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Anders Tobiason
Boise State University

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Engaging Antiracist Conversations: Foregrounding Twitter Feeds in Library Guides as a Way to Critically Promote Discussions of Racial Justice

Anders Tobiason
Boise State University

Abstract

Academic librarians have often been hesitant to foreground real time engagement with social justice in our public facing library guides. The guides, more often than not, serve merely to provide access points to “academic” materials and traditional news sources. Perhaps there is a different path. This chapter suggests that engagement with Twitter can point patrons towards the real conversations happening outside (and sometimes inside) academia that are missed when we rely on traditional sources. The real critical engagement with social justice issues such as race and technology, or migrant justice, is happening right in front of our eyes on Twitter. This chapter discusses how adding Twitter feeds to library guides can engage libraries (and our students) in critical conversations around racism and the foregrounding of traditionally marginalized voices. A problem with traditional library guides is that they center the voice and opinion of the librarian curating the guide. Adding in Twitter feeds can complicate this. Adding Twitter feeds from traditionally marginalized voices centers those voices in real time as opposed to centering the voice and authority of the, often white, librarian initially creating the guide. This centering occurs because while the librarian initially chooses which feeds to feature, the feeds are continuously updating in real time. This chapter reflects on why this centering of non-white voices is important, how it engages the counterpublic discourse on Twitter, and how doing so can push us all to be a little more critical, a little more subversive, in our work.

Keywords: Twitter, library guides, social justice, traditionally marginalized voices

Introduction

Where do critical conversations *actually* happen? How can we center those voices, both inside and outside the academy, who participate in conversations that promote antiracist practices and concepts? In other words, how do we fundamentally destabilize the traditional idea of a library guide as a static list of curated resources, and instead use it to help students engage in antiracist conversations in real time.

Let’s begin with a question. Who defines knowledge? I have long been pondering the idea that libraries have a fundamental role in upholding a highly constrictive version of what knowledge is, and importantly, what constitutes a proper relationship and critique of it. As a major way in which knowledge access is solidified, library guides play a role in helping librarians define which voices create knowledge and those that do not. Sofia Leung and Jorge Lopez-McKnight (2021) challenge us all to think a lot more critically about the problematic role librarians play in upholding a very narrow sense of what knowledge is, and who is allowed to create it, when they write that

By validating what is and is not knowledge—through the scholarship LIS produces, collections we center and make space for, institutional arrangements, and classification systems—LIS plays a key role in (re)constructing whiteness, gender, and racial power. Because knowledge, as it exists in library and archival collections, is created predominantly by white, cisgendered, wealthy, nondisabled, heterosexual men, and in support of white hegemony, knowledge is considered objective, color evasive, and true. Any other ways of knowing are not valid knowledge and therefore do not belong in a library or archive (p. 320).

So how do we get away from this? Perhaps we might start to look to voices and hashtags that converse with each other on Twitter. While Twitter is certainly not a truly public square, and it is a platform that not everyone engages with, it is nonetheless one of the major places where conversations about antiracism in the United States occur and where

underrepresented voices often make their mark. Twitter has become the platform where real time conversations occur, for both good and ill. And, importantly, it is where social justice issues are debated in complex and critical ways. As Andre Brock Jr (2020) writes, “Twitter – the service – has messily, exuberantly become the public sphere we deserve even if it does not fulfill technocultural expectations of productive, rational informational exchange” (p. 87). Precisely because it doesn’t fulfill these expectations makes it a vital part of opening up the possibilities of understanding knowledge creation as a larger, less exchange-based phenomenon. Any antiracist library practice needs to seriously engage with the problems that an objective, static, sense of knowledge creates and, in some ways, Twitter can help us do so. When we add substantive social context to information resources, and use real-time conversations as information resources themselves, we start to guide students toward an understanding of knowledge as a dynamic, living phenomena; as not just fixed in academic texts or dominant narratives and voices.

Adding Twitter Feeds to Library Guides: A Short Personal History

Adding a Twitter feed to a library guide first occurred to me while collaborating with the Homelessness Research and Action Collaborative (HRAC) at Portland State University to create a guide highlighting their research as well as pointing folks towards important resources (both community and academic). The HRAC are active on Twitter and use it as a place to engage the broader community in conversations as well as promote resources and new information. The folks they converse with on Twitter range broadly from academics to activists to policy makers, creating complicated real-time interactions and conversations. The HRAC can be broadly seen as an antiracist group and their work directly highlights the need for antiracism work surrounding the issue of homelessness. The process of creating this guide also got me initially thinking about why libraries often prioritize “traditional” sources for engaging in conversations around social justice issues. And so I started to ask, “where might I try to subvert this?”

