Podcasting Initiatives in American Research Libraries

Abstract

Purpose: The paper discovers how many American Research Libraries produce podcasts, on what subjects they are produced and how those podcasts are promoted.
Design/methodology/approach: The researchers looked at each American Research Library's website in December 2009 to determine if the library has a podcasting initiative and if so, what topics were covered. General scanning of the website, site search and Google search were used to discover Podcasts. Facebook and Twitter pages were also explored to determine if social media was used for podcast promotion.
Findings: It was found that approximately one third of American Research Libraries have a podcasting initiative, the subjects vary widely and social media are only used occasionally to promote the podcasts. The authors conclude that podcasting is a technology that has not yet reached its zenith and libraries have many avenues left still to explore using this technology.
Originality/value: The paper explores the use of podcasts in Libraries, which has not been explored in the literature.

Keywords Podcast, Vodcast, Social Media

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Academic libraries are leveraging new technologies and social media to engage their targeted audiences and promote valuable resources and services. Podcasting is one of the more recent of these technology-driven initiatives. In the 2005 article "Blogging is So Last Year—Now Podcasting is Hot," author Janet Balas asserts that podcasting is the next big thing in library outreach. Now that academic libraries have had a few years to experiment with this newest form of content publishing, it may be a good time to revisit Balas' assertion: Is podcasting still "hot"? To approach this question, the researchers examined podcasting activities by Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member libraries. Of particular interest to the researchers was the percentage of ARL member libraries that have produced or are producing podcasts, the type of content ARL member libraries are broadcasting via podcasts, podcasting frequency, and how libraries are promoting their podcasts.

2. Literature Review

Podcasting is a relatively new method of content publishing, so it is important to define the concept. These common definitions can be divided into two schools of

thought. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* provides an example of the first, and more inclusive definition, stating that a podcast is "a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player." (p. 1348) By this definition, and similar definitions offered by Harris (2006), DeVoe (2006), and Balleste, Rosenberg, and Smith-Butler (2006), a podcast could be as simple as an audio file (e.g. MP3) posted to a website and made available for download. In other words, a website-hosted audio file is not really a podcast unless the user can subscribe to the broadcast via Real Simple Syndication (RSS) or other push technology. Thus, a podcast is not just a content package (a product), but method of content delivery (a service) as well. Lee (2006) and Balleste, Rosenberg, and Smith-Butler (2006), among others, broaden this definition to include the syndication of video files (e.g. AVI and MPEG), now commonly referred to as vodcasting.

Education and library literature analyzes podcasting themes from a variety of angles, foremost among them the reasons to podcast, potential podcasting applications, and current library podcasting activities. EDUCAUSE (2005) provides a succinct argument in favor of podcasts: "Podcasting cannot replace the classroom, but it provides educators one more way to meet today's students where they 'live'— on the Internet and on audio players." In their article "What students want: Generation Y and the changing function of the academic library," Susan Gardner and Susanna Eng note four student attributes from their 2002 library user survey that could also be used in support of podcasting (2005):

1. They have great expectations.
2. They expect customization.
3. They are technology veterans.
4. They utilize new communication modes.

Ralph and Olsen (2007) cite these attributes to argue for podcasting as a means to reach tech-savvy Millennials, cater to different learning styles, and improve distance education services. Griffey (2007) also argues that the ubiquity of the MP3, MPEG, and AVI formats, and devices capable of playing those formats, support the delivery of content via podcast. A January 2009 national survey conducted by Arbitron and Edison Research found that 64% of its respondents in the 18-24 year-old bracket and 71% of its respondents in the 12-17 year-old bracket owned an iPod or other portable MP3 player. Furthermore, since personal computing devices are also MP3 friendly, podcasts enjoy considerable market penetration.

Several published articles provide examples of library or librarian-produced uses of podcasts. Balas (2005) describes the Online Programming for All Libraries (OPAL) project which began offering its archived web-based programs, e.g. book, genealogy, and health discussions, as podcasts. Lee (2006) discusses Lansing Public Library's podcasting efforts that promote its services to the community by connecting targeted audiences to specific programs.   Ragon and Looney (2006) describe the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library's podcasting project that provides access to

University of Virginia Health System's History of the Health Sciences Lecture Series. Murley (2007) provides examples of law library podcasts, including *Check This Out!* by University at Buffalo Law School's Jim Milles and *KCLL's Sidebar* , a monthly legal news podcast from King County Law Library in Seattle, Washington. Griffey (2007) and Ralph and Olsen (2007) both describe academic libraries' podcasting efforts that leverage the new technology to expand instructional services. Providing yet another example of a library's implementation and application of podcasting, *Library Journal* (2009) profiles Ohio University librarian Chad Boeninger, who is credited with a number of tech-savvy solutions, including podcast library tours.

