# (In)Visible Me? An Empirical Study of Engineering Librarian Online Profiles

**Mr. Michael J White, Queen's University**

# (In)Visible Me? An Empirical Study of Engineering Librarian Online Profiles

## 1. Introduction

The transition of information from print to digital formats over the last two decades has had a major impact on academic libraries and librarians. As the volume of online information has grown, the perceived value of the physical library has changed. This is especially true among engineering and science libraries, many of which have seen steady (and sometimes sharp) declines in user visits, circulation and reference transactions. In recent years a number of engineering libraries have downsized, merged or closed in response to budgetary constraints, technological changes, and shifts in the research needs and habits of library users. As a result of these changes, academic librarians today have fewer opportunities to interact with faculty colleagues and students. Librarians are challenged to find new ways to connect with users. One way librarians can enhance their visibility and professional status is by creating online profiles on library and university websites.

Online profiles are also important as a means to facilitate networking within institutions and professional societies, disseminating research and best practices, identifying expertise, recruiting new members to professional societies and boards, and connecting with mentors.

The purpose of this study is to explore the current development, characteristics and positioning of online engineering librarian profiles. Profiles of members of the Engineering Librarians Division (ELD) of the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) were compiled and analyzed by element, currency and platform. Examples of profile elements include personal photo, contact information, education, career biography, title and rank, subject expertise, research interests, video recordings, grants and awards, publications, presentations, teaching, service, and professional affiliations.

This study will also examine, among other things, whether there are substantial similarities or differences in the profiles of faculty-status and non-faculty status librarians. Analyzing the content and positioning of librarian profiles is the first step in developing a set of best practice guidelines for engineering librarian profiles.

Specific questions explored in this study include:

- How common are online profiles among engineering librarians who are members of ELD?
- What are the common platforms for hosting online profiles?
- Is there a difference in content between profiles hosted on different platforms?
- What types of personal content are included in engineering librarian profiles?
- Is there a difference between profiles of librarians with faculty status and librarians without faculty status?

## 2. Literature Review

Academic librarians in the mid-1990s were quick to recognize the web's potential to serve as a vehicle for communicating information about their professional roles and responsibilities. In early 1996, a time when libraries were just beginning to develop their websites, Day and Armstrong reported[1] on the use of web-based librarian profiles as part of a pilot project at Illinois State University to teach faculty about the internet and generally improve communication and collaboration between librarians and faculty. The librarian profiles described included a photo of the liaison librarian, a description of his or her liaison and collection development responsibilities, office hours, contact information, and an e-mail link. It should be noted that this became the standard template for librarian online profiles that persists to this day.

Academic librarians may have embraced online profiles much earlier and faster than faculty. At least two studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s found that few faculty had personal web pages[3-4]. However, by the mid-2000s faculty profiles had become ubiquitous.[5]

In recent years, the importance of librarian profiles as a means of enhancing the visibility of librarians has increased due to changes in technology and library users' perceptions. In 2011, Myhill reported on how a group of academic liaison librarians at the University of Bedfordshire (UK) use profiles to enhance their visibility and showcase their value and expertise to the campus community.[2]

Librarian online profiles are also important as a means of communicating the status of librarians as academic professionals. Pressley and Gilbertson describe how librarians at Wake Forest University used librarian profiles on the library website to showcase their research, publications and service.[6]

Recent studies have explored how librarians and faculty construct online identities through profiles. Hyland's 2012 study noted the trend toward corporate-style conformity and branding in academic faculty profiles.[7] In 2013, Anderson and Still examined and compared the types of images in librarian profiles on LibGuides and social networks.[8]

## 3. Methodology

The online profiles of engineering librarians reviewed in this study were selected from among ELD members who were included in the *ELD Membership Directory* dated July 2013.[9] Since only profiles of active engineering librarians were of interest to the author, some ELD members were excluded. These included retired members, engineering faculty and instructors, vendor and publisher employees, librarians without any apparent engineering liaison responsibilities, senior library administrators, and library technicians. Of the approximately 240 ELD members listed in the directory, 162 met the criteria and were selected for review.

The data for this study was collected during the first two weeks of November 2013. The online profile of each librarian was located by going to the library homepage and navigating to a list of subject librarians or library employee directory. In most cases the process was very straightforward. However, the author encountered some library websites that were designed in a way that made it challenging to locate individual librarian profiles, even when using the local site search or A-Z index. In a few cases the only information present consisted of a list of library staff names and contact information. In the end, online profiles were located for 147 (91 percent) of the 162 engineering librarians selected from the *ELD Membership Directory*.