The connections that can help librarians foster social justice and antiracist conversations do not only happen on the pages of a book or in a traditional news source, and they certainly don’t happen in the kind of timeless space of traditional academic discourse. This idea really solidified while I was creating a special topics library guide entitled *Race, Technology, and Justice*. I decided to create the special topic guide after reading Ruha Benjamin’s *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019) and having numerous conversations with colleagues both in and out of the Portland State University Library. The library had never provided a guide quite like this and I was encouraged to pursue creating one both by my direct supervisor as well as faculty in the social sciences. Another impetus was seeing the use of technology to harm protestors in Portland during the summer of 2020. Creating this guide helped highlight the many resources that the library had access to as well as point towards critical antiracism conversations occurring on Twitter. The antiracist conversations encapsulated in the resources, and made live in the Twitter feeds, provide a critical way in to understanding how *Race, Technology, and Justice* are intimately intertwined. Many of the authors and thinkers I was highlighting were active on Twitter and their conversations with others were providing crucial insight as well as nuance and other resources that I could not find anywhere else. So for the *Race, Technology, and Justice* guide I highlighted two academics (Ruha Benjamin, @ruha9, and Safiya Noble, @safiyanoble), a group (Algorithmic Justice League, @AJLUnited), and an activist (Joy Boulamwini, @jovialjoy). These folks create a broad way into conversations around antiracism and technology and all engage in both personal and professional conversations on Twitter.

Interlude: Problems with Library Guides

Let’s pull back for a minute.

As has been oft-criticized, Library guides and library website pages often just point to resources, or have short how-to videos, and are almost always devoid of social context.¹ Guides also often specifically highlight the fact that the resources therein are *curated* by a librarian. Adding in Twitter feeds can complicate this. By this I mean that adding Twitter feeds from either individuals, like Joy Buolamwini, or groups of traditionally marginalized voices, like @citeblackwomen, centers those voices of those feeds in real time as opposed to centering the voice and authority of the, often white, librarian curating the guide. This centering occurs because while the librarian initially chooses which feeds to feature, the feeds are continuously updating in real time. Thus the librarian “loses control” of them, as it were.

¹ An excellent critique of traditional library guides can be found in Paschke-Wood, J., Dubinsky, E., & Sult, L. (2020, October 21).

Counterpublic Discourse on Our Library Guides

Twitter feeds and Twitter hashtags are ripe for creating what has been termed counterpublics. As Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020) remind us, “networks and narratives matter, and both are built digitally and corporally. In every era, media technologies have been central to the maintenance of counterpublics and the safe development of counterpublic identity and politics. . . . Twitter represents a very real opportunity to work toward change by reintroducing and reframing issues for the public that have been either misrepresented or ignored in the mainstream public sphere” (p. 185). When we engage with conversations on Twitter, and more importantly create opportunities for direct unmediated engagement by others, we participate in a crucial reframing of who knowledge creators can be. We center those voices that are directly affected by, and may be participants in, racial justice conversations and work. When we highlight counterpublics and real time changes and thus allow for authority to move decisively towards the folks posting on Twitter and engaging with these topics, we deconstruct the very notion of the librarian as gatekeeper and help students begin to understand the many facets of knowledge creation. By decentering the white librarian’s authority over the knowledge practices presented in the library guide, we actively participate in a kind of antiracist practice too often missing in our profession. We create opportunities for direct engagement with traditionally marginalized voices unmediated, as it were, by an all-controlling librarian-based resource selection process.

This is important work because as Todd Honma reminds us in “Trippin Over the Color Line” (2005), “information devoid of a social context fails to live up to its potential as a transformative agent in a world increasingly shaped by racial inequality and the global spread of neoimperialist capitalism” (p. 19-20). We, as librarians, need to keep this in mind as we promote information as a transformative agent (whether through Open Access or in other forms). When we divorce information resources from any real time engagement with their social context we start students down a path where information itself is seen as kind of neutral. Authority rests with those who create “academic” resources without context for the greater conversations surrounding them, and by foregrounding Twitter feeds, we literally center those antiracist voices calling this into question. In doing so we start to move towards a more transformative view of information and knowledge. We blow up the possibilities of who “counts” as a knowledge creator by centering those voices and letting go.

As previously mentioned, traditional library guides rarely include social context, or real time engagement with resources that fall outside of the “traditional” academic milieu. In other words they lack nuance. But, context and nuance matter now more than ever, and, as we know, are frequently missing. Again, Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2020) speak to this. “Discourse across counterpublic networks reflects a nuance rarely seen in mainstream media coverage of issues of gender-based and anti-Black violence. These networks center, struggle with, and develop identity politics alongside social movement demands” (p. 197). So, in order to create ways for students to understand the nuance and engage in the discourse, we in fact need Twitter (or something like it). An example of this might be the 2020 firing of Timnit Gebru (@timnitGebru) by Google. The nuance provided by folks on Twitter really changed the narrative in terms of understanding the broader ways Google is *performing* the creation of ethical AI instead of actually doing so.²

