Access Denied: School Librarians' Responses to School District Policies on the Use of Social Media Tools

Jeffrey DiScala, PhD Candidate, College of Information Studies, University of Maryland, College Park, (202) 341-4758

Dr. Ann Carlson Weeks, Associate Dean for Academic Programs, College of Information Studies, University of Maryland, College Park

Abstract

Public school districts often block access to online social media tools. While considered a preventive measure to ensure student safety and limit district liability, this policy strips school librarians and their collaborating teachers of opportunities to instruct students in using social media tools creatively and responsibly. Using one school district as a case study, this study examined the perceptions and responses of high school librarians to district policies that limit the use of social media tools. It was determined that the way the school district presented its policies could affect how school librarians perceived and applied them. As the school district unintentionally shifted from formal to informal to implied policy documentation, this study found that the school librarians' perceptions and applications of the policies varied substantially.

Introduction

A study by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project found that 95 percent of youth ages 12–17 use the Internet and that 80 percent of those youth are members of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.) (Lenhart et al. 2011). Such pervasive use of social media tools is cause to consider how schools might best use these tools in teaching and learning. If the students are already interested in such tools and in interaction online with their peers, even if typically for the purposes of entertainment, social media tools could prove highly advantageous in instruction. Additionally, engaging others through technology is becoming increasingly important in personal and work lives. If the global workforce requires such skills of students, it is an obligation of our schools to teach them.

Unfortunately, most school districts limit the use of social media tools by students and teachers (Lemke et al. 2009). Many school districts report that they block social media tools to protect the safety of their students and to protect themselves from any liability. However, this ban removes

the opportunity for instruction in the ethical and responsible use of such tools. Amanda Lenhart and her colleagues (2011) found that nearly half of all youth put themselves at risk online by lying about their age to access social networking sites (SNS) and by sharing their passwords with a friend or significant other.

The school library is an ideal place for students to receive instruction in the appropriate use of social media and to gain the skills necessary for future work. The American Association of School Librarians emphasizes that learning has a social context and that "students need to develop skills in sharing knowledge and learning with others, both in face-to-face situations and through technology" (AASL 2007, 3).

Little research has focused on how school librarians use social media tools. While many accounts of ways in which social media tools could *potentially* be used in the school library can be found, little information is available about how school librarians *actually* are using them. In addition, minimal research has focused on the specific obstacles school librarians face in integrating social media tools into teaching and learning. In particular, there has been little focus on the policies that block use of social media in school libraries. In this research, we asked the following exploratory research question:

> *How do high school librarians perceive and respond to school district policies that prohibit the use of social media tools?*

The scope of the study was limited to high school librarians because students at this level are the most likely to use social media tools. Social media sites often exclude youth under the age of thirteen, and, for this reason, we determined that school librarians in elementary schools were less likely to use social media tools for teaching and learning.

Background

In this study, we defined social media tools as websites that include Web 2.0 capabilities and focus on user-generated content. Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010) have referred to Web 2.0 as a specific update in Web functionality that allows users to *interact* with other individuals online, rather than just *view* static content. In the case of social media tools, the primary use of this interactive functionality is to post, remix, and discuss user-generated content. Users publish this content publicly, show a certain amount of creative effort, and do not publish the content professionally or commercially. This definition eliminates e-mail and instant messaging (which are not public activities), mere replication of existing content (e.g., copying and pasting newspaper items into a blog), and all content created strictly for commercial purposes.

Use of Social Media Tools by Youth

Understanding how young people use social media tools is important in suggesting how we can use such tools in teaching and learning in the school library. Literature on this topic focuses primarily on individuals from the age of twelve to eighteen (Ahn 2011). The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) restricts the use of social media websites by children up to age twelve (Davis 2010). As a result, little research or literature exists about the use of social media tools by children in elementary schools.

While little research has been done on how students use social media tools in school libraries, studies have been done on how youth are using social media inside and outside the classroom (Ahn 2011; Boyd 2008; Lenhart et al. 2010; Subrahmanyam et al. 2008; Valkenburg, Peter, and

Schouten 2006). In a broad analysis of how youth use new media, Mikzuko Ito et al. identified the most common forms of participation in social media and new media as "hanging out, messing around, and geeking out" (2010). Ito et al. referred to these actions as media ecologies, each consisting of different behaviors by youth for different activities. While defining and examining each of these media ecologies is beyond the scope of this paper, they are important in considering the types of instruction possible with currently available tools. The different ecologies show the diverse ways in which youth use social media tools; how young people are using them to engage with one another at varying levels; and the extent to which each ecology involves information literacy, technology literacy, and information-seeking behaviors, all of which could be effectively used in the classroom or school library to enhance learning opportunities.