In a number of cases more than one online profile was located for a librarian, for example a LibGuides profile and a web-based profile. In these instances the profile containing the most detailed professional information about the librarian was selected for review.

The data contained in each online profile retrieved was analyzed and categorized into the following types in a spreadsheet. These types were selected in part based on previous work by Bukova.[10]

- Profile platform: Web, LibGuides, Faculty Profile System, Staff Directory
- Library type: Engineering, Engineering & Science, Engineering & Other, Main Library
- Sex of librarian
- Personal image (photo, etc.)
- Personal video
- Education
- Career history
- CV or resume link
- Academic rank
- Position title
- Liaison librarian role
- Other role (administrator, specialist, etc.)
- Contact information (phone, e-mail, office)
- Office hours
- Professional affiliations
- Research interests
- Publications/presentations
- Awards
- Grants
- Service (library or university committee, etc.)
- Link to library website
- Links to course/subject guides
- Links to personal blog or website
- Links to social networks

**4. Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows the librarian and library demographics for the profiles retrieved. In total, 147 librarian profiles from 116 universities (108 American, 8 Canadian) were reviewed. The majority of online profiles were found to be hosted on library websites (43 percent) and LibGuides (57 percent). Launched in 2007, LibGuides has become an increasingly popular content management system for publishing library subject guides and other information.

The ratio of male to female librarian profiles across all platforms was 31 percent to 69 percent. Half of the profiles examined were from engineering librarians who work in a main library, while 21 percent worked in an engineering library and 25 percent were affiliated with an engineering and science library. Only 3 percent of the profiles were from librarians working in a library that served engineering and non-engineering/science disciplines. LibGuides appeared to be slightly more popular among librarians affiliated with a main library while web-based profiles were more common for librarians working in an engineering library.

**Table 1. Librarian and Library Demographics**

| Platform | Total | Male (%) | Female (%) | Eng. library (%) | Eng. & science (%) | Eng. & other (%) | Main library (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Web | 61 | 31 | 69 | 26 | 25 | 3 | 44 |
| LibGuides | 81 | 31 | 69 | 17 | 26 | 1 | 56 |
| Faculty profile | 1 | 0 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Directory-type | 4 | 25 | 75 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 |
| Total | 147 | 31 | 69 | 22 | 25 | 3 | 50 |

Table 2 shows the frequency of contact information and links. Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming number (99 percent) of librarian profiles contained contact information (e-mail, phone number, and/or office location). This suggests that one of the main purposes of maintaining an online profile is to facilitate contact between librarians and library users. Slightly less than 15 percent of the profiles contained information about librarian office hours and were more likely to be present in a LibGuides profile. Although many librarians construct personal and professional identifies in social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, only a handful of profiles contained links to these social networks. Fewer than four percent of profiles included links to personal websites and blogs. Only one in 20 profiles had a direct link to the librarian's library embedded within the profile. Of course, links to the library and university were most always present outside of the profile space in the website banner or navigation menu.

**Table 2. Contact Information and Network Links**

| Platform | Total | Contact info (%) | Office hours (%) | Link to library website (%) | Link to personal blog/website | Link to social network (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Web | 61 | 98 | 7 | 7 | 3 | 0 |
| LibGuides | 81 | 99 | 17 | 9 | 5 | 9 |
| Fac. profile | 1 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Directory | 4 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 147 | 99 | 15 | 5 | 3 | 5 |

Tables 3a and 3b show the frequency of personal images and multimedia within profiles.

**Table 3a. Images & Multimedia by Sex**

| | Total | Formal portrait (%) | Casual portrait (%) | No image (%) | Building image (%) | Other image (%) | Avatar (%) | Video (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 45 | 33 | 42 | 13 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| Female | 102 | 32 | 47 | 13 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 147 | 33 | 46 | 14 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 |

**Table 3b. Images & Multimedia by Platform**

| Platform | Total | Formal portrait (%) | Casual portrait (%) | No image (%) | Building image (%) | Other image (%) | Avatar (%) | Video (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Web | 61 | 26 | 43 | 25 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| LibGuides | 81 | 36 | 48 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| Fac. profile | 1 | 0 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Directory | 4 | 75 | 25 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 147 | 33 | 46 | 14 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 |

Personal photographs and images were a common feature in engineering librarian profiles, with 86 percent displaying at least one. This is consistent with other recent studies of faculty and librarian profiles. Anderson and Still[8] found in 2013 that 84 percent of LibGuides librarian profiles contained an image. In 2012 Hyland[7] reported that 98 percent of faculty homepages in a selected group had images.