Discovering Actual Voices

And this pulls us towards a very practical aspect of adding Twitter feeds to library guides. One of the major silver linings of the Covid-19 pandemic was the opening up of talks and events to a larger general online public. Events that are most prominently promoted on Twitter. While talks by academics and other folks were previously often open to the public, they were constrained by physical space. They no longer are, at least for now. By promoting them on Twitter, they become part of the conversation surrounding and penetrating academic work and resources. This is key. By showing folks where to literally listen to an author’s voice, rather than just merely reading their words, we further center that author’s voice. Reading a book is one thing, hearing, or reading the captions of someone talking through their thoughts, is a different thing entirely. It further illustrates how many different information engagement routes exist, and thus again unsettles the traditional norms of academic discourse. In other words, it is a way to show that information does not only reside in academic books, or in print at all. Engaging in real time, and hearing folks hash out thoughts in real time, provides vital social context for any information contained within traditional resources, even a newspaper.

² Hao, A. (2020, December 4) is an article that gives a good overview of what happened between Timnit Gebru and Google.

Twitter is certainly problematic, and we have to recognize this fact, but it does provide a unique way for us, as librarians, to decenter ourselves and create opportunities for others to engage with information as a force for transformation that focusing solely on traditional resources sometimes fails to do. When we decide to let go of our control, to create space for other voices to speak, we allow a nascent antiracist understanding of knowledge creation as something not just tied to traditional sources, traditional (usually white) voices, or “owned” by the library at all. We guide folks toward an information practice where the nuance of an argument and the context of both its author and readership come more fully into focus. While many librarians participate on Twitter, a quick glance suggests that few use it as a teaching tool in this way. We might all become a little more subversive, a little more critically engaged, if we did so.

Postscript: What if Twitter Goes Private?

In the months since I originally wrote my reflection on how adding Twitter feeds to library guides can be part of an antiracist practice in library instruction, Twitter, as a company and platform, may be in for some rather major changes. In April 2022, Billionaire Elon Musk offered to buy Twitter, to take it private, and his offer was accepted (Feiner, Apr. 25, 2022). In the months leading up to the initial offer and eventual acceptance, Musk called himself a “free speech absolutist” (Musk, Mar. 4, 2022). What he means by this is a bit up for debate but it seems to suggest that he will loosen the content moderation standards and potentially un-ban Twitter users who have been banned for life including former President Donald Trump (Bond, May 10, 2022). While the return of Donald Trump would certainly make headlines, it is the content moderation that worries most Twitter critics and scholars.

If the deal goes through, and this is very much in doubt as of this writing in July 2022, Twitter will certainly change. While the return of Donald Trump and others will garner the big headlines, it is the content moderation and privately owned nature of Twitter that will really change the platform. As Jaigris Hudson writes in *The Conversation*, “what Musk is proposing would likely make speech on Twitter less free than it is now, because people who cannot rely on social media platforms to protect them from online harassment tend to leave the platform when the consequences of online harassment become psychologically or socially destructive” (Hudson, Apr. 25, 2022). Hudson’s work shows that when supposed free speech advocates work to remove content moderation, the voices of the already marginalized are further silenced. So what might this mean for the project adding Twitter feeds to library guides? It could mean the withdrawal of those folks who comment on and add significant context to major users’ tweets. This would be incredibly detrimental to the project because the counterpublic discourse I talk about in the chapter as vital to decentering the white librarian and centering the voices contextualizing and problematizing mainstream discourse would be largely silenced. While there might be some folks who persevere, returning to the “wild west” in terms of content management would drive the majority of the voices we want to center away from posting.

Even if, somehow, the deal does not occur, a change in the discourse around Twitter will have occurred. The warning signs that have been raised with the idea of Twitter being made private, subject to the whims of a single person, are highly problematic. Who gets to decide what conversations should be happening? With the possibility of a private Twitter, even if not yet realized, that question must be more urgently asked. In the end, no one quite knows what it means for Twitter to be owned by a single person, especially a single person with significant pre-existing cultural clout like Elon Musk. But whatever the outcome, change will be coming for Twitter. Whether this is in the form of an edit button, new features for premium users, less content moderation, or merely an understanding that Twitter is not going to just stay the same, the platform will change. And whether we, as librarians, will be able to rely on using Twitter feeds in our teaching contexts as a way to center those creating counterpublic discourse and decenter our own perspectives remains to be seen. As I wrote about in the chapter, who gets to define knowledge has been, and continues to be, a highly problematic thing for libraries. If Elon Musk becomes the final arbiter of what counts as free speech on Twitter, once again a White Male Cisgender person will be the one to define the conversation. At least to a certain extent. However, there is always hope. If Elon Musk buys Twitter and changes it as he has indicated he will, and the consequences of such actions are as expected, counterpublic discourse will still exist, and Twitter may still be the place that it is most obviously found. Remember, #BlackLivesMatter arose in 2013 (BlackLivesMatter.com/herstory/) and created incredible possibilities for counterpublic discourse while content moderation at Twitter was quite different than it is today.³

³ For a history of the Twitter Rules and how they changed in 2016, see Jeong, 2016.

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