. 252) claims that cataloguing is a 'field in transition', as it responds to the 'rapidly evolving digital environment'. A non-roman cataloguing practice which employs a large number of dispersed, part-time employees is guided in its work by unique guidelines, policy and procedure documents that require frequent updating. This practice requires a digital workspace that is not dependent on web maintenance staff. A blog is used because it offers *timely updates and autonomous management*, thereby meeting the specific needs of a niche information practice.

## Projects: planned and orderly

The majority of stories of practice describe the incorporation of social media into information work as careful, planned and considered. Rationales for this include the need to use resources wisely and to seek tangible benefit from the activity. The matching of tool to audience and purpose is carefully considered, as is the human resource needed in an on-going capacity for an organisation to maintain its social presence in media such as Facebook or Twitter. In one description of practice, the practitioner notes that the orderly planning process seems contradictory to the nature of social media which encourages immediacy and experimentation.

*The planning for this has been in progress for some time now which in itself seems at odds with social media and in particular Twitter which is such a short and sharp sort of tool (Faulkner 2010, p. 12).*

Yet, as if by nature, an information professional's approach to social media is one of caution and planning. In the extreme, it involves working parties, prototypes, testing and beta versions.

Many aspects of design of online environments were considered by information practitioners in their planned approach to the use of social media. *We designed it to make the most important features visible within a single screen and to ensure that post are consistently created with the same basic information, we created a template.* Such commentary reveals comprehensive and thoughtful preparation in the use of social media.

Information practitioners, in the planning of activity using the tools of social media, consider the position of the parent body. One group, aware that their planned foray into Facebook for interacting with students sat outside the norms of official communication channels, strategically prepared a justification to counter any possible institutional concerns. Benchmarking and comparisons of competitor's use of Facebook were conducted and brought to the table when broader approval was necessary. It was also important to practitioners that they not appear to be using Facebook for anything other than professional activity.

Use of the tools of social media in isolated information practices often paved the way for enterprise adoption. The use and value of social media for discrete purpose and in small-scale projects piqued the interest of the organisation at large. Inadvertently, information practices had performed pilots for larger adoptions of social media.

Analysis and evaluation of use is prevalent in information practices that incorporate social media. The obtaining of data revealing the number and timing of specific types of access and interactions feature in the narratives of practice. Interpretations of collected data steers the way for future developments or fine-tunings. Once social media is in use, change is based on evidence and evaluation.

Information practitioners are concerned with the risk of using social media, particularly when their technologies of use and the information and communication that follow are in the public domain. Practitioners also expressed a concern and developed a strategy to deal with inappropriate content that may be received by the public. The risk of the possible demise of a popular social networking site was weighed and contingencies considered before use.

Much of the knowledge captured from participating community members using social media tools remains isolated from traditional corporate systems. Community knowledge collected by an open social platform such as Flickr remains separate from the formal systems supporting the organisation's collection. As it is captured, it remains isolated and part of a specific project. Across this divide, the information practitioner forms a conduit, validating and transferring contributed community knowledge which has earned its way into the stored corporate memory. *A level of moderation* is at play. The transfer of community contextual knowledge to the corporate knowledge base is rarely automatic. In an alternative, but equally cautious approach, audience newspaper text 'correction' is reported by one practitioner as being entered directly into the corporate system. Yet all previous version of the text are kept and are visible.

A current awareness service was initiated by information professional using a free and public blog publishing tool and a number of blogs were established. However, over time, the information agency became uncomfortable with the use of public tools and the global access that followed. They *realised that they might pose some security and liability risk to the Corporation* and acted to select appropriate blogging software that could continue the service and be hosted internally. The use of social media in information practices confirms the trend toward Enterprise 2.0 (McAfee 2009) whereby social media tools, as appropriate, are only accessible within the organisation.

## ***Conclusions***

This research finds that the practices of information professionals are replete with the use of social media and are richly extended and transformed as a result. Descriptions of information practice that embrace social media abound in the literature and many more occur in the workplace without report. The use of social media in information practices is currently shrouded in practice-led innovation and debate and is needy of research and theoretical underpinning. This research sets out to theorise across the written and verbal stories of practice and to establish patterns of practice that will inform professional activity. It seeks to develop a framework to conceptualise the use of social media in the information sector

This paper presents a preliminary theoretical account of practice that includes the constructs of *the nature of collected community knowledge; re-imaging and re-positioning information agencies; autonomy, agility and innovation; and projects: planned and orderly*. It provides a theoretical foundation for a deeper understanding

of the ongoing and emergent practical adoption of social media in the work practices of information professionals. It will inform both practice and higher level management and policy direction. Glaser (1978, p. 5) claims modifiability is an important and desirable characteristic of a grounded theory. As new data comes to hand it can be considered, and minor or significant modifications can be made to an existing grounded theory. Thus the theoretical outcome of this research lends itself to extension in both small and large proportions in ongoing research, which is an ideal situation for this fast-paced field of study.

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