

Social Media in Libraries: Why and How?

Dhanyasree V.K.

Dept. of Library and Information Science, IGNOU

New Delhi, India

vk.dhanyasree@gmail.com

***Abstract.** Social media has a huge impact on bringing about paradigm changes in the way we communicate and exchange information. It has opened hundreds of new doors to be in touch with others and establish an online presence. The potential of social media is well experimented in the field of education and is now being greatly utilized by many. Libraries, being a part of the education system and the hub of social education is also sought after the potentials of social media to widen up their reach and augment their services. The present paper explores the essential characteristics that constitute the concept of 'social media' from different viewpoints. The paper also discusses the basic as well as the most popular categories of social media and analyses the ways in which social media can be used productively in libraries. Various social media tools are discussed with examples of libraries using the particular social media tool followed by randomly selected screenshots of social media pages of renowned libraries.*

Keywords: Social media, Web 2.0, Blog, Wiki, Social Networking, RSS

1. Introduction

The advent of Web 2.0 having its key features such as participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration has enormously added to the information transfer on the Internet to an endless scope. Though Web 2.0 is understood as a new version of the web, it essentially refers to the collective changes in the ways in which the World Wide Web technology and web design is being used by software developers and end-users to enhance creativity, information sharing and obviously, collaboration among users. These concepts have led to the development and evolution of a number of online tools and platforms which are collectively known as 'Social Media' to facilitate the culture of participation and interaction which makes the Internet an inevitable part of the routine of the new generation.

Social Media provides a myriad collection of internet based tools and platforms that boost and improve the sharing of information. They make the transfer of information in different forms, namely, text, photos, audio, video and their combinations much more simple and rapid among internet users. Thus they find an important place in all fields, including education, health, business, administration, journalism etc.

Applications that have developed within and around social media platforms, websites, and tools are endless in their number, scope and functionality, but all make online sharing and searching easier in some manner, making possible the flow of the enormous amount of information. They integrate technology, social interaction, and content creation to collaboratively connect online information thus enables people or groups to create, organize, edit, comment on, combine, and share content.

2. Social media: Characteristics

Kietzmann et al. (2011) pictures social media as a honeycomb with seven functional building blocks. Each social media tool differs according to the extent to which they focus on some or all of these building blocks. The seven functional building blocks of social media honeycomb are:

- **Identity:** the extent to which users reveal about themselves.
- **Conversations:** the extent to which users communicate with each other.
- **Sharing:** the extent to which users exchange, distribute and receive content.

- **Presence:** the extent to which users know if others are available.
- **Relationships:** the extent to which users relate to each other.
- **Reputation:** the extent to which users know the social standing of others and content; and.
- **Groups:** the extent to which users are ordered or form communities.

He states that these building blocks are constructs that allow us to make sense of how different levels of social media functionality can be configured depending on the degree of focus given to each of these.

According to Mayfield (2008), social media is a group of new kinds of online media which share most or all of the following characteristics:

- **Participation:** Social media encourages contributions and criticism from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between media and audience.
- **Openness:** Most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, comments and the sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content.
- **Conversation:** While traditional media is about “*broadcast*” (content transmitted or distributed to an audience) social media is better seen as a two-way conversation.
- **Community:** Social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities share common interests, such as a love of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show.
- **Connectedness:** Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

He identified six basic kinds of social media:

- Social networks
- Blogs
- Wikis.
- Podcasts
- Forums
- Content communities
- Microblogging

At the same time, applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classified social media in to six specific categories by characteristic:

- Collaborative projects(Wikis)
- Blogs
- Content communities (eg. YouTube)
- Social networking sites (eg. Facebook)
- Virtual game worlds (World of Warcraft) and
- Virtual social worlds (eg. Second Life).

However we can observe that ‘*social media*’ is a collective term for the online tools and services such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, photo and video sharing communities, social bookmarking, podcasts, discussion forums, RSS feeds, virtual worlds, presentation sharing and a lot more. As these tools provide with hundreds of new ways to communicate and interact with each other and with huge mass, they create a context for effective use in libraries too.

