

COLLABORATIVE ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS AND
CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN
CANADA: INTRODUCING THE SOCIAL MEDIA
RESEARCH TEAM (SMERT)

by Tania Alekson & Dean Giustini

This article is an overview of a new collaborative venture at the University of British Columbia (UBC) that brings together a group of student and professional academic librarians from across Canada called the *Social Media Research Team (SMERT)*. We currently have six member librarians in the group who are either studying librarianship or working as professional librarians in various public service and research positions in libraries and academia from coast to coast (in Vancouver, British Columbia out west to Halifax, Nova Scotia in the east):

- [Tania Alekson, Librarian, Capilano University Library, North Vancouver, B.C.](#)
- [Amy Ashmore, MLIS Student, UBC School of Library, Archival and Information Studies](#)
- [Allan Cho, Program Services Librarian, Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, UBC](#)
- [Dean Giustini, UBC Biomedical Branch Librarian, UBC Library](#)
- [Daniel Hooker, Health librarian, MLIS](#)
- [Xuemei Li, Digital Librarian, Patrick Power Library, Saint Mary's University, Nova Scotia](#)

Formed in 2010, the research team (or, SMERTs as we like to call ourselves) was formed by bringing together two distinct but overlapping groups of librarians who had shown interest in using social media in libraries and its concomitant challenges in evaluation, implementation and programming. The first comprised a group of students (or recently-graduated) librarians enrolled in the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program at UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies (SLAIS) who had completed research into digital media librarianship and library 2.0 (Alekson, Li & Cho, 2009); and a second group of librarians who had either completed a directed study about social media at SLAIS (Hooker, 2009) or taken the new online course at SLAIS called *Social media for information professionals* (Giustini, 2010). In 2009, the instructor of that course, Dean Giustini applied for a research grant from the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL/ABRC) in order to examine some of the behaviours and attitudes of Canadian academic librarians in their usage of social media. The idea was to get a sense of the overall picture of how social media was used, but also to examine some of the behavioural and institutional barriers that academic librarians had to overcome to implement social media. As an initial step in this process, Dean Giustini hired an MLIS Student, Amy Ashmore, in the summer of 2010 to assist with the environmental scanning of twenty-nine of Canada's academic research libraries and their use of social media as evidenced on their websites and in the social tools themselves (Ashmore & Giustini, 2010). The environmental scan was released in draft form in August 2010 and provided us with a number of key insights which have proven to be critical as our research continues and a national survey questionnaire is developed and validated for a fall 2010 release (Giustini, 2010).

Collectively, the SMERT librarians have shown interest in a range of issues around social media and web 2.0 technologies, and have begun setting out a research agenda for themselves. As a diverse group of Canadian (mostly) academic librarians, we have come together first and foremost to share our interests and to further our knowledge of social media (SMERT, 2010). Many of us are new to research, and yet we have been able to share our views of introducing social media within our institutions with each other and, as a preliminary step, discussed the many challenges in doing so. Social media is seen by some academic librarians as too time-consuming and a drain on resources (Giustini, Hooker & Cho, 2009). We have found, anecdotally, that one of the most pernicious problems in using social media to deliver library services is finding evidence to support its use (Giustini, 2010). This is also a reason why we would like to develop a research agenda: to be able to develop a base of evidence to uncover the affordances and constraints of the most popular social media tools in use by our constituent user groups. To that end, a research portal was also developed to help our member librarians learn some of the basic concepts associated with library and information (LIS) research (*see http://hlwiki.slais.ubc.ca/index.php/Research_for_librarians_-_portal*).

The SMERT librarians are a diverse group. We are at different stages in our professional careers and development but all of us use social media in one way or another. Throughout our study of social media, we share our ideas and have developed a number of ways to do so, such as the

- SMERT blog <http://smertlibrarians.wordpress.com/>,
- SlideShare <http://slideshare.net/smertlibrarians> (where we are able to share our powerpoint slides and presentations)
- and even our daily musings on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/smertlibrarians>.

Our view of social media can best be summed up by the tagline in the SMERT blog: *To share is to learn*. We firmly believe in the power of sharing and its relationship to being social and learning online. Twitter is only one tool that enables us to share ideas with each other as we also use other channels. One of the ideas we have entertained is creating our network away from the standard social tools we have mentioned. Moreover, I think it's fair to say that we are open to new ideas from others around the world and would entertain speaking to any early adopter social media librarians in Europe who may be interested in collaborating with us.

The SMERT librarians have begun to develop a research agenda. In various combinations, we have commenced a number of research projects and academic studies about using social media in our respective libraries and individual contexts. Living in a world where the future is happening before our eyes – and where full-scale technological changes occur in *real-time* – the ability to practice simultaneous discovery, analysis and revision is integral to our success and practice as information professionals. By using social media for outreach and marketing, for example, the SMERT Librarians are working to develop new ways of promotion and collaboration for the digital age. The rise of social media the world over and the transformation of the web from a broadcast (one-to-many) to collaborative (many-to-many) medium has changed how librarians engage in lifelong learning and social networking practices (Aleksion & Giustini, 2010). While some librarians working in academic institutions argue that social networking sites (SNS) are simply a way to stay in touch with family and friends, an increasingly larger group use them as part of a professional network (Aleksion & Giustini, 2010). In addition, many of the most popular social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter have surpassed their original, intended

affordances and moved beyond their limited original purposes. We consider the application of social media in our work in the broadest sense of the word ‘social’ – since it is a sphere that includes all kinds of human interactions and learning. We believe firmly in the social aspects of the web for learning, professional interaction and for simple information sharing.

Looking to the future, social media is likely to remain part of the academic librarian’s toolkit and will be used to deliver traditional and innovative services as a part of that future. Several of the SMeRT librarians are working towards presenting social media options in their libraries: Xuemei Li in Halifax is exploring social bookmarking and reference management tools such as Zotero; Daniel Hooker is examining the use of mobile devices and social media; Allan Cho and Dean Giustini have collaborated on a book chapter which looks at where the web is heading into web 3.0 and the semantic web; Dean Giustini and Xuemei Li are working on a research project that examines bibliometric data extracted from social media websites to measure scholarly impact and, finally, Amy Ashmore, Daniel Hooker and Dean Giustini will be presenting some of their thoughts about the future of SMeRT at an upcoming meeting of the Health Libraries Association of British Columbia. In the meantime, we hope you visit our blog and follow us on Twitter.

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