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A whole new world: Investigating the use of social media by the Vancouver Public Library to deliver services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Poster)

Abstract or Résumé:

This poster will present the preliminary results of a thematic analysis of the contents of the Vancouver Public Library's (VPL) Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube feeds throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (February 1st to June 30th, 2020) to better understand what types of crisis-related services and information they are providing to the public. This data will also be compared to Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube content from the same time period in 2019 to investigate whether the pandemic has changed VPL's social media practices in any significant ways.

1. Introduction

Libraries typically use social media to communicate with stakeholders about the immediate impacts of crises as well as their provisional plans for maintaining operations. The long-term nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many public libraries to re-evaluate their traditional use of social media. The majority (over 80%) now use social media to not only keep patrons informed of emerging changes, but also to deliver some of their new digital services and programming (PLA 2020; MLA 2020; OLA 2020). As one satisfied VPL patron stated, "It's a whole new world my friends!" (Vancouver Public Library, 2020). This study explores the use of and changes to three social media platforms used by a large Canadian public library in order to better understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Libraries and Social Media

Previous research either focuses on using social media for marketing and engagement (Cahill 2011; Anwyll et al. Fall 2013 & Winter 2013; Valenza et al. 2014; Zou et al. 2015) or providing best practice recommendations for specific platforms (Harmon & Messina 2013; Shiri & Rathi 2013; Smeaton & Davis 2014; Mon 2015; Cavanagh 2016; Woodworth 2018). Very little of it looks at providing virtual programming beyond reader's advisory and even less of it explores multi-platform comparisons.

2.2 Public Libraries' Social Media Use during Disasters

Previous studies (Zach 2011; Liu et al. 2017; Siragusa 2017; Tu-Keefner et al. 2017; Han 2019) have focused exclusively on information provision. Moreover, "[d]espite libraries providing

much needed services and resources to community members after natural disasters, their use of social media platforms as a tool remains overlooked” (Han 2019, p. 45).

Although providing reliable information on COVID-19 has been a primary focus for public librarians, they are doing much more to contribute to their communities’ pandemic response (PLA 2020; MLA 2020; OLA 2020). The circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis have created opportunities for libraries wherein social media is less of an option for promoting services and more of a necessity for providing services. Exploring the bounds of these new virtual programs is therefore just as important as examining libraries’ implementation of crisis communication because it could lead to new policy recommendations and updated best practice guidelines for public libraries’ social media use during future crises.

3. Research Questions

RQ1: What types of pandemic-related information and/or services is VPL providing via Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube?

RQ2: What types of virtual programming is VPL offering on these platforms?

RQ3: How has the content changed on these platforms between 2019 and 2020?

4. Methodology

This study utilizes Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis to examine content posted to VPL’s Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube between February 1st and June 30th in both 2019 and 2020. The themes will then be compared to see what, if any, changes have occurred as well as what types of pandemic services and information are being provided.

VPL was chosen as a case for several reasons. First, it has been studied before and found to have a robust social media presence (Cahill 2009, 2011, & 2013). Second, during the first wave of the pandemic, the province of British Columbia had to contend with not only the first large outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada, but also the fourth largest provincial case count (sixth per capita) and fourth largest death count (fifth per capita) in Canada (New York Times, 2020). Third, VPL is the third largest library system in Canada; it serves a culturally diverse population across 21 locations, which makes it a prime location for potential innovation (CBC News, 2008; World Population Review, n.d.).

5. Results

Preliminary YouTube results show a significant increase in use and a shift from advertising towards virtual programming and resource-related information, particularly for children and those seeking employment.

Preliminary Instagram results show a potential re-framing of VPL’s digital library (from resources to place) and an emerging theme of togetherness (shaped by a need to express solidarity, caring, and longing for one another).

Preliminary Twitter results forthcoming.

6. Limitations

The results of this study are limited in that data could not be obtained for VPL's Facebook account and therefore an all-inclusive understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on the library's social media practices cannot be achieved.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this study could lead to new policy recommendations and updated best practices for public libraries' social media use as society moves through and beyond COVID-19.

8. Links to Conference Theme

This poster fits the conference's theme by exploring emergent practices in the area of public library virtual programming and crisis communication.

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