3. Social media in Libraries

All libraries, irrespective of whether they are public, academic, or special, are community libraries serving a specific community. Digital revolution along with the Internet made it possible for users to access the resources they need without really visiting the library, forcing libraries to think of alternate ways to reach and remind the patrons about their presence.

The ever increasing popularity of social media with exponentially growing user base, make it almost impossible for libraries to stay away for a long time being mere viewers of the phenomenon. As a result, an increasing number of libraries are facilitating access to their resources by developing and incorporating tools for patrons to use in their '*personal slice of the web*', the social media space. These tools are used to complement the traditional methods used by libraries '*guiding the patrons through the library experience without forcing them to leave the familiarity of their favorite sites*' (Harris and Lessick, 2007).

The adoption of social media in libraries should be thought of in the context of the developing information environment, changing user needs and attitudes, collaboration among library organizations, and the ways social media may convert the loose connections between library staff members and patrons.

According to Tyler (2011), if a library thinks of having a social media presence, the major factors to consider are:

- The aim of your presence (be it a blog, a social networking site like Facebook, photo sharing site etc.)
- How the site/tool will enable you to achieve your aims
- The audience you target
- How you will evaluate the presence
- Resource implications (although low-cost there is a time and skill required)
- Managing potential risks
- How it fits into your library service and marketing plans.

3.1 What Libraries actually do with social media?

The major aim and motto of any library's presence on social media is "*being there where our patrons are*". Outreach to users is a very important factor in an era where users have no time to come and spend hours in the library. Social media emerges as a remedy for this. Once the library establishes a presence on the social media, and connects to its users, they will be reminded of the presence of the library once and every time they log on to their account/profile. By and large, it is observed that libraries are using social media potentially for:

- Outreach purpose
- Promotion and marketing of library services
- Making announcements
- Reference service
- Creating discussion threads
- Networking with other libraries

In a survey conducted by South Carolina State Library among library professionals, nearly all (96.2%) of the respondents agreed the need and importance of incorporating social media tools into libraries (Rogers, 2011). The study revealed that the most used social media applications in libraries are social networking sites, blogs, online photo sharing, video sharing and instant messaging followed by wikis and social bookmarking. Most of the libraries use them primarily for:

- Promoting general library services
- Providing quick updates to users
- Marketing specific programs and/or services
- Reaching a new audience of potential users

Other uses of social media that were disclosed in the study are:

- Reference transactions
- Receiving/resolving complaints
- Building community
- Technical instruction/how-to at the library
- Collaborate with other college departments

- Introduce new and showcase existing resources, reminders of special resources available to the academic community
- Have conversations with users and learn more about/from them
- Sharing reading suggestions.
- Share items relating to local history via contests and providing links to helpful resources.
- Share "*good to know*" information like upcoming emergency exercises in the community, disaster preparedness materials, other City goings-on.
- Promoting university archives
- Announce new releases, hot picks on the shelf, day's activities at library, answer questions
- Circulation notifications by text messaging
- Promoting hidden collections
- Recruiting and managing volunteers

Apart from the above listed practices, interesting ways in which two libraries used social media tools are (Giustini, 2010):

- **Geek the Library-** used Facebook for *community-based public awareness campaign*
- **Brooklyn Public Library-** used their blog for *fund raising through text messaging*

3.2 Examples for the use of social media tools by Libraries

Many libraries are now-a-days connecting with their users through different social media tools. While some are utilizing the potential of blogs, some others are experimenting with social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace. While some are creating wiki pages for their users, some others are sharing photos and videos through content communities. A few are using a combination of two or more of these tools to serve their customers. Below are the examples of some libraries using some of the social media tools.

