

# Social Libraries: The Next Generation of Knowledge Management

IT'S CLEAR THAT A NEW CLASS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY IS NEEDED—ONE THAT USES SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES TO TAP INTO AN ORGANIZATION'S COLLECTIVE WISDOM. SOCIAL LIBRARIES ARE DESIGNED TO DO THIS

BY PHILLIP GREEN

It's no secret that the world of special libraries is changing and with it, the role of the librarian. What remains unclear is what form the library of the future will take, and which tools librarians and information resource professionals will be using to best achieve their organization's objectives.

Librarians today are dealing with much more than physical artifacts such as books and documents. They have to create environments that facilitate search and discovery and enable communities to manage and act on all manner of content. This includes digital documents, e-books, photographs, digital images, videos and, increasingly, social information.

Their charge is to share and create knowledge that improves productivity and fosters deeper collaboration throughout an organization. To do this, many are looking to social media. Clearly, social media is lead-

ing the world to a new age, much as the Internet has over the past 15 years. Social media is helping people link content, knowledge and collective input to make communities—including corporate communities—more effective, agile and cohesive. For librarians, this shift is more than a sequential evolution of the library; rather, it's a fundamentally new way of thinking about knowledge management.

Broadly speaking, this next generation of knowledge management can be called the "social knowledge network." And in the universe of library applications, it's become commonly known as "the social library."

Social libraries combine traditional library automation and workflow with collections of diverse content and vetted knowledge. These are then fused with the "wisdom of the community," or the network. The result is "social knowledge."

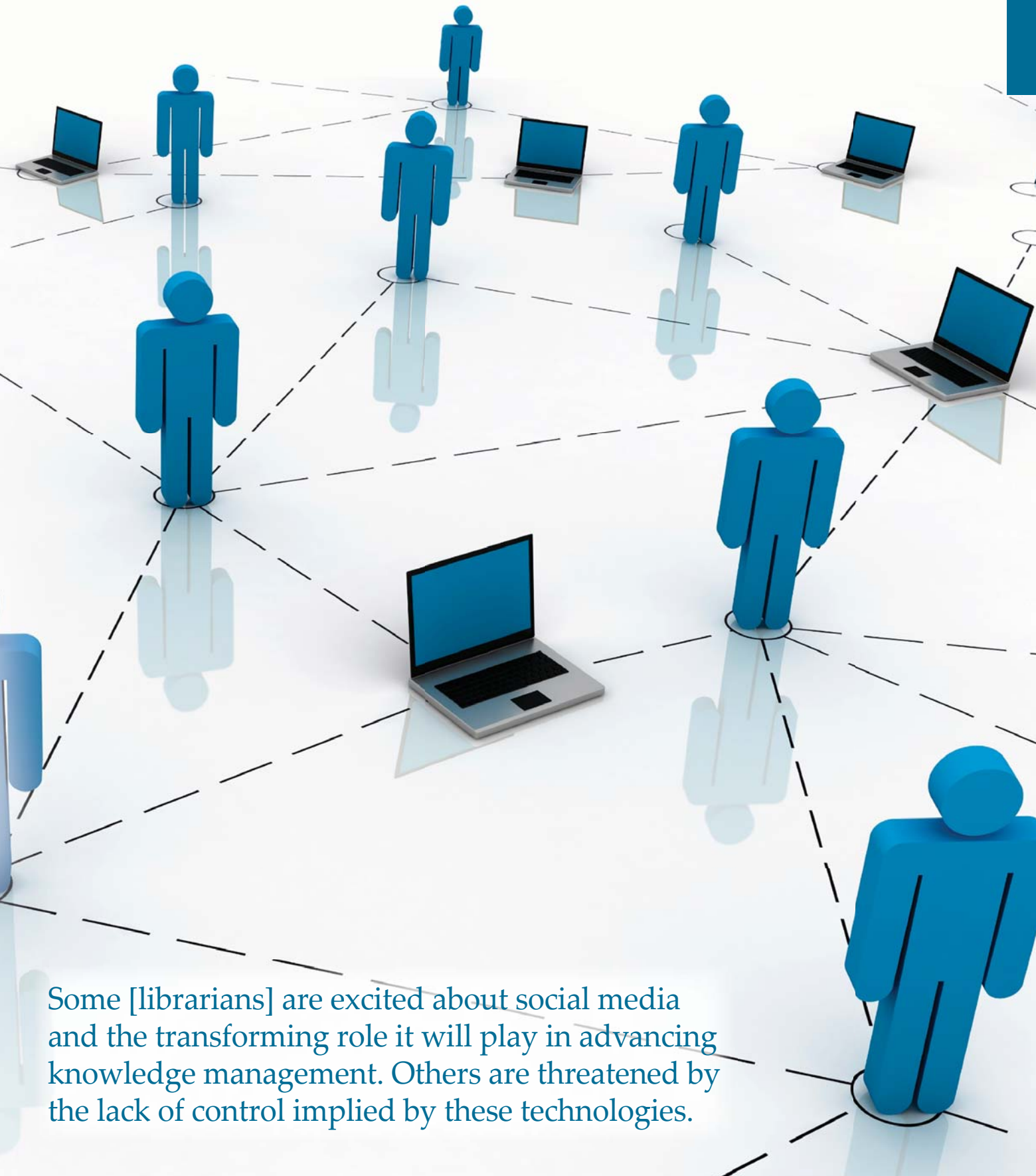
Social knowledge networks let organizations quickly harness collective wis-