The literature also recommends ways to initiate a podcast project, beginning with the identification of appropriate podcast content. Balleste, Rosenberg, and Smith-Butler (2006) describe how Nova Southeastern University (NSU) Law Library and Technology posed several questions before embarking on its podcasting project, starting with the basics: "Why should we begin a podcast?" and "What should we podcast?" NSU librarians and IT staff quickly identified its audio series, *Legal Replays,* as a good starting point. By simply moving these preexisting recordings of faculty lectures into podcast format and adding RSS feed capability, they could make it easier for students to stay current with new content. With this impetus for a podcasting project, librarians identified new podcasting opportunities, including professional lectures and lectures given by visiting speakers. Lee (2006) suggests several podcast applications including event promotion, library tours, and book talks. Griffey (2007) describes how the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga produced podcasts to support its instruction program.

The literature also provides some guidance to libraries for moving from podcast vision to podcast creation and implementation. Harris (2006) presents a few basic resources to help libraries begin their podcasting programs, ranging from a headset with microphone to Audacity software for audio recording and editing. Ragon and Looney (2006) go into greater detail in describing how the University of Virginia Claude Moore Health Science Library produced its podcasts to capture and disseminate course lectures. The authors provide production notes, describe hardware and software resources that were used for the project, production notes, and discuss how metadata was generated to improve podcast visibility. The authors also offer a glimpse of future podcasting projects.

3. Methodology

One hundred and twelve ARL member library websites were examined for podcast content during the second and third weeks of December 2009. Twelve non-academic ARL member institutions were excluded from the study. If no podcast content was found on a site, either by browsing or site search, the website was searched via Google using site search functionality (e.g. site:libraries.ou.edu) in conjunction with terms such as "podcast," "vodcast," or "MP3." For the purpose of this study podcasts or vodcasts were loosely defined to be any library-produced

MP3, MP4, or similarly formatted content on the library's website available for download. Streaming audio or video that was not downloadable was not included. A more rigorous podcast definition, one that requires subscription capabilities via RSS, was deemed too exclusionary for the purposes of this study. However, library sites providing aggregated list of podcasts available from external sites were not included in the study. Only podcasts produced by the libraries themselves were included in this study.

Once each ARL library that produced podcasts was identified the podcast content was examined and classified by subject.   These classifications included library tours, library resources, recorded lectures, interviews, library news, oral histories, scholarly publishing and art in the library. The total number of podcasts produced in each category was calculated.   In addition, the total number of all podcasts was calculated as was the podcasting frequency for each library. Finally, the researchers examined the accessibility of the podcast content to determine whether podcasts were promoted by a link on a library's homepage, or alternatively, how many clicks from the homepage were required to reach the podcast content. The researchers also looked for instances of podcast promotion on library Facebook and Twitter pages.

4. Results

The researchers discovered podcast content on 37 of the 112 ARL member library websites, roughly a third of the sample.   The content, promotion and frequency varied greatly from library to library.