3.2.1 Blogs

Blogs are websites which resemble personal web pages, allowing entries in reverse chronological order with a date stamp on it. They are commonly used as online personal diaries. Blogs are usually managed by one person only, but provide the possibility of interaction with others through the addition of comments (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). They facilitate linking to other websites. Blogs can be subscribed to usually through RSS feeds. Some of the most commonly used blogging services are Blogger and Wordpress. Many libraries make use of blogs to interact with their users in an effective way.

A few examples are:

- Library of Congress- use a number of blogs to cater different communities (<http://blogs.loc.gov/>)
- **Santa Fe Public Library Blog** (<http://santafelibrary.blogspot.in/>)
- **Cook Memorial Library** (<http://tamworthlibrary.org/>)
- Kendriya Vidyalaya Pattom Library, Kerala (<http://librarykvpattom.wordpress.com/>)

The image (Figure 1) below shows the first page of the performing arts blog of the Library of Congress.

3.2.2 Wikis

Wikis are websites allow people to add content to or edit the information on them, acting as a communal document or database. They are very useful for collaborative and team works. It can be either private or open depending on the decision of the creator (Mayfield, 2008). Such collaborative projects enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users by means of adding, removing or changing text based content. The most recognized wiki is Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia which has over 23 million articles and 100000 active contributors (Wikipedia). A few of the other wiki services are: Wikia, WikiHow, Wikidot, Wikimedia, Wikinews, PBworks, etc. Some of the wiki projects created by libraries can be viewed at:

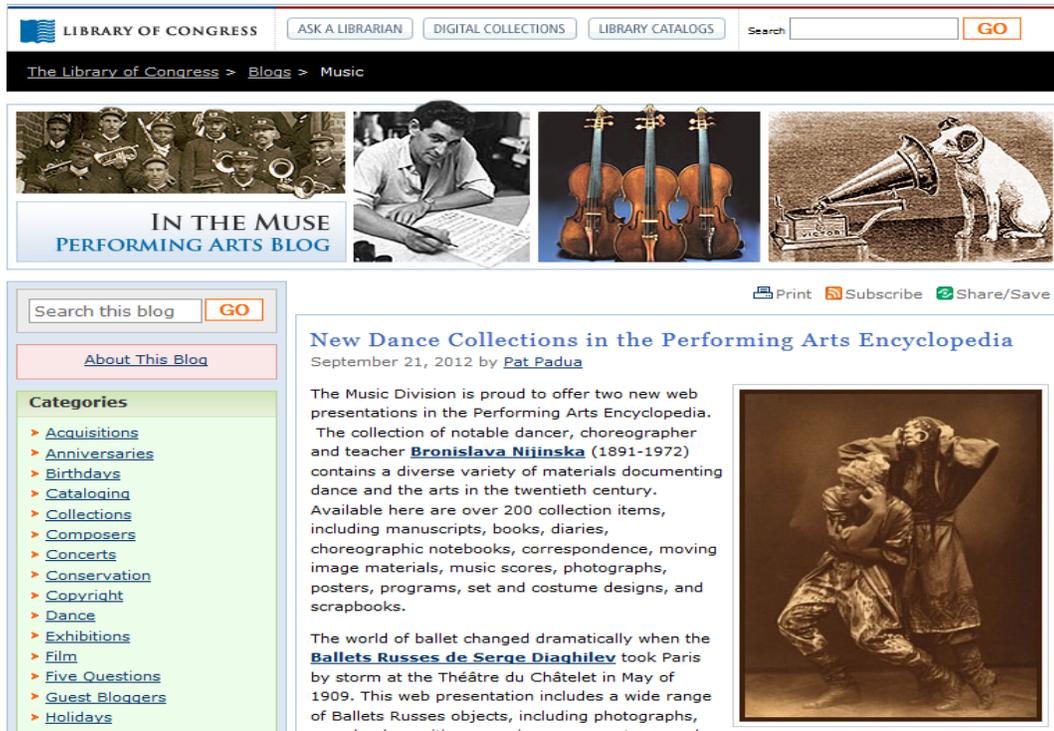
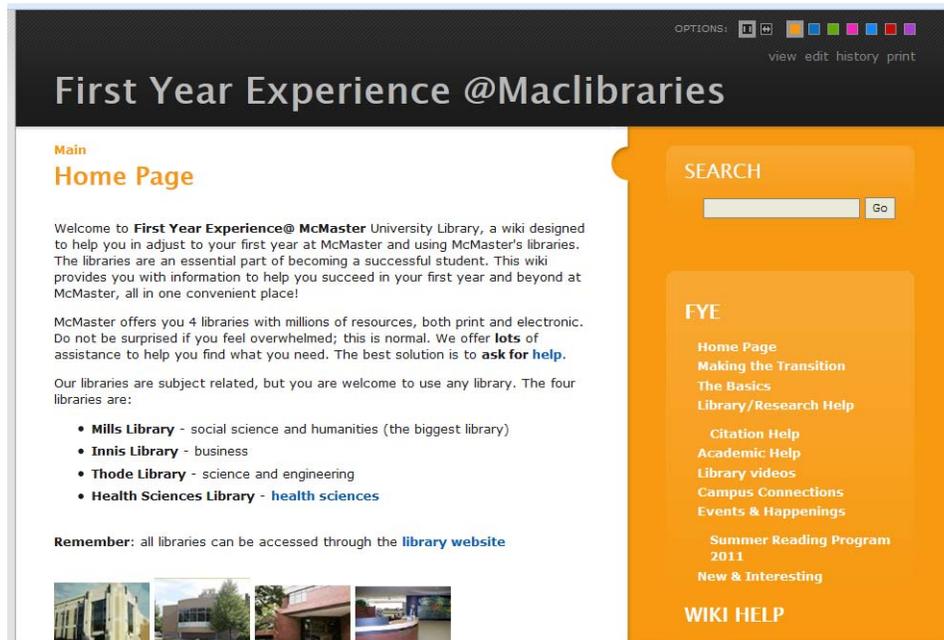