Policies on Social Media Tools in School Districts

Though educators could use social media tools to engage students in teaching and learning, the majority of school districts block their use (Lemke et al. 2009). Some school districts allow for limited use of collaborative and instructive social media sites (i.e., blogs, wikis, interactive educational games, etc.), while others ban SNS completely. Many school districts heavily filter even limited use and allow students and employees to visit only preapproved online collaborative tools.

School districts often cite the safety of their students as justification for banning the use of social media tools for teaching and learning (Flowers and Rakes 2000). While school districts must protect students from bullying on the Internet and exposure to inappropriate material or dangerous persons, an all-inclusive ban may be overly cautious and unnecessary.

Another primary concern of school districts is their own liability in the event that students do something harmful to themselves or others while using the school district's network. To mitigate this risk and maintain compliance with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), school districts began adopting acceptable use policies (AUPs): formal policies regarding use of their networks and associated hardware and software.

In many instances, school districts do not keep their policies up to date with the many changes in technology (Culp, Honey, and Mandinach 2005; Quinn 2003). The policies use general language to address the legal issues of students using technology, and a cynical view would hold that "they serve as a basis for the school to avoid responsibility should harm or damages result from student or staff actions that violate these [policies]" (Dill and Anderson 2003, 337).

In an analysis of one hundred AUPs from the largest districts in the United States, June Ahn, Lauren K. Bivona, and Jeffrey DiScala (2011) found that only a minority of school districts mention social media tools in their policies, and many of those refer only to chat rooms, which are far less common today than in the past. With so many school districts blocking social media tools, but only a minority mentioning them in their most-public policy documents, it could be assumed that either no policies exist or that these policies may be formulated and expressed elsewhere, and are less readily available to students and employees.

Use of Social Media Tools in School Libraries

Most literature describing the use of social media tools in the school library has focused on the *possibilities* for use and not *actual* use. For example, Donna Baumbach (2009) provided a detailed how-to guide for school librarians describing possibilities for using Web 2.0 tools, but

did not describe any instances of application. Barbara Fiehn (2008; 2009) and Victor Rivero (2010) discussed only the potential opportunity for online collaboration and social interaction through the social media tools embedded in OPACs (online public access catalogs). Going beyond discussions of the most common tools such as wikis, blogs, microblogging tools, and social networking sites, others provided suggestions for using social bookmarking sites (Greenhow 2009), collaborative word processing, and online bibliography tools (Naslund and Giustini 2008), but few provided actual examples.

Laura Summers suggested that, "As with any new technology, the answers do not lie within the software or the virtual space, but rather within the human capital: the collective wisdom that emerges from collaborative work with our peers whether they are students or professional school librarians" (2009, 50). Laura Brooks stated that social networking sites should not be used simply as a means to an end: "We must design and assess with deeper content in mind, designing meaningful projects using social technologies" (2009, 60).

Methods

In this study, we addressed the following research question:

> *How do high school librarians perceive and respond to school district policies that prohibit the use of social media tools?*

We conducted a bounded case study of a school district in a mid-Atlantic state by collecting data through semi-structured interviews with four high school librarians and through examination of building- and district-level documents related to social media tools. The school district is large with more than ten high schools. The majority of the school district is suburban, with some smaller sections of urban and rural areas. The average expenditure per student is 20 percent higher than the national average.

The school district's official policy on the use of social media tools is a complete ban for both teachers and students. According to this ban, while using the school district's computers and Internet connection no student or teacher is to use social media tools in any way for teaching, learning, or personal purposes. The nuances of this ban on social media and the way it is presented are discussed in much more depth in the "Findings" section.

With little prior knowledge or research about school librarians' understanding of and reactions to social media policy in school districts, we designed this study to explore the policies, the perceptions, and the responses to these policies through each individual's story and triangulate the responses with evidence from written documents. Confining these stories to librarians within one district allowed for the comparison of each individual's perception and responses to the policy guidelines that applied to all of them. For purposes of anonymity, pseudonyms are used for each of the study participants. Names of their high schools or the school district are not provided in this paper.

