Chapter 16
Theory and Application: Using Social Networking to Build Online Credibility

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ABSTRACT
Scholars are increasingly engaging with their peers in synchronous and asynchronous online forums. In order to adapt to this current trend, librarians and faculty must consider the nuances of computer-mediated communication and learn to understand the potential benefits and hazards of creating online identities that may round out others’ perceptions. It can be overwhelming and confusing to determine how to best present oneself or to “create” a credible identity. Through the introduction and explanation of communication concepts and theories, this chapter discusses online credibility, or ethos, and examples of those who have successfully built online credibility.

INTRODUCTION
Your online ethos. Your credibility. Why should you care? Online ethos is how your audience sees you, or your organization, based upon their observation and interpretation of the way you present yourself in online media. This chapter will examine ethos as personal or institutional credibility in social media communication channels. Phrased in the terms of the medium, why should your readers care about what you say and look forward to your next post? The ubiquity and accessibility of these channels has radically changed the communication patterns of individuals, groups, and businesses and will continue to influence scholarly and professional communication in the future (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Beginning with a thorough examination of related research, this chapter will discuss what it means to have online credibility, provide specific examples, and discuss directions for users to build their own online ethos.

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Social media is a pervasive tool for personal and professional networking. Interviewers, applicants, friends, colleagues, and others are using forums, e-mail discussion lists, and social networking sites such as Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook to communicate. Social media is the web of Internet- and mobile-based communication channels such as blogs, Twitter, and the like that allow the generation and exchange of user-created content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As faculty, students, and librarians develop and use the online communication channels, formally referred to as “computer-mediated communication” (CMC) in the literature, that are made available to them, the scope of their face-to-face (f2f) communication must change along with advances in technology (Berger, 2005; Hovick, Meyers, & Timmerman, 2003; Ishii, 2006; Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007).

This chapter will address the importance of developing scholarly ethos with regard to social networking as it relies on communication theory to explore credibility through online impressions and identity creation. As social networking tools rise and fade, users need to understand the importance of, and methods for, establishing credibility across platforms. Examples of poor use of social media abound, from Facebook sites set up and then abandoned to lawsuits threatened for making factual statements about a website (Lawson, 2009). By introducing communication concepts and theories, this chapter will explain strategies for avoiding these pitfalls as it discusses building one’s online credibility, or ethos, while carefully considering the audience, the impact of a lessening of traditional non-verbal cues, and a consideration of other communication concepts that must adapt from f2f to online format. The authors will also cite examples of librarians who currently have influential online presences to demonstrate the successful use of social media to build credibility. After analyzing these exemplars, we will offer suggestions and best practices for individuals, libraries, and other institutions to build online credibility and discuss how this credibility can affect scholarly communication in the future.

Computer-Mediated Communication and Identity Formation

Previous predictions of poor development of individual relationships via CMC have been rejected by current research, which indicates that CMC has the “ability to convey rich, multidimensional messages through text and has potential for developing even ‘hyperpersonal’ relations (Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007, p. 493). Librarians and others must learn to tap into that ability in order to build online followings for their personal professional development and to access their patrons in social media settings. Indeed, research indicates that active participation in the process is critical to successful CMC (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002). A discussion of CMC’s impact on the development of personal and professional relationships cannot be conducted without an understanding of the pivotal theory that highlights the role of distinct communication factors which influence identity formation: Joseph Walther’s Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT).

As mentioned above, early research and communication theories suggested that CMC would never allow users to communicate meaning fully. Theories such as the Media Richness Theory suggest that the lack of social context cues is likely to create a more hostile communication environment due to the possibility of multiple meanings in a message combined with the inability to read context cues (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). Other theories such as Social Presence Theory suggest that participants may feel as if they are in a void or that they are, in a sense, alone in the communication process (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). While Social Presence Theory was developed in response to telecommunication, scholars regularly applied it to CMC in its early days. These remained the prevailing theories...