dom and use this wisdom to enhance vetted content. The relevant knowledge that results (and is in the repository) helps organizations enhance content, improve productivity and collaboration, and ultimately, become more competitive, innovative and effective.

## Five Missteps to a Social Library

Librarians are, naturally, attracted to the promised benefits of social knowledge networks. Many are rushing to develop and implement social libraries. Industry pundits and vendors are exploiting this interest, suggesting techniques and tools that librarians should use to socialize their libraries.

Their suggestions run the gamut, from simply setting up a Facebook page or dropping in a wiki to overhauling their knowledge management strategy. Some go as far as re-engineering their entire content or knowledge management environment.



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Perhaps a better approach would be to tell librarians not what to do but which pitfalls to watch for. And that's exactly what we're going to do here. We call this the five missteps to a social library:

## 1 Painting librarians out of the picture.

Any social knowledge network should recognize that the librarian is the backbone of the library. The librarian is the knowledge professional in an organization. The last thing an organization wants is to build a wiki that contains information it cannot trust. That's why librarians must be at the center of the social library equation. They are knowledge management professionals trained to organize the information. They understand the user community and who is best equipped to create and act on content. Librarians create the environment necessary to publish content and to develop knowledge communities around that content. This isn't as simple as buying an Integrated Library System (ILS) and bolting on social tools. Someone must have their hands on the wheel to plan, design and manage the social library. This includes implementing an information strategy, including an understanding of the user community, to ensure that contributors are helping to build, maintain and manage the social library in a logical, organized fashion.

## 2 Not understanding what a true knowledge management system is.

Knowledge management has been a misnomer since Day One. First, consider the meaning of the word knowledge. Knowledge is vetted information that is enhanced and enriched by social information. Indeed, there has been no system to integrate and manage these two pieces until the advent of new generation technologies recently designed for social libraries. Publishing a document or providing access to a book is not knowledge management. Knowledge management is how the individual receives, uses, enhances and shares that information. Until vetted information is socialized and that social information is integrated, by definition, organizations do not have a true social knowledge management system.

## 3 Passively managing information.

Layering a search engine over a database or file management system does not create a social library; in fact, it's not any type of library. Even the best search engine approaches only provide access to the information being searched, which could be accurate or inaccurate. Just by the numbers, if 80 percent of the repository contains outdated, irrelevant data, the search engine

will yield 80 percent outdated, irrelevant data. Poor information must be filtered out in order for search engines to return the most relevant information possible. Remaining information must be rated and commented on, so the organization knows which is relevant to their project and which isn't. The librarian must be at the center of managing this information, and the tools used must be designed to facilitate this requirement.

## 4 Improving with a content management system.

Most companies' knowledge repositories are their hard drive or Intranet. I call these the "junk drawers of the Internet age." Some of the more advanced repositories are built on a content management system (CMS). But the organization, relevancy, search capabilities, and so forth are questionable. That's because CMSs are designed to manage static HTML. They are not meant to aggregate and organize large volumes of diverse content in a single place, or to manage social content. As a result, they don't allow for the rich types of categorization that a true social library requires.

## 5 Using isolated wikis and blogs.

Social libraries are not about merely adding blogs and wikis to a CMS. In fact, when used in isolation, blogs and wikis



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exacerbate data management problems by creating additional silos of information that are not aligned with the core knowledge repository. Data on one topic is strewn about these sites. To find it, librarians must search each site individually, a time-consuming process. If they can't find the related data or forget to search for it altogether, they end up working with poorer quality information. But by integrating vetted and social content in one place, librarians (and the community they serve) can't miss it. Users quickly gain enhanced knowledge in the context of the vetted content.