The semi-structured interviews and collection of documents within the case study were appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study. With each interview, we were able to adjust questions to gain a better understanding of each individual's perceptions and responses to the policy ban. In the first interview, questions focused primarily on the use of social media tools in teaching. As more responses that related to the district's policies were collected, each successive participant was asked new questions about how the participant perceived the policy ban, how he or she interpreted the district's intentions in creating such policies, and how the policies influenced the participant's actions (or inaction) while teaching. Further interviews led to

questions about differences in school environment; possible infractions by school librarians, teachers, and students; and the different types of policy documentation.

Recruitment of Participants

To recruit participants for this study, we contacted the coordinator of library services for the school district. We indicated that we were seeking high school librarians to participate in interviews about their use of social media tools in their school libraries. We did not make any other specific requests to the coordinator. She asked for volunteers in the district and then provided us with a list of four high school librarians willing to participate.

Demographics of the Participants

At the time of the study Ms. Green had been a high school librarian for "some time." She has her master's degree in library science (MLS) and was certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). She reported that she makes little personal use of social media tools outside the workplace. Although she indicated that she used social media tools extensively in her work, she described her school as "somewhat adverse to technology with little actual support for technology integration."

Ms. Red had spent the last six years at her high school. She holds an MLS, and her experience was limited to her current position. Accustomed to using technology, she is a regular user of social media tools in both her professional and personal lives. She described her high school as receptive to the use of technology.

Mr. Blue had been a high school librarian for almost nine years and has an MLS. He is an avid user of social media tools in his personal life, particularly on his mobile phone and tablet computer. He described his high school as one in which all practices, including the integration of technology, were lauded if they were beneficial to student achievement.

Ms. Violet had been a high school English teacher for more than fifteen years before becoming a school librarian and had been in her current position for nearly ten years. She did not have an MLS, but a master's degree in instructional technology, which the district considered to be an equivalent degree. While describing herself as a frequent user of technology professionally, at the time of the study Ms. Violet did not use social media tools personally. She reported that all technology practices in her school were praised by the administration if they contributed to student learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant. Before the study, we developed a list of possible questions and a protocol. All interviews took place in person and, when permitted, were recorded. In the one instance in which the participant did not permit recording, we took extensive field notes documenting the interview.

At the end of each interview, participants provided documents related to the use of social media tools in their work or policies relating to technology and social media tools in their schools or district. Documents included e-mails between district-level and building-level employees; these e-mails described district policies, publicly available policies in student and employee handbooks, acceptable-use policies, professional development materials, school websites, and other documents.

Once all interviews were complete we transcribed the information and conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of both the interviews and the documents collected; an

iterative, grounded-theory approach was used (Charmaz 2006). We first developed a list of themes, then merged the codes, determined proto-themes, and re-coded for consistency.

Findings

Two major themes emerged from the data analysis. First, the high school librarians believed that the district's purpose in policy making centered on the safety of students and the liability of the district, thus confirming findings reported in the literature. Second, participants had differing perceptions about and responses to the school district's policies on the use of social media tools, depending upon whether the district presented the information in formal policy statements, in informal documentation, or through implication without any type of documentation at all. In the following sections, we first discuss the school district's policies on the use of social media tools. We then present findings on the school librarians' perceptions of those policies and their responses to the different types of policy presentations.

District's Formal Policy on Social Media Tools

The district's formal policy statement specifically banned the use of social media on the school district's network. This ban prohibited use of blogs, wikis, microblogs, video uploading sites, and all social networking sites. "On the school district's network" referred to the use of any Internet-capable hardware that used the school district's Internet service provider (ISP) to access the Internet. All activity on the school district's network could be monitored and filtered. "Off the school district's network" referred to all use of the Internet by means of a different ISP, including the use of mobile technology with cellular access, through which the school district could not monitor or filter activity.

District's Informal and Implied Policies on Social Media Tools

The school district did not define its policies as explicitly on the use of social media tools when employees and students were off the district's network. Some aspects of off-network use were addressed by district-level staff as informal policies communicated through e-mail correspondence with all employees in the district; however, off-network use was not addressed in any official, publicly available documents. Informal policy on this off-network use included a ban on the creation of pages or profiles on social networking sites, such as Twitter or Facebook, in which a person affiliated with the school district might attempt to represent a school, school group, or school department (e.g., the history department or the school library).