Figure 1. Source: <http://blogs.loc.gov/music/>

- *Queen’s University Library* (<http://library.queensu.ca/wiki/elearning/doku.php>)
- **National Archives of the United Kingdom** (<http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk>)
- **McMaster University Library** (<http://libwiki.mcmaster.ca/fye/>)

The wiki page created by **McMaster University Library** for first year student is shown in the picture.



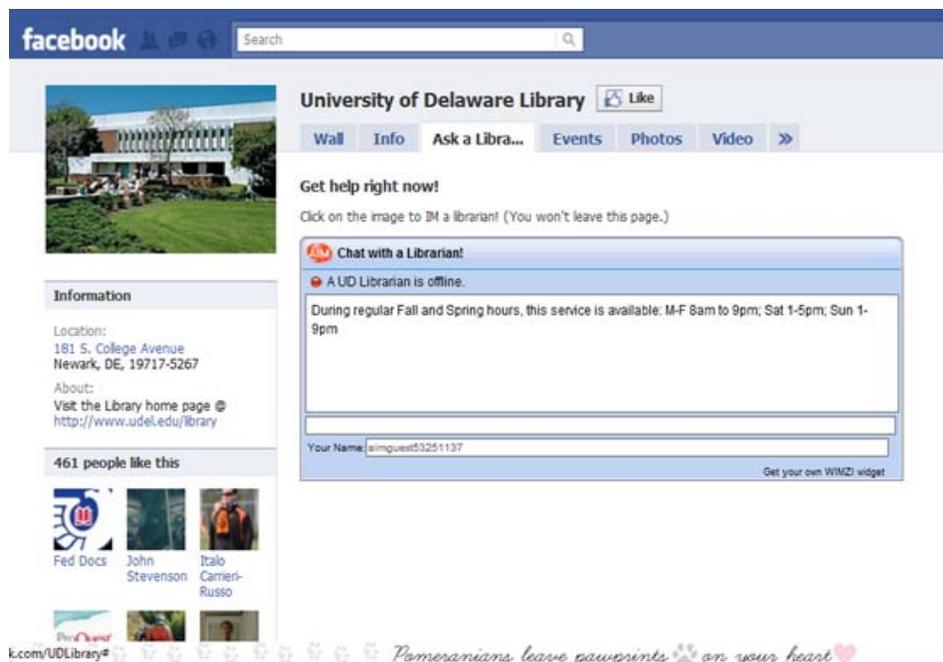
(Source: <http://libwiki.mcmaster.ca/fye/>)