Podcast Categories by Library

An examination of the thirty-seven ARL libraries that created podcasts revealed the following: Sixteen libraries created podcasts on how to use resources within the library. Ten libraries provided podcasts of recorded lectures and events, and eight provided podcasts that included library tours. Five libraries produced podcasts that contained recorded interviews, and three libraries produced podcasts that contained library news or oral histories. Only one, The University of California, Davis produced a podcast on the works of art in the library.   The Massachusetts Institute of Technology library was the only library to offer a set of podcasts that addressed scholarly publishing.
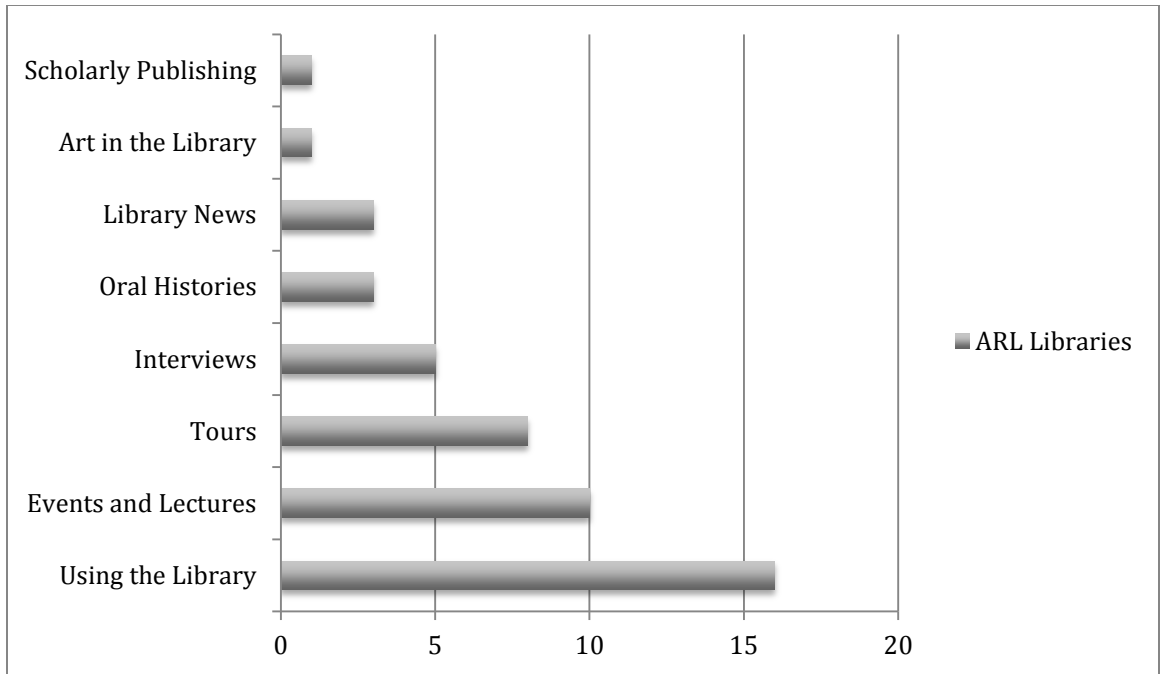
Figure I Podcast Subject Taxonomy

Podcast Frequency

Only seven ARL libraries appeared to produce podcasts on a recurring basis (Figure II). Arizona State University (ASU) launches podcasts almost every day and Yale University podcasts frequently, but not on a daily basis. The University of Oklahoma (OU) produces podcasts on a weekly basis. The other libraries examined do not have a regular schedule of podcasting, and their podcast content appears to be static or changes infrequently.
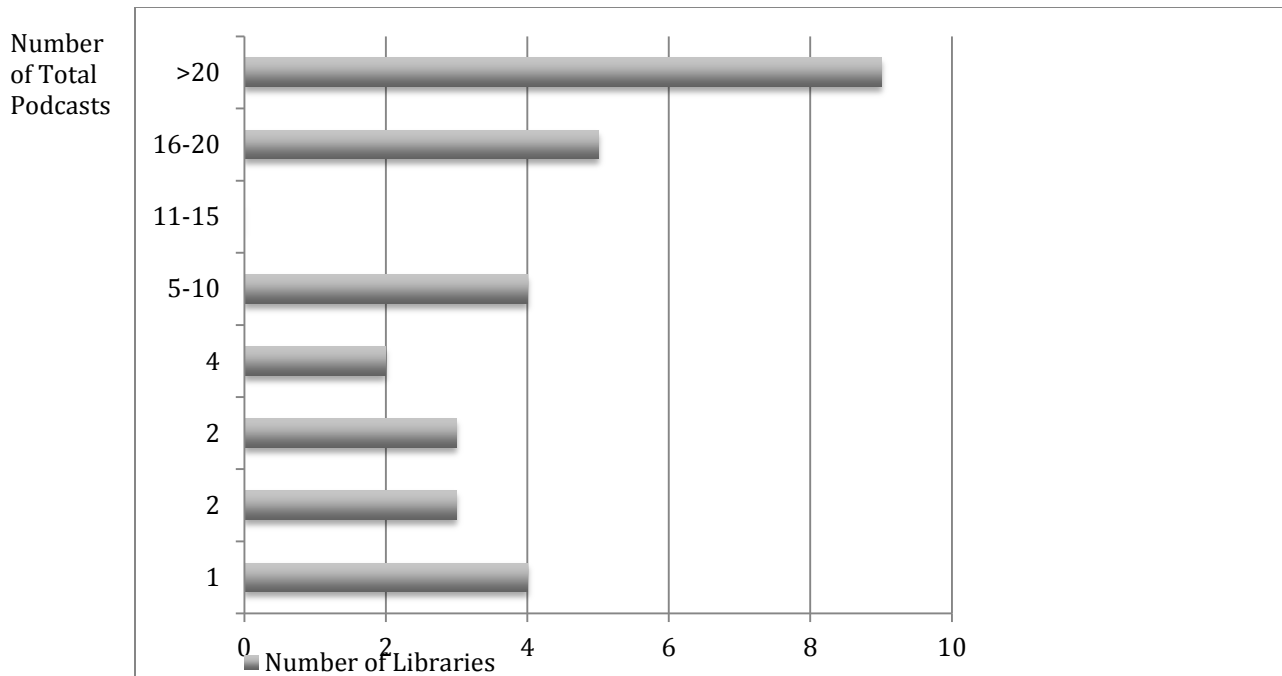
Figure II Podcast Frequency