Other off-network use of social media tools discouraged by the school district included informal or nonprofessional interaction between students and faculty or staff on SNSs. That such use was inappropriate was implied through interactions and discussions between district administrative staff and the school librarians and was never addressed in any written policy that the participants provided.

Perceptions of the Formal Policy

The perceptions of the school librarians regarding the school district's intentions in enacting and maintaining a complete ban on the use of social media tools on the district's network centered around two principles: student safety and district liability.

The consensus of the participants was that the rationale for banning social media was to ensure student safety. Ms. Red stated that access was not allowed because the district was cautious:

> I think that overall, in our district, the wheels move slowly, and I think they're very cautious…. I think that they're looking at the worst case scenario and they want to make sure they can address the worst case scenario before they open it up for use….I don't think they're trying to keep students from using [social media tools]. I think they recognize the students are using this technology. . .

Ms. Violet had a similar understanding of the school district's reasoning for student safety, but attributed that reasoning to other factors. "I understand the precautions being taken…. It's a conservative [school district] and [school librarians] don't have a role in decision-making." She emphatically stated that she understands "why they don't open all the doors" and that problems might result.

Mr. Blue was not at all frustrated by the complete ban on social media tools, and his explanation showed an understanding and acceptance of why the school district took such action:

> Some interactions on social media are good. Some are negative in a school setting, and, therefore, they need different types of monitoring…. I've seen some very negative interactions using social media between students. To read about it is one thing, but because I've seen the ugly side of it, I'd probably be the biggest to advocate against it if there weren't some type of heavy monitoring along with the actual instruction.

Student safety, however, was not perceived as the only factor in understanding the district's policy. The school district's liability in the event of a harmful or dangerous interaction while using social media was viewed as another major reason for the complete ban. While the other school librarians expressed a general acceptance of student safety as the district's primary concern, Ms. Green viewed this issue differently. She agreed that students should be protected, but believed the district's intentions were more about protecting itself than the students:

> I think the school district is very concerned about safety. They are so concerned about student safety, but they're not really doing anything about it. They are more concerned about their own liability. Kids are out there doing things on these social networking sites that aren't smart. I believe that these kids are not getting the kind of instruction they need. They're not being taught the dangers of what they're doing. They're making bad decisions. We're just trying to block it and pretend it doesn't happen…. We're just so afraid of liability so we're blocking everything.

Ms. Green's thoughts on the school district taking a somewhat extreme stance in protecting itself may not be completely unfounded. For example, when a user (on or off the school district's network) clicks on a link from a website housed on the school district's server to a webpage located elsewhere the following message pops up:

> The link you have just selected is an independently managed World Wide Web site and is not affiliated with [the school district]. While every effort has been made to evaluate the sites to which we link, we cannot control the content that may appear on these sites or on related links. Please be advised that you are leaving the official [school district's] web site and material found on these associated links [is] not approved or sanctioned by the school system.

Shortly before this study was conducted, Wikipedia was added to the list of resources blocked by the school district. This decision was sufficiently overt that each school librarian mentioned it without being asked. Ms. Red explained her understanding of the situation in the following way:

> Even Wikipedia is blocked. Last year there was a student at an elementary school who apparently got into something on Wikipedia that was apparently quite raunchy…. [Other

educators] say Wikipedia is evil. That's not the way I feel. It's the way you use technology and what you use it for. I lost a teaching moment. Wikipedia is a great place to get your brain around something that you have no idea about…. [To] use it as a source to get to other sources. So now, I have hundreds of students who come through my library who won't get that little teaching lesson, which made me upset. But there's nothing I can do about it.

Mr. Blue told an almost identical story in describing the loss of Wikipedia as a resource for students. He regretted not having access to such a broad resource that, while imperfect, provided valuable teaching moments regarding citation of information, validity of source material, and the importance of verifying information with multiple sources.

While the school district unilaterally blocked websites such as Wikipedia and other similar tools, staff can get websites unblocked for instructional use by going through a request process. Ms. Violet mentioned this process after discussing Wikipedia and described how one submitted a request to the school district's Department of Instructional Technology to have the filter dropped for a specific site. Ms. Green described this process with great frustration. "They block every social media you can think of…Twitter, Facebook, wikis, blogs. I wanted to do journals with my kids, (but) there was nothing they could unblock—I asked."

Though the school librarians all expressed their belief that protecting students was important, the librarians were frustrated because they were not allowed to teach using certain tools. Overall, however, the school librarians' understandings of the district's rationale for its formal policy were similar, and they held a shared understanding that its focus was on student safety and district liability.