3.2.3 Social Networking

These are websites which enable users to create profiles and connect with others to form a network of contacts. Usually such communities are built around common interests and huge amount of information is shared. These communities try to retain the interest of their members by being useful to them and providing services that entertain or help them to expand their networks (Mayfield, 2008). There are a number of social network sites catering to different audience. However, the most popular ones are Facebook, Myspace, Linked In, Twitter etc. as social networking is unbelievably popular among youth, and many of the libraries are creating their presence on these sites. Some of the libraries that are very active on social network sites are:

- The British Library (<http://www.facebook.com/britishlibrary?ref=search>)
- National Library of Wales (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Llyfrgell-Genedlaethol-Cymru-The-National-Library-of-Wales/12684193278>)
- University of Delaware Library (<http://www.facebook.com/UDLibrary>)
- Bryant University Library (<http://www.myspace.com/bryantuniversitylibrary>)

The image below shows University of Delaware Library's 'Ask A Librarian' service provided through Facebook.



(Source: http://www.facebook.com/UDLibrary/app_10531514314)

3.2.4 Content communities

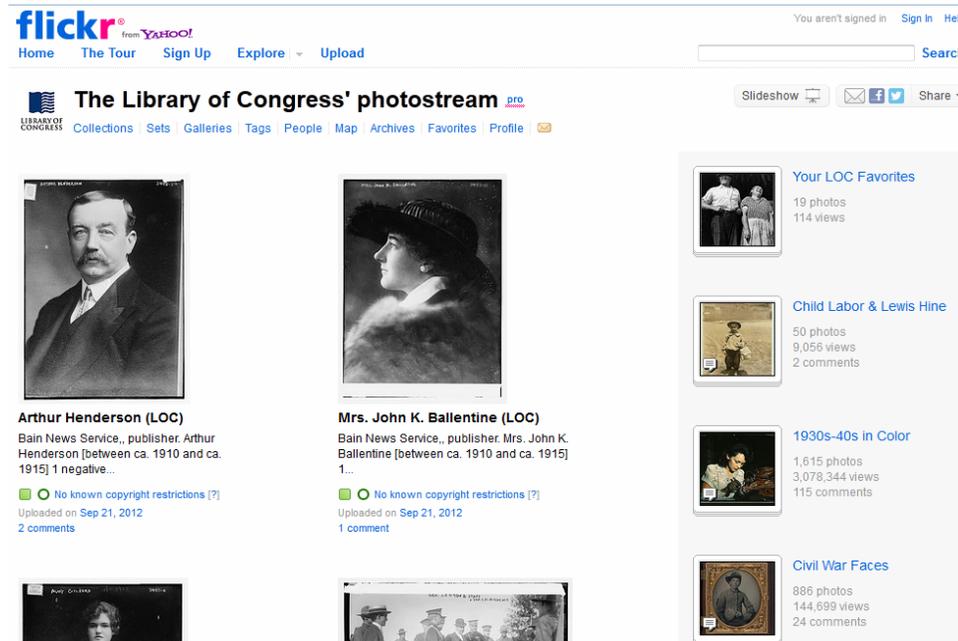
Though content communities have some similarities with Social networking sites, they are more focused on sharing some particular kind of content. They differ according to the type of content (text, photos, videos, power point presentations etc.) they share. Though they carry the risk of being used as platforms for the sharing of copyright-protected materials (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), many of them are gaining immense popularity because of their huge capability for content organization and sharing. Some examples of content communities are:

- Text sharing: BookCrossing
- Photo sharing: Flickr, Picasa, Photobucket
- Video sharing: YouTube, Dailymotion, Metacafe
- Presentations sharing : Slideshare, Prezi, scribd

A few libraries using different types of content communities are listed below.