One third (33 percent) of the images in the profiles reviewed could be described as high-quality formal portraits featuring the librarian dressed in professional attire posed in front of a non-descript background. Nearly half of the photographs (47 percent) were casual portraits depicting the librarian in a variety of settings such as a library interior, office, outdoors, etc.; styles of dress including professional, casual, out door, etc.; and engaged in professional or leisure activities. Several photographs included animals, usually a dog or cat. A handful of profiles contained photographs of buildings, objects, and other images. Although libraries are increasingly using videos to market services and collections, only two librarian profiles had embedded personal videos. Photographs were almost always located in the upper left-hand corner of the profile.

There appeared to be little difference between men and women in terms of the presence of images. Images of buildings appeared four times more often in profiles of male librarians than in female librarian profiles. Profiles of female librarians had a slightly higher frequency of other types of images such as landscapes, artworks, etc.

Table 4 shows librarian credentials and expertise displayed in profiles. The overwhelming majority of web profiles included the librarian's academic rank and/or position title. However, only 61 percent of LibGuides profiles contained this information. Overall, nearly one quarter of

librarian profiles in this study lacked rank and title information. Education information was present in only 4 percent of LibGuides profiles and 61 percent of web profiles, suggesting that most libraries have not customized their LibGuides templates to include this important information. Career history was available in only 12 percent of profiles; 25 percent of web-based profiles contained a brief summary of the librarian's career while only 2 percent of profiles on LibGuides provide a career history. Only three profiles (2 percent) contained links to full CVs or resumes.

**Table 4. Librarian Credentials by Platform**

| Platform | Total | Rank/ title (%) | Liaison role (%) | Educ. (%) | Career history (%) | CV (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Web | 61 | 95 | 77 | 61 | 25 | 2 |
| LibGuides | 81 | 62 | 88 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| Fac. profile | 1 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| Directory | 4 | 75 | 50 | 25 | 25 | 0 |
| Total | 147 | 76 | 82 | 29 | 12 | 2 |

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of profiles (82 percent) examined in this study indicated that the librarian's primary role was engineering subject liaison or specialist. A handful of profiles (16 percent) indicated that the librarian served in one or more additional roles. Examples of other non-engineering liaison roles included administrator (head librarian or library director), archivist, coordinator (instruction, collections, etc.), data curation librarian, electronic resources management librarian, and web administrator. Administrator was the most common type of non-liaison role, appearing in 17 profiles (12 percent). This is not surprising given the number of ELD members who work in branch engineering libraries with small staffs.

Table 5a and 5b display activities by rank/position title and profile platform.

**Table 5a. Activities by Academic Rank and Position Title**

| | Total | Aff. (%) | Res. (%) | Pubs. (%) | Guides (%) | Grants (%) | Awards (%) | Service (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | 19 | 21 | 47 | 74 | 37 | 11 | 5 | 37 |
| Title | 93 | 24 | 13 | 18 | 75 | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| Neither | 35 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 80 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 147 | 18 | 14 | 21 | 71 | 1 | 2 | 13 |

**Table 5b. Activities by Profile Platform**

| | Total | Aff. (%) | Res. (%) | Pubs. (%) | Guides (%) | Grants (%) | Awards (%) | Service (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Web | 61 | 41 | 31 | 48 | 39 | 3 | 5 | 30 |
| LibGuides | 81 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 96 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fac. profile | 1 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| Directory | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 50 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 147 | 18 | 14 | 21 | 71 | 1 | 2 | 13 |

Overall, 18 percent of profiles included professional affiliations. Nearly 41 percent of web-based profiles contained professional affiliations while fewer than two percent of profiles on LibGuides did so. Web-based profiles also were much more likely to contain references to librarians' research interests, publications and presentations. Only a handful of web-based librarian profiles provided information about grants and awards. No LibGuides profiles contained information about grants, awards, or service.

Of the 19 profiles that contained an academic rank, nearly one third (31 percent) mentioned research interests and nearly half (48 percent) provided a list of publications and presentations. This may be explained by the fact that librarians with academic rank typically have faculty status or the equivalent and are expected to be active in research and publishing. Librarian profiles displaying only a position title were slightly more likely to include professional affiliations (24 percent) but were far less likely to mention research interests and publications (13 percent). A handful of profiles on LibGuides had been modified to include affiliations, research interests, and publications. Nearly one quarter of profiles (24 percent) displayed no rank or title. Of these, only 3 percent listed professional affiliations and none listed research interests, publications, grants, awards, or service.