Promotion of Podcasts

Podcasts were on average 2.3 clicks from the homepage (Figure III). Only six of the 37 podcasting ARL member libraries provided prominent links to podcast content on their libraries' homepages. More surprisingly, the researchers discovered podcast content on six sites that were only discoverable through site searches, and had no discernable browse-and-click pathway to the content. Three library websites contained links to podcasts that were no longer functional. Of the 37 library sites studied, 26 offered an RSS feed for subscription to other library information, but only three allowed subscription to podcasts through RSS feeds (Figure IV); while thirteen libraries regularly provide status updates via Twitter, only three libraries promoted their own podcasts in this manner. In addition, thirteen libraries maintained Facebook pages, but only two promoted their podcasts on Facebook.
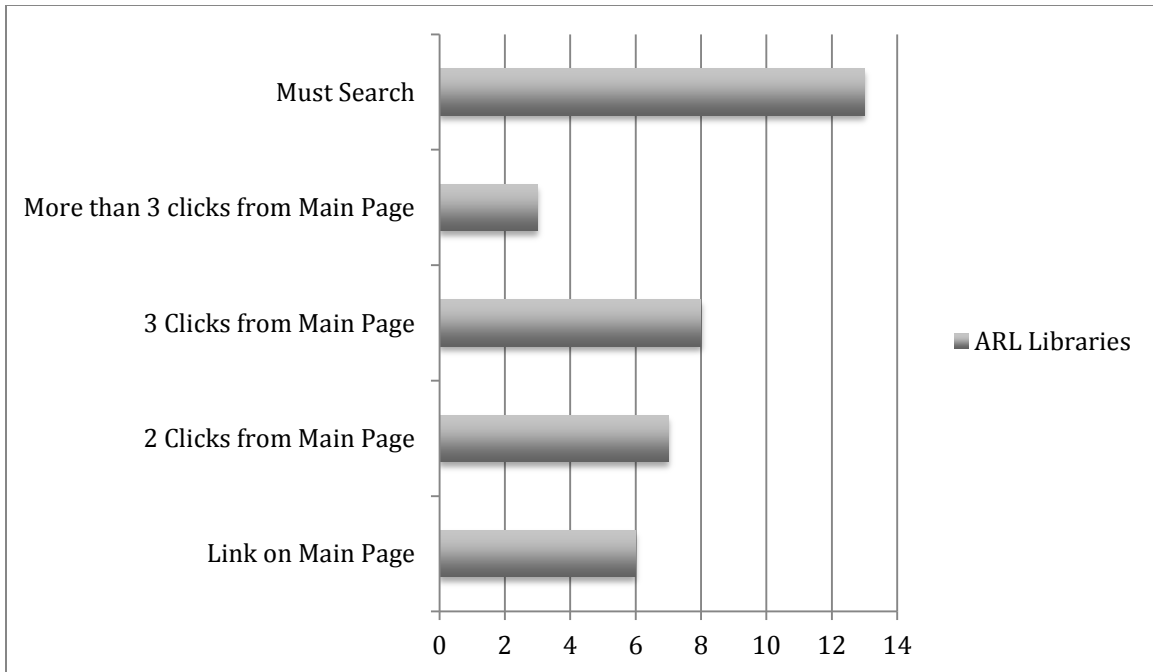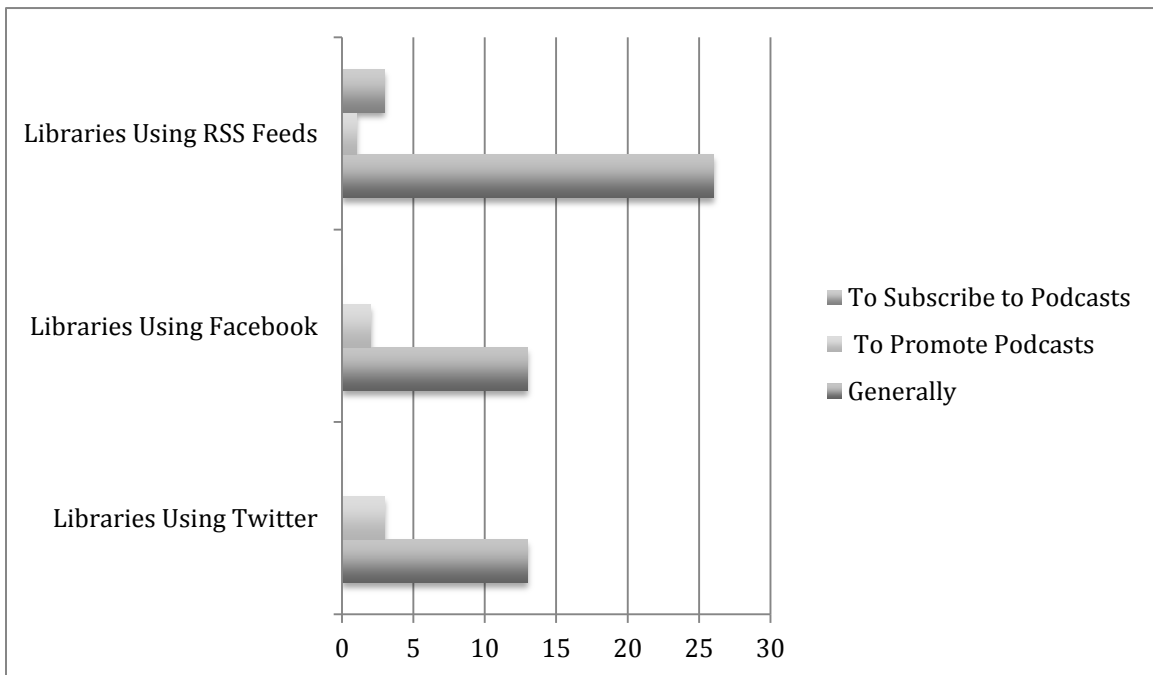
Figure III Podcast Location on Website