- Library of Congress - historical photos on Flickr (http://www.flickr.com/photos/Library_of_Congress)
- **Brown Library** *Video Tutorial on- Finding Books* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IJ_O3dbJqY)
- **Scottish Library & Information Council (SLIC), CILIP in Scotland (CILIPS)** (<http://www.slideshare.net/scottishlibraries>)

The screenshot below is the Flickr page from the British Library's historical collection of photographs.



(Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/Library_of_Congress)

3.2.5 Social bookmarking

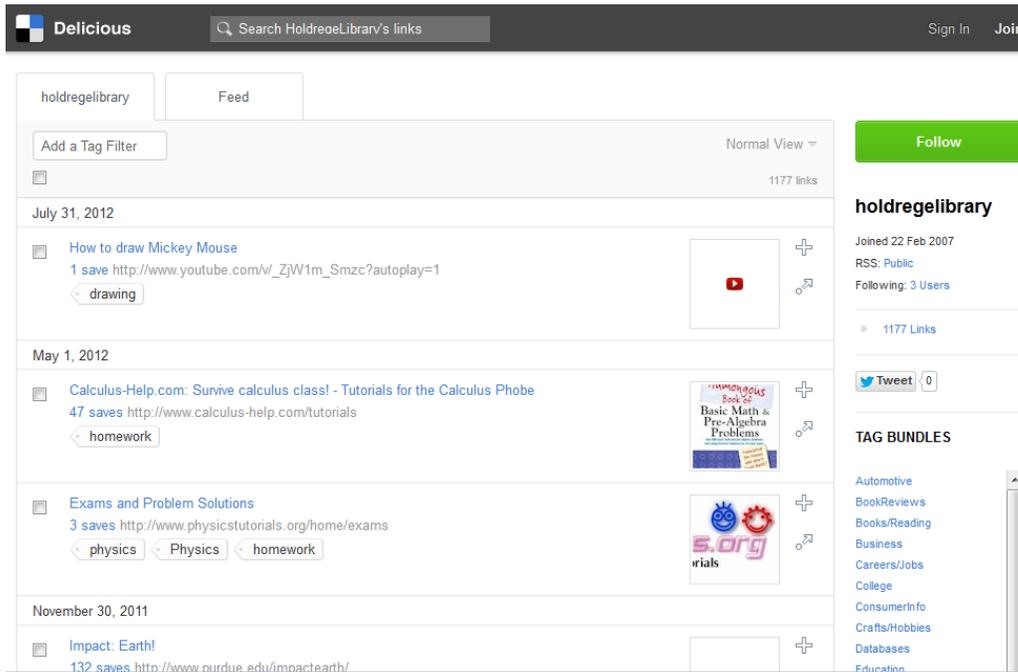
They are applications which enable the group-based collection and rating of Internet links or media content. One of the predominant online social bookmarking services is Delicious, which allows the storage and sharing of large number of web bookmarks. Other bookmarking services include CiteULike, Diigo, Google Reader, Folkd etc. Most of them also allow users to assign tags (key words) to the resources they add. **The Holdrege Area Public Library uses Delicious, to keep and organize important internet links.**

- **Holdrege Area Public Library** (<http://www.delicious.com/HoldregeLibrary>)

The image shows the **Holdrege Area Public Library's links on Delicious.**

3.2.6 RSS feeds

RSS, the short form for Rich Site Summary/ RDF Site Summary/ Really Simple Syndication, is an application of the Extensible Markup Language (XML) that adheres to the Resource description Framework (RDF). It is a group of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works (may be blog entries, news headlines etc.). RSS allows users to avoid the difficulty of checking for new contents on all of the websites they are interested in, and instead subscribe to the RSS feed available on the website so that users are updated about the new content when it becomes available. RSS feeds can be read with the help of fee reader/ feed aggregator. Some of the feed readers are Bloglines, Google Reader, FeedDemon etc.