### The Library's New Era

It's clear a new class of knowledge management technology is needed—one that uses social technologies to tap into an organization's collective wisdom. Social libraries are designed to do this. A social library is a collection integrating traditional, vetted information (also known as top-down information) with the wisdom of the community (or bottom-up information).

Vetted information forms the basis of organizations' core knowledge repositories. It consists of managed content that is monitored for veracity by organizational controls, such as the company's standards board.

Wisdom of the community is information contained on various social media platforms, such as blogs, wikis, online ratings, discussions, tags, and so on. The information is created by individuals in the organization and surrounding industry and community. It consists of people's knowledge of and opinions about the vetted information.

The social content platform is an opportunity for organization members to contribute knowledge that normally just

sits in their heads. When integrated into vetted information, social information augments and enhances it, providing true knowledge or "social intelligence." It gives the user insight unattainable from either alone.

Combining vetted and social content also fosters collaboration within the organization. It creates an active knowledge base, where librarians gain reliable information and simultaneously add their own. They become part of a knowledge dialogue.

This setup lets members share their input, value, expertise, and intelligence about any given information asset. They can also reach out to the individuals who provided the knowledge and gain additional insight into their thoughts. With a social library, knowledge truly is power.

### Librarians' New Role

Most librarians are working to understand what socializing content means for their role and for their organization. Some are excited about social media and the transforming role it will play in advancing knowledge management. Others are threatened by the lack of control implied by these technologies.

As a result, some librarians may be resisting an important opportunity to reinvent themselves and bringing greater benefits to their organizations. These feelings are similar to the initial reaction

to Web technologies in the 1990s, when many librarians feared disintermediation. Some thought their role as "information middlemen" would be compromised. The fact that everything would be made available on the Internet seemed to threaten the fundamental underpinnings of disciplined research and library science. But others embraced the Web, and by doing so fundamentally changed their role and enhanced their impact on the community.

Today, social libraries present a similar perceived threat in those who fear social media. Some fear the loss of control, while others might be nervous about the thought of disintermediation. But this fear is misplaced. Organizations don't want to dispose of a vetted and verified repository of high-value information. They don't want to access knowledge in an environment where fact and fiction are indistinguishable and veracity is weak.

Organizations require the opposite. And that's where librarians come into play. In fact, their role in the new order of social libraries is more vital than ever. They become strategic members of the organization, implementing its knowledge management plan. Indeed, they become the knowledge coach, with the organization's experts the quarterback and knowledge consumers the active position players. Librarians must develop and implement a strategic game



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plan to ensure the quarterback and other players are helping to build, maintain and manage the social library in a logical, organized fashion.

While specific duties are still evolving as social media technologies make their way into today's library, it's important that traditional librarian responsibilities are not forgotten. These include:

- **Feeding and weeding.** Librarians must source good knowledge (both vetted and social) while weeding out outdated, irrelevant, and incomplete information. Of course, it's crucial to stock the repository with reliable, relevant and cost-effective knowledge, because the quality of the repository is only as good as the quality of its knowledge.
- **Organizing.** With social libraries, new and more diverse content and social information is flowing into the repository. Librarians must play a larger role in organizing, categorizing and creating environments to publish and provide this information to the com-

munity they serve. Without logical organization, the repository becomes a junk drawer of useless information, and social information is either not captured or is misused.

- **Cultivating.** Librarians are true information management professionals and experts at organizing content. They are not necessarily domain experts in the company and cannot be solely responsible for ensuring that the information published is the most useful and relevant social content. They must cultivate the social library by partnering with the organization's experts. Those experts will be the primary contributors of social knowledge, providing the most accurate and useful knowledge to the organization.

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and regulated to ensure their accuracy and relevancy.

### A Team Effort

It's a team effort to bring a social library into an organization. That's because knowledge is more than vetted white papers, books or image repositories. And it's more than social communications and networking. It's the combination of the two. Only when they are integrated and properly managed does an organization achieve a true social library.

This leads to a crucial underpinning of social libraries: One person does not have all of the knowledge. It exists in multiple places. Social technologies bring it all together to make the library an efficient, rich and relevant repository of knowledge that organizations can use to rapidly solve the challenge or problem at hand and make better business decisions. **SLA**

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