# Brazilian Librarians and Twitter
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Brazil leads the world in social networks. This essay focuses on the results of a two-year experience of Brazilian librarians using Twitter in their work field. Two types of presence on Twitter are identified. A new approach is proposed to answers the critical questions librarians are facing regarding service provision based on Twitter.

## Perspective and numbers

Social networking is one of the most ubiquitous activities across the web. As more users around the world became acquainted with connecting and expressing themselves through social network websites, a whole new social online environment emerged.

According to ComScore, a digital world research company, today nearly 3 out of 4 global Internet users access social networks each month[1]. This phenomenon continues to gain steam around the world, and Brazil represents one of the fastest growing social networking markets.

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[1]

http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/8/Indonesia_Brazil_and_Venezuela_Lead_Global_Surge_in_Twitter_Usage

Surprising as it may seem for an emerging economy, Brazil leads the world in social networks reach. According to a report released on April 2010 from Nielsen[2], a preeminent media research company, Brazil is the country with the most social networks regular users, topping the charts with the highest percentage (86%) of local online consumers who are registered on at least one of the major social networks.

In Brazil, social networking sites had 35.2 million unique visitors in July 2010, up 47% compared with a year earlier. Undisputed leader is Google's Orkut, with 70% reach, making it the world leader on domestic audience reach, with 28.9 million unique visitors in July, representing growth of 27% in 12 months. At the same time, Facebook grew by 524%, reaching 8.2 million visitors[3].

Nielsen credits the popularity of social networking in Brazil due to Orkut. The network ran by Google drew more than three-quarters of Brazil's internet audience. But social network via Twitter has experienced an explosion in local traffic over the past year, establishing itself as one of the most-visited social networks in Brazil, right behind Orkut and Facebook.

Twitter is the fourth most popular social network in Brazil with about 8.6 million visitors in August 2010. The service reaches about 23% of the Brazilian online

[2] http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global/social-media-accounts-for-22-percent-of-time-online/

[3] http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2010/08/25/can-facebook-become-brazils-other-social-network/

population. According to comScore, this is the highest Twitter penetration in the world[4].

Expansion of broadband connections and mobile access, and the rise of the sense of social media ubiquity are important factors contributing for the social networking phenomenon in Brazil.

But history and culture more likely explain why social networks seem so attractive to Brazilians. We are incredibly community oriented.

## How many we are

Twitter is just too attractive. It brought a new level of speed, ubiquity and filter quality. People working in some extension with media, technology and communication are the most active users of Twitter. Librarians fit somewhere in there. Just like in many other countries, it was a natural to librarians to adopt these tools in our work field.

In Brazil there are more than 300 active users identified as librarians (included those that are attending library school, librarians to be). It is very difficult to maintain an updated list of librarians on Twitter[5] since there is no simple way to keep track on every new librarian user. But based on network effect and popularity it is safe to say that we have a solid library-Twitter community in our country.

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[4] http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/Brazil_facebook_is_growing_fast_but_orkut_still_far_ahead.php

[5] See http://bsf.org.br/2009/05/01/bibliotecarios-no-Twitter/

There are about 50 Brazilian libraries with an unofficial or official Twitter account. This number is also growing. I would recommend a simple search on Twitter for the term 'biblioteca', which stands for 'library' both in Portuguese and Spanish. There is also a large group of librarians following the Twitter stream of the major library conference in Brazil[6].

## How we are

Considering the high number and quality of articles and blog posts already written in the last years regarding the theoretical, philosophical and practical aspects of social networks applied to libraries and by librarians, I will focus on what Brazilians have in terms of results after a solid couple of years of library and librarians using Twitter.

My perception is that we have in Brazil two distinct types of presence on Twitter – one that is personal and one that is institutional. To make it clear, personal use stands for librarians using it on behalf of themselves, talking to their friends, families and conversations based on personal interests. Institutional stands for official accounts representing institutions, libraries, taking in account that there is a real person running it or a group of people who respond for it.

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[6] See http://Twitter.com/SNBU/following

We Brazilians have got really good at professional conversation – which is, in a personal level, librarians have a lot to talk about in between librarians. This conversational volume is not hard to spot, requiring only a simple examination of our Twitter streams, updates and lists.

But we are not so good at institutional conversation – when there is a librarian transvested as an official library account trying to talk with its users. In a brief conclusion, we could argue that librarians are sharing with librarians but panphleting to users.

Librarians are really good in passing relevant information forward to other librarians, sharing library related stuff and making a real impact on each other's lives, but apparently doesn't have the same capability when dealing with patrons. Most of the time we are providing only small, ephemeral pieces of alerts in a one way communication scheme, but using a tool that is essentially about conversation.

 I hardly believe this is an institutional fault, even considering all the constraints that cannot be avoided in our governmental and public universities' libraries, but simply evidence that we still have not completely understood how to use Twitter to attend users need and consequently maximize the tools' potential as a conversational platform.

Nevertheless on the librarians personal side we have good results: Twitter

provides a whole new level of awareness and information consumption; article request has also been working amazingly as any well connected librarian can put a reference on their timeline and within minutes get many responses from different colleagues across the network;  social networking itself breaks barriers and professionals can get to know each other better, get connected through friends in common, work, think and solve problems together. Twitter is a great meeting place after all.