Virtually all librarian profiles hosted on LibGuides contained links to subject and course guides authored by the librarian. This is not surprising given that LibGuides is a content management system designed specifically to facilitate the creation and management of library guides. Less than 40 percent of web-hosted profiles contained links to library guides.

## 5. Conclusions and Further Research

This explorative study of online profiles of active engineering librarian who are members of ELD found that more than 90 percent maintained a profile. Most profiles were hosted on either a library website or LibGuides, with librarians affiliated with a branch engineering library preferring the former while librarians working in a main library preferring the latter. Contact information was nearly ubiquitous across all profile platforms. However, profiles on LibGuides were more likely to include office hours and links to other social networks. This is perhaps due to the fact that the LibGuides template encourages librarians to include this information in their profiles.

Web-hosted librarian profiles were more likely than LibGuides profiles to include credential information such as the librarians' rank and position, education and career history. It is possible that librarians have more control over web-based profiles and thus are able to include these elements. Libraries that use LibGuides may not have customized the profile template to include librarian credentials. Given the high value that academic professionals place on rank and

credentials, it is surprising that only 76 percent of profiles examined in this study included the librarians' rank and or position title and that less than one third included educational background information. Among profiles hosted on LibGuides, only 62 percent included rank and/or title and only 4 percent included education. Librarians would do well to include this information in their profiles and a link to their full CV.

There appears to be a correlation between faculty status (and the equivalent) and the presence of research and publication activities in online librarian profiles. Librarians with an academic rank were much more likely to list their research interests and publications in their online profiles. Web-based profiles were also much more likely to include this information compared with LibGuides profiles.

Librarian research and scholarship should be disseminated as widely as possible. Librarians should include a least their most recent publications in their online profiles and a link to their full bibliography. Promoting librarian research via an online profile is also a good way to advertise expertise. For example, a librarian who has published widely on citation analysis may be invited by faculty to collaborate on a departmental citation analysis project. Given the increasing popularity of LibGuides, it would be advisable for those libraries that use LibGuides to customize the standard profile template to include information such as research interests, publications, service, and awards.

There are a number of questions raised in this study, but not addressed, that require further investigation. For example, how much time do librarians invest in developing and managing their online profiles? Library budget and staffing constraints of recent years may mean that librarians simply do not have the time to fully develop their online identities. Do library administrators value librarian online profiles? Online profiles may not align with user-centered design principles currently in vogue in library website and space design. Do librarians value online profiles as networking and professional development tools and for evaluating potential employment opportunities? Finally, what do faculty and students think about librarian profiles?

## 6. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

## 7. References

[1] P. A. Day and K. L. Armstrong, "Librarians, faculty, and the Internet: Developing a new information partnership". *Computers in Libraries, 16(5),* 1996, pp. 56-58.

[2] J. Myhill, "'I didn't know you did that' facing the challenge by being visible". *Impact: Journal of the Career Development Group, 14(2),* 2011, pp. 46-51.

[3] R. H. Bee, "A comparison between college faculty users and non-users of an academic home page." *College Student Journal, 34,* 2000, pp. 271-280.

[4] D. Palmiter and D. Renjilian, “Improving your psychology faculty home page: Results of a student-faculty online survey”. *Teaching of Psychology, 30(2),* 2003, pp. 163-166.

[5] K. Dumont and W. Frindte, “Content analysis of the homepages of academic psychologists”. *Computers in Human Behavior, 21*, 2005, pp. 73-83.

[6] L. Pressley and K. Gilbertson, “Librarians as experts: Using the web to assert our value”. *Computers in Libraries, 31(4),* 2011, pp. 19-23.

[7] K. Hyland, “Individuality or conformity? Identity in personal and university academic homepages”, *Computer and Composition, 29*, 2012, pp. 309-322.

[8] K. Anderson and J. Still, “Librarians’ use of images on LibGuides and other social media platforms”. *Journal of Web Librarianship, 7*, 2013, pp. 272-291.

[9] B. Ewen (Ed.), *ELD Directory of Members, July 2013.* Engineering Libraries Division, American Society for Engineering Education, 2013.

[10] H. Bukova, “Scientists online: A framework for the analysis of Internet profiles”. *First Monday, 16(10),* 2011, http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3584