Figure IV General and Podcast Promotional Efforts

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that a significant number of ARL member libraries employ podcasting as a means of communication, and that libraries are disseminating a wide variety of content via these podcasts. Podcasts were most commonly used to describe and promote various library resources. For example,

libraries at Texas Tech University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Washington State University and Johns Hopkins University all offer podcasts that function as guides to using the library, many of which offer general research tips. The University of Connecticut Libraries' went one step further in producing an entire podcast series that provides research tips for freshman English students.

Lectures and events were the second most popular type of podcast. University of California San Diego Libraries podcasted a small series of lectures produced in collaboration with its literature department. The University of Arizona Libraries' Special Collections produced several book lecture podcasts, as well as the *Morales de Escarcega Lecture Series*, featuring three faculty lecture podcasts. Case Western Reserve Libraries initiated a similar effort in their *Off the Shelf* podcast series, which features interviews with authors and faculty. In addition to *Off the Shelf*, Case Western produced a second series of podcasts titled *Case Stories* which provide the oral histories of prominent university figures. Temple University Libraries provides yet another example of leveraging the podcast to disseminate author interviews and visiting and resident faculty lectures. Recent projects include a guest lecture podcast with Janet Jakobsen, professor of women's studies, and an interview with Leslie Banks, author of the Vampire Huntress series.

Tours were the third most common type of podcast. University of Iowa Libraries' library tour podcasts are organized by floor while the University of Washington Libraries provides two podcast tours, one of the Suzzallo-Allen Library and another for the Odegaard Undergraduate Library. Other libraries have created podcast tours that focus on special libraries, such as SUNY Buffalo's Health Sciences Library tour, while other libraries, including SUNY Alabama, have broadened access by podcasting library tours in several languages. For these libraries podcasting was seen as an effective means to help orient new users to physical library spaces. It is also interesting to note that several of the libraries that chose to focus their podcasting efforts on library tours tended to have static podcast collections. The podcasts appear to have served a niche purpose, and once completed, the podcasting initiatives were concluded.