Responses to Formal, Informal, and Implied Policies

The participants responded to the school district's policies differently depending on how the district presented the policy and whether the policy referred to unacceptable uses on or off the school district's network. In the most explicit and formal presentation of policy, the four school librarians perceived the policy in the same way: understanding that it required strict adherence. However, as the school district presented policies less clearly, the responses by the librarians began to differ. Table 1 shows the relationships among the different types of policy presentations, the practices described in each policy, and the school librarians' perceptions and responses.

Table 1: School district policy presentation types with corresponding practices, perceptions, and responses.

Policy Type	Presentation Examples	Practices Banned	Perceptions	Responses
Formal	Employee handbooks, acceptable use policies (AUPs)	Use of social media on the district's network	Interpreted similarly and viewed as clearly stated	All policies followed correctly
Informal	Emails from district staff	Representing the school or district using social media off the district's network	Interpreted somewhat differently, often based on school	Assisted students in using social media for school activities off the district's network
Implied	Discussions in staff meetings, prof. development seminars	Personal interaction using social media off the district's network	Highly varied interpretations	Communicated with students using social media off the district's network

Responses to Formal Policy

The policy regarding the use of social media tools on the school's network was formalized; it was board-approved and in writing for both staff and students. The *Employee Ethics Handbook* contained a section on "Responsible Use of Computers and Electronic Communication Tools and System." Under a list of *unacceptable* uses, one item noted, "Student and teacher use of Social Networking sites (e.g., MySpace.com), unapproved blogging sites, Wikis, Forums, etc. [sic]." Additionally, "Non-Instructional live streaming (radio, music sites, videos, video clips, TV) is not permitted in the school or office due to bandwidth constraints." In a similar manner, the *Student Handbook* included the following information under *unacceptable* uses: "Use of electronic, including Web 2.0, resources to access social networking sites such as Facebook, or to conduct cyber-bullying."

The school librarians had no misunderstanding of this specific policy regarding the use of social media tools on the school district's network. The participants all understood the policy to mean that no one should use social media tools in any form during teaching and learning activities. Any attempt to do so would lead to some actionable consequence by the school district. Not one of the participants mentioned any attempt to countermand this policy, although they indicated that they had seen their students make many attempts.

Responses to Informal Policy

Although the formal policy referred only to the use of social media on the school district's network, it was Ms. Green's understanding that employees were not to create pages that

officially represented a district entity or group even if it were housed off the school district's network. When asked why she had this understanding, she stated the policy came from "everywhere": the school library district coordinator's office, the Department of Instructional Technology, and the school board. However, she could not identify an actual source for this policy. Such behavior not addressed in official documentation in the school district is referred to as *informal* policy.

Ms. Red and Ms. Violet referenced an e-mail sent from the school district's public information officer to all employees; the e-mail dealt with recent natural disasters, including problems with electricity and other utilities, that severely affected regular means of communication within the school district's community. In an effort to make sure that all community members received official information, the school district created a Facebook page to represent the school district. Since this action went against the policy of the school district regarding social media sites, the district's public information officer explained the reasoning and how this action affected future policy:

> We are well aware of the impact social media sites have had on communication in recent years. While they bring with them myriad logistical issues and some problems, they are valuable tools to get information to large numbers of people very quickly…

> Throughout the weekend, Facebook became a primary method for some people to obtain information about the status of schools. Many of those posted that they had no other way (short of mainstream media, I suppose) of getting the information and were able to tap into Facebook through their cell phones….

> The page will be used primarily as a one-way means for system-wide, not school-specific, information…. We will not routinely engage in dialogue with those who may comment….

> At this time, [the school district] will not sanction any other Facebook pages. In other words, this is not an invitation or license for schools or departments to set up a Facebook page. They simply should not do so.

> At this point, there is no intention to alter the filtering process to allow Facebook access on [school district] computers.

Ms. Red's perception of this policy was that it was definitive. Teachers, librarians, and schools (she did not mention students or student groups) were not to have Facebook pages or a presence on other social media websites that represented the creators as members of the school district. This policy seemed to be "official" to her; however, she admitted that she could find documentation only in an e-mail message.

Although the school librarians refrained from representing themselves or their programs in any official capacity on social media websites, they knew—and sometimes encouraged—students to do quite the opposite. Ms. Red described a number of student organizations that had created unofficial profiles and pages for student groups, such as the high school's drama club, on social media sites. She did not participate in this activity as she was not directly involved with any student groups, but she was aware of the existence of these profiles and pages.

