

Archival education in the age of social media in Algeria: opportunities and future horizons

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology is changing the way we learn, interact, work and entertain, for its unlimited potential in penetrating all spheres of life. The digital revolution is transforming education industry worldwide. In recent years, extensive debate and research are exploring digital technology, focusing on developing a clear understanding of its capabilities as a platform for making social sciences and humanities applicable to the cyber environment of the twenty first century. The widespread use of social media supported by a rapid growth of the digital culture is making learning ubiquitous by creating, capturing and sharing knowledge. This is enhancing students' engagement and learning efficiency. It is also improving the learner-instructor interaction by engaging students in a more meaningful participation in their own education and academic achievement. To accomplish this, both students and instructors need to have the skills and expertise in capturing the positive effect of the digital technology and engaging in the new learning environment.

This paper reflects on the new learning environment supported by a curriculum reflecting the digital technology era. It discusses how students at the department of archives at the University of Constantine 2 build on the digital capabilities of social media to engage in independent learning by creating and sharing knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Digital technology; digital tools; archival education; social media; students' engagement; Algeria.

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Introduction

As societies are moving towards the digital era there is a greater need for harnessing the technological advancements of the web and promoting their use in instructional and learning activities. In the last few years extensive discussion and heated debates are exploring such use. Much of that focused on developing a clear understanding of the capabilities of information and communication technology as a platform for enhancing instruction and learning. Digital technology and accompanying tools are putting academic institutions under pressure for organizational changes built on digital technology to make their education system applicable to the cyber-environment. However, social sciences' programs face innumerable challenges in nurturing and managing the impact of such developments. With the advent of the Internet technology and its gradual penetration in developing countries, education re-engineering is needed to optimize the positive effect of the web technology and its growing applications in instruction and knowledge creation, sharing and transfer. Social media emerged as one of platforms for such endeavors for their unlimited potential of making infinite amount of data available to learners. For instance, Facebook has reached two billions users all over the world. They create and share around 30 billion pieces of content every month. Therefore, the use of digital technology in form of social networks is growing at a scale that is threatening and at the same time promising. On one hand, they have the potential for global involvement of institutions; on the other hand, the question of how to deal with the big-data generated by myriads of users will soon become inevitable and need to be resolved. This requires new skills and expertise that may not be applicable to social sciences and humanities programs such as archival education. Nonetheless, this is in a state of transition as a result of several factors specifically, economic growth and gradual application of ICT in various activities namely: digital preservation, electronic record management and several other areas to optimize the positive effect of the web technologies. The heavy use of digital technology is changing every sphere of life including education where rigid learning models do not work in the digital era that is promoting flexible systems supported by technological tools. In retrospect, new communications technologies and research data infrastructure are now appreciated by humanities researchers and learners, enriching the connections within the academy and powering the linkages of content and data (Owen, S. et al, 2014a.). Students in Algerian universities are creating and sharing contents through social media, thus engaging in their own learning in a more meaningful way.

The Institute of Library and Documentation was founded in 1983 it developed gradually from a small institute to the status of national institute with a students' population of about 2500 reading for a BA, Master and Doctorate. There are 35 full time faculty members and a number of part timers serving in the Institute's two departments namely: library science and archival science. A total 500 students are enrolled in the department of Archives and the number is growing every year.

This paper explores the use of social media by students in the department of archives at the University of Constantine 2 (Algeria) to bridge the gap between digital technology and archival education. It investigates the type of social media they use, the type of activities they are likely to use social media for. It looks at how students are investing their technological skills and learning time, for better academic achievements and examines factors affecting their use.

Archival education in Algerian Universities

Archival science came into the mainstream of higher education in Algeria in 2008. But, it started as a single course long before that, offering archives coursework as part of library science bachelor program. In 2008 it grew into a standalone program offering bachelor, master and doctorate degrees to a growing number of students. Courses on archives are designed to educate and train a new generation of archivists qualified to take on different roles and responsibilities for archival activities in public and private organizations. To provide an adequate coverage of curriculum content, that encompass academic courses and technical skills that are vital for educating future archivists is important in building a stronger archival profession in Algeria as well as in fostering professionalization among the younger generation of graduates, who are required to work in the digital era. Therefore, the curriculum is constructed to serve the archival collections in the country, give a new perspective to the profession and open doors of opportunities for archivists to acquire the required expertise to accommodate the technological requirements of the digital environment to contribute to essential understandings for the development of future archival systems and technologies that operate at a global level. (McKemmish, Gilliland - Swetland, & Ketelaar, 2005). This depends on the extent to which the program content and characteristics respond to the needs of digital technology and provide necessary tools for that. At this point, it is necessary to develop clear strategies for integrating into the digital arena by:

- Developing and providing access to new and innovative learning and instruction tools;
- Tapping into the wide ICT applications to provide access to new formats of education packages;
- Develop a common vision of the demands of the digital technology environment;
- Provide the necessary institutional and technological infrastructure that commensurate with the global development in archival science.