Libraries with sustained podcasting efforts tended to provide a variety of content, from tours and lectures to interviews and research instruction. These efforts obviously require a greater commitment of resources, either by a dedicated podcaster-in-residence or through broader institutional participation and partnerships. In either case it is highly suggestive that organizations with sustained podcasting efforts consider podcasting to be a worthwhile investment of library resources. ASU Libraries, which produces five podcasts a week, is one such organization. The subject matter is varied and ranges from how to use library resources, to interviews, to what to do on a hot day. There is no list of past podcasts or vodcasts, although the user may link to iTunes and view a list of the most viewed podcasts and vodcasts. The user also has the ability to search for podcasts by topic or browse a subject listing.

Indiana University-Bloomington Libraries (IU) is another organization with a significant podcasting initiative. The university maintains links to podcasts from the home page of the libraries' website. This link leads to a dedicated podcast page for the university-at-large. The user can narrow a search to podcast content or browse podcasts by topic. Library produced podcasts are clearly labeled.   The podcasts cover a wide range of subject matter, including research instruction, resource highlights, and lectures on a variety of topics, such as Open Access and digital scholarship. IU Libraries also takes the podcast library tour to new levels by providing their broadcasts in twenty-four languages.

The University of Oklahoma Libraries produces podcasts approximately once per week. The OU Libraries' podcast webpage provides direct links to the four most recent podcasts or vodcasts and a link to the full podcast archive. The podcasts cover a wide range of topics, including resource spotlights, interviews with resident and visiting faculty, and current and campus event promotion.   OU Libraries has also produced podcasts that promote resources outside the library. OU libraries recently produced a podcast highlighting services offered by the University of Oklahoma Speakers Service, providing one example of how a library can leverage podcasting to establish new connections within the campus network.

It stands to reason that those libraries with the most ambitious podcast initiatives would put equal efforts in their promotion, beginning with content visibility. A podcast that is difficult to discover will likely be underutilized and underappreciated, regardless of the quality of its content. Therefore, libraries with podcasting ambitions would do well to reserve or create conspicuous locations for their podcast content. Interestingly, there is not always a correlation between the frequency of the podcasts a library produces and the effort expended in publicizing these podcasts. A few podcasting ARL member libraries, including ASU, OU, and IU, provide links to podcast content on their website homepages. These libraries, however, were exceptions. Most library websites, including several with impressive podcast content, place these resources several clicks away from the homepage, and as a result, are less accessible and can be difficult to discover. The researchers grew to appreciate the severity of this issue when podcasts from thirteen ARL member libraries were all but indiscoverable through the native library websites and were only found by a site search or through Google.

 Few podcasting ARL member libraries have leveraged social media to market their podcasts, and as with podcast link location setting, there is not always a correlation between the effort put into podcasting and the effort to promote the podcasts through social media. Louisiana State University Libraries, for example, was one of the few among the ARL member libraries that have promoted its podcasts on both Twitter and Facebook, and has produced relatively few podcasts. Conversely, ASU and OU Libraries produce podcasts on a weekly schedule, and neither promotes those resources on their respective Facebook pages, and only ASU has given podcasts brief mention on Twitter.   Not all ARL member libraries have created

Facebook or Twitter profiles (Figure 4), but it is surprising that so few of those libraries that have made the move into the world of social media have leveraged those channels of communication to market their podcast content. While OU Libraries maintains Facebook and Twitter accounts, neither was used to promote the libraries' podcasts. As a result of the awareness generated through this research, OU Libraries will begin to promote its podcasts on Facebook.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine, in broad terms, the podcasting activities of ARL member libraries. Future studies in this area may focus on specific types of podcasts, the factors that go into a library's decision to initiate or conclude a podcasting program, or may revisit podcasting activities in an effort to project its ascent or decline in the ARL community. Competing (or complementary) broadcasting mediums, such as YouTube, offer libraries alternative channels to communicate to their audiences. Similar to podcasts, YouTube provides its content authors the ability to create unique channels and viewers the ability to subscribe to those channels. It will be interesting to see if and to what extent YouTube and other emerging channels of communication impact ARL member library podcasting activities.

Many ARL libraries use podcasts for education in the library to promote library events, resources, services, and but many of those same libraries do not make that content highly visible on their websites and fewer still use the free tools already available to them to promote the podcasts. Podcast production, from brainstorming and planning to production and dissemination, can be a resource intensive process, so it was surprising to the researchers to discover such a wealth of quality content buried deep within library websites and rarely promoted on library Facebook and Twitter pages. ARL member libraries are clearly discovering podcasting to be an effective means to present a wide range of information to their audience, and those efforts deserve to be marketed appropriately.

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