On the institutional side we have low level of interaction, between libraries and its users. Sure there are standouts, but looking at the average library timeline it's easy to identify their low effort trying to maintain a conversational flow; struggle to get followers, which is hard to understand since librarians on personal level seem to be very good at making connections and followers based on the quality of their conversational content; no prior strategy, which lead to accounts being left behind after a short period of experimentation.

Many explanations have been put on why Twitter doesn't fully function: duplication of work or extra work; no immediate impact; won't convert potential users into actual users; and impossible to personalize.

Back to the librarian's side, Twitter has represented a way to hack the system, considering that most of our libraries in Brazil have a very strict structure or low technical resources.  Hacking the system represents a way to work out of the constraint of politics. And Twitter has what it takes with a bottom up approach,

web based and easy to implement. Take the article request tactic for example, as we librarians are exchanging articles in favor of our users but probably going against databases contracts.

Not only Twitter but social software in general allows people to have a voice even if they are not authority on a particular subject. Being an alternative to academics, Twitter is just another form of scientific communication, dependant on formal communication, but exploiting more the ability to work outside the academic boundaries. Librarians of Twitter are helping to make this concept clearer.

Self branding is something that Brazilian librarians are learning to do, as they are taking advantage of being followed by a lot of colleagues and other people. Not to forget that Brazilians are culturally community driven.

After all this comparison between personal and institutional sides a straight conclusion is that Twitter as a news board has fulfilled its role.

**Where we are**

After two years of solid experience, is that all we have? Twitter as a news board? We stand at this tipping point now, where there's no turning back and we need to figure out where are we going and how are we going to get there, if we ever get somewhere. A lot of questions come up, and we are trying to respond them.

Are we doing marketing or advertising? Because if Twitter in libraries has worked only as a news board, it seems that we are trying to promote and sell what we do as librarians and ask people what they want from us, when we should be instead trying to use the tools' potential to anticipate and discover what people need, before they even recognize particular demands.

As a way to sell this type of initiative and to insert Twitter into institutional culture, we need to prove that social media works and then use what we know to make it better. No doubt we already have enough experience.

Librarians lack the ability to deal with the lack of policies. Not many of us are willing to take risks and start projects from the very beginning, taking full responsibility for it. All the subversive initiatives that turn into a best practice have the potential to become institutionalized. We Brazilians have acknowledged the importance of taking this type of risk to make ideas work. Twitter is just another practical example.

A major point we need to address is that we have something of incalculable value, because we cannot deny that there is a huge value in Twitter, which needs to be measured. It seems contradictory but we have to figure out a way to capitalize this value.

Many articles have pointed the importance of return on investment. We need to come up with a method to measure the ROI on this type of investment because

anyhow it consumes time, human and technical resources.

This type of approach forces us to answer questions such as "how many books were lent thanks to Twitter?" or "how many potential users were converted into actual users thanks to Twitter?"

I have a personal feeling that we have failed in trying to work with Twitter within the library scope, hoping to make a better contact with our users.

## Where we are going

But we won't stop here; we need to keep moving on. Trying to figure out how Twitter can be applied to libraries in its full capability seems to be a good problem. I am not saying that is good to have problems, but especially in a country with many problems like Brazil, these good challenges are fuel for a creative community.

As Clay Shirky (2008) or any librarian with social media experience would state, Twitter or social networking in general associated with the library is meant to be simple, not be fundamental. We can't be fundamentalists about it. Maybe we should think of Twitter as a platform to do things rather than simply say things. Certainly there is a great deal of hype around social networking, but the model is here to stay.

## What Brazil has to offer?

In conclusion, what Brazil has to offer?

We have a major librarian workforce. Brazilian librarians are joining Twitter and social media in general with the same velocity and curiosity as Twitter itself stir up its functionality as a library service. Countless librarians from all regions of the country are coming in each day, ready to take the most out of the tools' conversational potential, be it in personal level or applied to their work places. The list of Brazilian librarians on Twitter raises the same proportion of the network's overall reach.

Our country is one of the largest in the world and Twitter is proving to be a major gathering tool, working not only to approximate librarians working in many different and distant regions but to provide better services to patrons across the nation. Twitter can work faster than email and telephone, as most librarians are connected to their accounts online fulltime.

Portuguese is the fifth most spoken language in the world and one the fastest-growing languages after English. It is the language of about half of South America's population. There is no doubt Brazil plays a major role in keeping the language heritage circulating in a network system dominated by English spoken users. Librarians can take advantage of Twitter to evidence the uniqueness of the collections and materials written in Portuguese they guard.

There are so many young librarians showing up on Twitter. Digital natives are using Twitter as an extension of their social lives, now coming straight out of library schools exploiting those tools on their full capabilities. Young librarians have the vision the employ Twitter to the work field like older librarians wouldn't. It feels almost like a relief to see that librarians won't need to adapt to certain tools, since these have been a natural for them even before they became librarians.

As pointed by Ronaldo Lemos[7], Director at the Brazilian Center for Technology and Society, social networks has become a better mirror of the Brazilian society, with its class and social differences.

My local perception may have similarities with many other countries. I strongly believe this is good sign as we are facing the same reality or a variety of realities and can use a globally pervasive tool like Twitter to work altogether in making our work better and provide greater services to our library users and patrons.

Bibliographical References:

Shirky, C., 2008. Here comes everybody. Allen Lane, London.

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[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKksump9864