The rapid development of the internet technology, specifically the web2.0 technology and tools have emerged as the driving forces that are reshaping the global environment within which social sciences and humanities including archives are operating. Such as IT savvy user demographics, (internet generation) complex user needs, changing collection formats (from paper to digital), increased use of social networking, global pressure for sharing knowledge among others. For that matter, curriculum development has been carried out a number of times to include courses that have a direct impact upon the development of the field of archival science in relation to digital technology environment. Courses like: Electronic archiving, Application of new technology to archives, Archive digitization, Electronic record management, Archival institutions through the web, Metadata & archives, Digital technology & archives that are featured in the program are direct applications of digital technology and tools to archives.

Literature review

The literature cites four dimensions of learning styles using the social web; these are:

- Active versus reflective: or trying first then think;

- Sensing versus intuitive: learning the facts or discovering them;
- Visual learning versus verbal: using visual material or verbal explanations;
- Sequential versus global: starting by understanding the linear steps or getting the big picture first. (Mavropalias, n.d.)

Modern education systems are shifting the emphasis from instructors towards learners who take part in their own learning. Students in the department of archives are using social media, specifically, Facebook to collaborate with one another in group projects and term papers, they exchange lecture notes, previous exam questions and other learning material related to their course. One possibility afforded by social media is the ability for students in the Humanities to use and create linked data through open systems and through socially constructed linkages which are driven by the perspectives and understandings of individuals (Owen, S. *et al.* 2014b). The ubiquitous presence of social media is generating big-data outputs and has attracted researchers to study both positive aspects and concerns of using such tools in various settings offering new and various ways of using computers or/and mobile devices. (Paliktzoglou and Suhonen, 2014).

As education institutions are embracing social media there is a need to optimize the positive effect of such technologies to bring them into pedagogy to make instruction and learning active and applicable to the cyber environment of the new millennium. (Boumarafi, 2015a). For a generation immersed in a world of evolving technologies where internet applications, specifically, the web 2.0 tools are having a considerable impact on creating a technology – driven culture in every society.

Kirshenbaum (2010) states that digital technology and tools are a social enterprise, it is a network between people who jointly research together, argue, compete and collaborate. Students all over the globe are using social media capabilities to create and share content, exchange ideas and establish networked communities. As a result, a huge amount of digital-born data is being created. That is, in a way promoting the digital technology and tools movement through innovation in humanities scholarship which still needs more investment while recognizing the challenges of infrastructure and staff (Spiro, 2011) in compiling, organizing and preserving social media content for future use. They need to create new digital tools for data warehousing and text mining. The current approach to digital technology in social sciences especially in developing countries is still limited in terms of scope and research projects. However, as research in this area increases, demand for digital scholarship will become inevitable (Green, 2014) in a new intellectual space aiming for a global impact and internationalization (Zorich, 2008). This has challenged the status-quo of social sciences and humanities as it requires new skills and competencies to properly engage in the digital technology environment.

Pahl (2003) studied the evolution and change in web-based teaching and learning environments with the focus on four perspectives including content, format, infrastructure and pedagogy. The author concluded that lack of standardized technology, its limited life expectancy and cost are among the major problems facing teaching and learning environments that are struggling to keep up with the constant changes in technology and theoretical advances in education.

In 2009, Pannapaker posited that digital technology is “the next big thing in a long time, because its implications affect every field including arts and social sciences as a result dozens of grants have been awarded to projects in digital humanities, focusing on the application of computing technology to humanistic inquiries and on humanistic reflections on the significance of that technology (Sula, 2013) to develop a clearer understanding of the capabilities of such technology as a new platform in leveraging arts and social sciences efficiently and addressing large scale participation in the creation of digital content and tools.

Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, (2007) observed that Facebook supports resource sharing by establishing the social foundation between students and their peers. In essence the advent of social networking technology is also the advent of new learning systems and a rapid growth in educational technology. Although, social networks were not initially created for education purpose, Paliktzoglou, Stylianou, and Sohenen (2014) found evidence that Google apps can support pedagogical activities by increasing students’ engagement and team work. Therefore, it is important archival students to learn how to integrate evolving technology into learning strategies; not just for technology’s sake, but for the added value that these tools already familiar to learners provide. (Brotherton, 2011). Boumarafi (2015b) investigated the use of social media by Algerian students and the extent to which they use it for academic purpose found that facebook is the most popular and is used in some academic activities.

Methodology

Documented literature was examined to design a questionnaire for this study. A pilot survey was conducted with a small group of archives and library sciences students to assess the weaknesses if any and strength of the questionnaire. Based on their suggestions the instrument was revised and then finalized. Faculty members were approached for permission to distribute the questionnaire during their class session. This allowed greatest accessibility to the target population that consisted of master students who were in class on the day the questionnaire was distributed. 120 completed questionnaires were collected, out of which 73 (60.8%) were used in the study the rest were considered unusable. The majority of these respondents were female (n=43; 31.39 %) and male represent (n= 30; 21.9%), in fact the number of female students in the institute in general outnumbers the male. All respondents have a laptop, a smart phone and internet connection at home. This means that they have the possibility to respond to the digital technology and tools material requirements.