In seeming opposition to the informal policy, Mr. Blue was involved with an environmental club at his high school and had strongly encouraged the club to start a Facebook page. In their meetings at school he discussed with students the topic of creating a page, even though they were unable to access it by means of the school district's network.

Ms. Green had had a similar experience with her students. She was the faculty appointee for the student group that ran the school's morning announcement program on closed-circuit television. She said that the students conducted their organization of the program almost entirely through Facebook without her. They created a Facebook group on their own, and most communication that did not happen in person happened in the Facebook group.

Responses to Implied Policies

Perhaps the greatest differences regarding the use of social media tools was how employees were expected to conduct themselves on a more personal level and not necessarily as an official representative of the district. An employee "friending" a student on Facebook or joining a student-created group were cited as examples of this behavior. We refer to policies about such behavior as *implied* policies, because no official or unofficial public documents provided by any of the participants gave any indication of a written policy regulating such behavior. Participants' responses varied as to what the district expected of them in such situations.

Ms. Green believed district policy dictated that no employee should *ever* participate with students on a social media website outside of school. "I have been instructed, 'Do not become friends with anyone on Facebook. Do not use Facebook. Stay away from Facebook.'" She stated that these instructions came not from official documentation, but in a professional development seminar with a trainer from the Department of Instructional Technology. Ms. Green did have a Facebook profile, and students tried to "friend" her, but she never accepted their requests.

In some cases, the individual school building environments did determine how students and faculty responded to this implied policy. During the same natural disaster that caused the school district to create a Facebook page, teachers at Ms. Violet's school kept in touch with students in their classes via Facebook. When regular classes resumed, the administration applauded those teachers as exemplary in attempting to stay in touch with their students. Ms. Violet regarded this activity by teachers in her school as inappropriate and the administration's recognition as cavalier. She perceived such actions to be against school district policy and, therefore, they should not have been encouraged. She herself did not participate in any such activity.

Mr. Blue's perception and response to the implied policy on what the district allowed employees to do off the school district's network was entirely different from the others:

> I am able to interact with the students online. I have one or two males that I currently coach or mentor in my program. Because they're all over the school doing different things, I can choose to interact with one or two and that way the interactions kind of filter out, instead of me talking to fifty or sixty students. The president of the environmental club is in the library daily…. So, usually, I communicate with him and vice versa through [many] different ways…. I do this in person, or I will contact him on Facebook.

Mr. Blue seemed to be acting in a way that was contrary to the school district's implied policy on interaction with students on social media sites off the school's network. When asked further questions about district policy on using social media sites off-network, he gave no indication of being aware of a policy—formal, informal, or implied—that might have prohibited him from interacting with students. Like Ms. Violet, Mr. Blue mentioned that other teachers in his high school had been in frequent contact with students via Facebook and Twitter. In a specific instance, one teacher used Facebook during summer school and "was able to reach more students than the principal" when all-school broadcasts were necessary. He stated that his school commended such an action:

> Anything that is conducive to student learning is encouraged. If it's going to make [our high school] better, then do it. Once [the administration] is in-the-know and has an understanding of what's being done, then people get the thumbs up and are told to continue.

Whether due to influence from inside his own school or an ignorance of the school district's policy on interaction with students off the network, Mr. Blue and others may have been acting in a way the district would not condone. However, if an incident were to occur, it was unclear what the consequences might have been.

Discussion

This study took a first look at high school librarians' perceptions and their contradictory responses to their school district's policies on limiting use of social media tools. Their understanding of the policies was most similar when the school district formalized the policies in official documentation. When the school district used informal means of communicating policies, the school librarians perceived and responded to the policies more loosely and observed others in their schools doing the same. When the school district only implied the policies and did not explicitly present them in writing, the school librarians interpreted this direction in different ways, leading some to take actions that school district administrators might have considered inappropriate.

Beyond the intentions behind the school district's policies, the school librarians had no misunderstanding about the formal, written policies on the use of social media tools on the district's network. Each individual clearly understood that going around the filters or circumnavigating the system was unacceptable and that the district would meet that action with consequences. With clearly set policies provided to all employees and students, whether agreeable or not, there was little room for confusion.