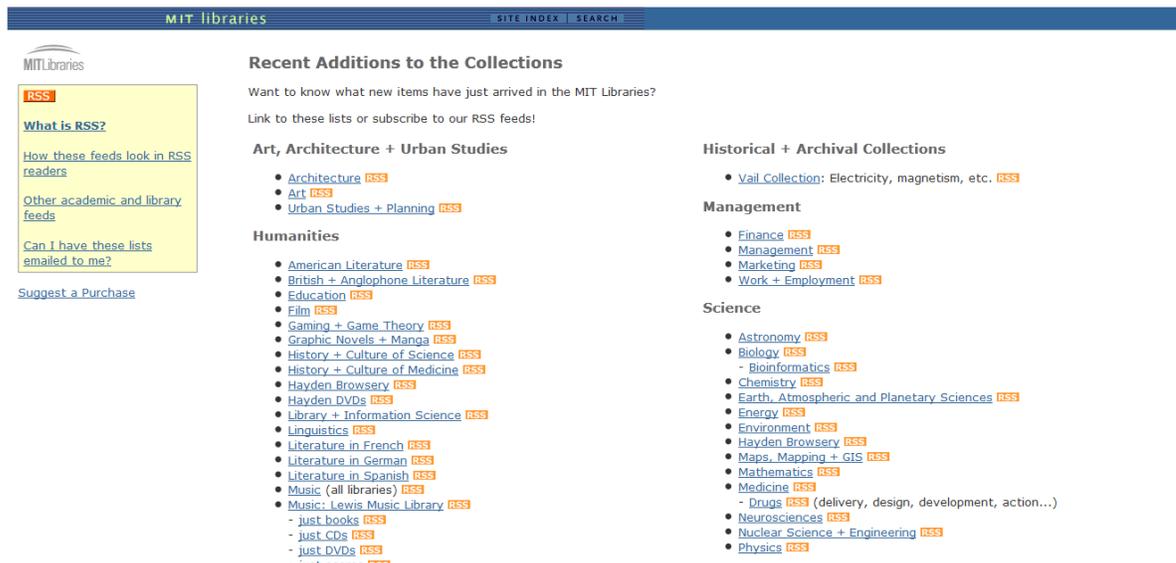


(Source: <http://www.delicious.com/HoldregeLibrary>)

Though many of the libraries facilitate RSS feeds on their sites, MIT library stand on top of them through providing RSS feeds for new books separately in each subjects.

- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Libraries (<http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/barton/>)

MIT library's recent addition to the collection page with RSS feeds is shown in the picture.



(Source: <http://libraries.mit.edu/help/rss/barton/>)

The above descriptions are only a few examples for the use of diverse social media tools in Libraries. It gives only an outline of the various ways in which these tools are used by libraries. There are several other social media tools that are used by many libraries in different innovative ways. This digital era demands efforts from the part of library

professionals to learn and incorporate evolving technology innovations into library services for success and survival in the future.

4. Conclusion

There is no doubt, social media provides with exciting tools for libraries to connect with their users and offer better service delivery. As different social media tools do different things and appeal to different people, it is very crucial to select the social media tool that best suits your library and patrons. It is also necessary to be well clear about why you want to create a social media presence and to have something new to offer your users through this tool. There is no point in creating a social media presence just for the sake of doing it. Being very dynamic is extremely important on social media. “A big difference exists between being where our patrons are and being useful to our patrons where they are” (Farkas, 2006). A social media profile- be it a blog, Facebook account, or wiki- should be designed to offer something new and exciting to patrons so that they will keep coming back to the library.

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