Findings

Preferred social media

Respondents were asked which social network they prefer to use. Their preferences are summarized in table 1. As expected, all respondents 73 (100%) gave the top rank to Facebook at a mean of 4.10. Previous studies also identified Facebook as the most frequently used SNS.

YouTube is ranked second in preference with a mean of 4.00. Respondents put Twitter in third position in terms of importance with a mean of 3.85, followed by LinkedIn which scored 3.64. Skype that respondents use to keep in touch with family and friends at home and abroad was put in fifth position with a mean of 3.63. MySpace is ranked last with a mean of 3.10.

Type of social media	Mean	Sdt. Dev.	Rank
Facebook	4.10	1.163	1
YouTube	4.00	1.005	2
Twitter	3.85	1.078	3
LinkedIn	3.64	1.106	4
Skype	3.63	1.123	5
Google+	3.10	1.265	6

Table 1. Preferred social network sites (n=73).

Activities carried out using Social media

Respondents were asked to specify academic activity they carry out using social media and indicate the importance of each. The respondents' responses are presented in the form of means and standard deviation in table 2.

Activities	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
Discuss group projects	4.50	.996	1
Share assignments and course work	4.31	.917	2
Share files and lecture notes	4.23	.927	3
Create content	4.17	1.116	4
Exchange ideas	4.12	1.029	5
Join academic discussion forums	4.06	1.165	6
Make a presence in the cyber-space	4.03	1.006	7
Improve foreign language skills	3.99	1.109	8
Self-regulated learning	3.94	1.106	9
Improve communication skills with students abroad	3.81	1.092	10
Share ideas and promote creativity	3.74	1.094	11
Make contact with faculty members easier	3.50	1.124	12
Enhance academic achievement	3.35	1.148	13
Get assignments from faculty members	2.99	1.220	14
Send assignments to faculty members	2.80	1.265	15
Get grades for assignments completed	2.36	1.100	16

Table 2. Activities carried out using social media (n=73).

From the results exhibited in table 2 above, the sample groups of the study consider seven activities as important at various levels. However, “discussion of group projects” is considered as the most important and gets top rank with a mean of 4.50. They also placed high importance on sharing assignments and course work (mean=4.31), followed by “share files” and “lecture notes” (mean=4.23), “create content” (mean=4.17), “exchange ideas” (mean=4.12), “join academic discussion forums” (mean=4.06), and “make a presence in the cyber-space” (mean=4.03). All these activities are very close to very important. Learning a foreign language especially English became a very important skill for the 21st century learners. Therefore it seems logical that respondents considered “improve foreign language skills” as the next important activity they carry out (mean=3.99). “Self-regulated learning” was also perceived as important (mean=3.94). In the same manner, the study showed that the perceived importance of “improve communication skills with students abroad” was evaluated with a mean of 3.81. “Share ideas and promote creativity” (mean=3.74) this supports the claim that students use social media to create content. Respondents agreed that social media make contact with faculty members easier (mean=3.50). “Enhance academic achievement” (mean=3.35) indicate that students benefit from the use of social media technologies that have positive effect on their academic performance and growth. The last three activities namely: “Get assignments from faculty members”, “send assignments to faculty members”, and “get grades for assignments completed” were given less importance with means less than 3; 2.99, 2.80, 2.36 respectively.

These results reveal digital technology and tools acceptance and adoption by Archival science students expressed in a good use of social media in a numbers of academic activities.

Discussion and conclusion

Interest in Social networking is growing because of the belief that digital technology and tools are becoming essential for socialization, work and study. Arguably, it seems certain that learning and research will be affected by their evolution into digital forms. Therefore, there is a need to understand what motivates archival students at the institute of library and documentation science to use social media as digital tools to participate in their own learning through interaction with peers in the process. The study found evidence that Facebook is the most used tool and received top score. This correlated with results of previous literature. In relation to students’ activities carried out using social media, the study revealed that the top activities are of academic type between peers. The literature review supports this result. This helps in the deployment of technological networking in archival studies. Such deployment impacts archivists in the way they study and represent knowledge with direct improvement in instruction and learning activities. Surprisingly, interaction with faculty members is unexpectedly low. No doubt, using social networks increase understanding of digital techniques in humanities and social sciences and yield a better collaboration between learners and instructors in sharing knowledge and ideas and learn from each other’s opinions on site and remotely whether creating, collecting, interpreting and sharing knowledge through social media and digital devices. In fact, that is what social media is about.

The use of social media by students in the department of archival science enabled them to create content and share it with peers. Social networking proves suitable for self-learning and for establishing connections with peers locally and abroad. Overall, our study revealed that, although there is evidence of the use of digital technology by archival education for independent learning, such use remains limited to informal learning.

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