As the school district's policies became less explicit and documentation was lacking, the interpretation of policies by the school librarians became more varied. For example, formal school district policy did not describe what actions might be taken against Mr. Blue or his students if some incident that reflected badly on the school or harmed a student were to occur because of the environmental club's Facebook page. The club was an official group of the school, but the district did not sanction the members' use of social media to communicate within the group or to publicize the group off the school's network. However, without a formally expressed policy, such as the one banning use of social media tools *on* the school's network, how were Mr. Blue and his students to know what was acceptable and what was not?

These differences in interpretation became even more prevalent when the school district *implied* policies, as in the example of the policy on how students and employees should or should not interact with one another on a personal level off the school district's network. While Mr. Blue and other teachers in the district actively engaged with students on social media websites off-network, the other school librarians understood these actions to be either strictly prohibited or, at least, unwise. Nevertheless, none of the participants expressed any understanding of the consequences of such an incident if it caught the school district's attention.

There was some evidence that Mr. Blue and the teachers in his high school were taking advantage of a valuable opportunity to engage students. In a cooperative learning experience, students may not want to think of their teachers or school librarians as instructors, but rather as individuals with whom they could work as cooperative partners in learning. Some early studies have suggested that when an educator shares personal information online, it has a positive impact

on how students view that individual. By making themselves more accessible and more personal, teachers lend some credibility to students' perspective on their learning experience (Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds 2007).

In this study, it was clear that the district's policies were not reflective of the current use of technology. The school district could not control the use of social media tools on mobile devices on school property, and the district would have to rely on outside reporting if it wished to limit interaction between students and employees off-network. As many social media tools do not permit public monitoring if the user specifies a particular privacy level, school district officials would have no way to detect such interaction.

Even though the district policies were not reflective of technology, and some of the school librarians were acting against district policies—purposefully or ignorantly—not a single librarian interviewed indicated that he or she was doing anything to change the policies in the school district. The school librarians mostly understand that the district was concerned with the safety of students or the liability of the school district, and indicated that the policy sometimes impeded instruction. However, they mentioned almost nothing about working to shift the school district's policies.

Conclusion

This school district's policies on banning social media were unilateral and prohibited access to tools that students and their instructors wished to use. While the school librarians in the study understood the school district's reasoning for such policies to protect both the students and the school district, such broadly scoped policies had the consequence of limiting valuable, safe opportunities for teaching and learning.

The presentation of such policies was also confusing to both students and faculty. In its most formal presentation of policies, little or no ambiguity existed, and the school librarians understood the policy as intended—no allowances would be made for the use of social media on the school district's network. However, as the district presented policies more informally or only by implication, the perceptions and corresponding actions of school librarians differed.

It must be acknowledged that the study used a convenience sample and that the school librarians in these four high schools were not necessarily representative of other high school librarians. The school district, while average in many ways, is not generalizable to other districts. This study examined policy only in a public school district in a largely suburban area. As described by Ms. Violet, the school district also had a particularly conservative culture.

Another limitation of the study was that of limited triangulation. The "converging lines of inquiry" that Robert K. Yin has discussed (2009) were present in this case study as documentation and interviews. However, with no observation of the participants or artifacts of their work, such triangulation was somewhat limited.

Future Research

The findings of this exploratory study point to two phenomena that require further research:

1. What are school librarians doing to compensate for the policy restrictions regarding social media, and
2. What do they plan to do, if anything, about changing the policies in the future?

School district policies limiting use of social media tools will eventually have to change to allow school librarians and other educators to complete their work and to instruct students. However, who will change the policies? Though she wanted to use Wikipedia in instruction, Ms. Red stated that "there's nothing we can do" to change the policy.

If students need these skills and we should be teaching them in schools, then how will we enact such changes in policy to allow that instruction? Rather than continue with policies that limit useful tools and that can cause school librarians and others to use technology less, stakeholders might call for policies that are more inclusive of social media.

Districts and administrators may wish to consider policies that allow them to monitor and filter but also support incorporation of socially integrated technologies into teaching and learning both on and off the school district's network. Based upon the findings from this limited study, it was evident that students were eager to use social media tools to engage with others on topics they enjoyed. It may be appropriate for school librarians to take a leadership role in updating district policies to enable students to do so.

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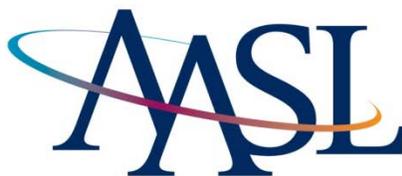
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