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Signing Off on Signatures

By Jacob Lackner

An email signature is easy to overlook. It's easy to set it and forget it. Yet, I've found them fascinating during my brief time as a librarian. I see a multitude of examples every day, but they never enter the conversation. I think that's a shame. To me, a signature is a critical component of digital communication. A signature describes the sender and links the sender with their message (Rains & Young, 2006). "A signature is an impression-management mini-text" (Gesuato & Bianchi, 2021, p. 335). Unlike business cards or conference badges, a signature can be instantly tweaked, expanded, or contracted based on personal preference. When people add a piece of information to their signature, they are making the case that it is important enough to attach to every email.

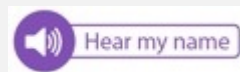
Librarians can use signatures to advertise, to list credentials, and to make statements about their values. They can vary dramatically from library to library and librarian to librarian. This article aims to establish a modest foundation for exploring this topic. I will continue with a background segment focusing on electronic signatures and librarian identity. Next, I will

include emerging themes derived from an email questionnaire with Georgia librarians and library staff about their signatures, concluding with new directions to investigate.

Background

There are two major dimensions to this topic that I identified in scholarly literature. The first is previous research on email signatures and their significance. Rains and Young (2006) analyzed signatures across a variety of industries. They

XXXXX, MSIS (she/her)



A button with "Hear my name" text for name playback in email signature

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An example of a complex email signature displaying multiple facets

noted that “those in education and the public sector were more likely to include a title in their signature. In these instances, signatures may be used to convey a sense of authority or status” (Rains and Young, 2006, p. 1056). Harmon-Jones et al. (2009) linked signatures to the theory of symbolic self-completion. Their research demonstrated that academics at less prestigious universities or with a shorter publication record would feature more information (professional titles) in their signatures as symbols of attainment. Gesuato and Bianchi (2021) investigated how academics used signatures to reinforce their professional identities. Their findings showed that signatures can be used to align writers with their institutions and as a self-promotional tool.

The second dimension is about the librarian identity. How do librarians see themselves, and how do they live up to a librarian ideal? Pierson et al. (2019) described how an individual’s librarian identity is constructed from multiple categories and that identity continually develops over time. Klein et al. (2020) argued that librarian as identity has historically been perceived through an essentialist and exclusionary framework and that librarians should adopt a more relational approach. Balling et al. (2008) and Attebury (2010) note that digital services offer a chance for librarians to challenge stereotypes and change how they are perceived by the public. In the academic sphere, Radford et al. (2008) describe how scholarly identity increasingly incorporates an online presence, for both traditional faculty and academic librarians.

In general, a link between electronic signatures and librarian identity has yet to be addressed in library and information science literature. I

believe that librarians take the idea of being a librarian seriously, and signatures are one of the tools they can use to establish that identity to the world.

Email Questionnaires

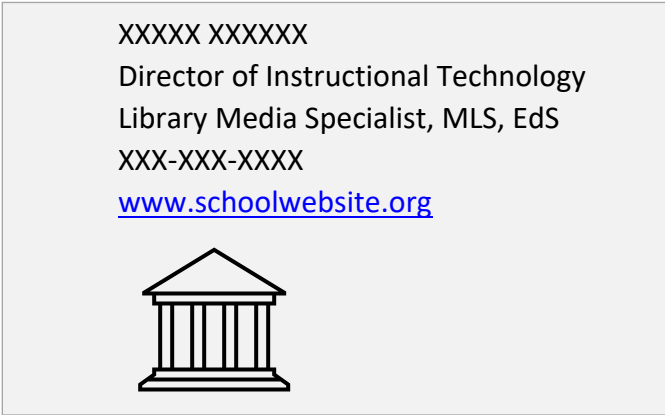
For the purposes of this article, a full-fledged quantitative survey was not feasible. Instead, I contacted several librarians and library staff to answer an email questionnaire (see appendix). I knew this would not be any kind of representative sample and that I would not have extensive conversations to analyze. Still, I believed it would help in identifying some of the differences between different libraries and to indicate themes for future research.

Email signatures, like libraries in general, attempt to change with the times. One academic librarian observed that: I’ve also noticed with the increase in online / hybrid work, people have started including a statement along the

lines of: “Don’t feel the need to respond if I’ve contacted you during your off hours.” This could indicate a change in librarian attitudes about work–life boundaries. A school librarian noted “pronouns, quotes related to literature/a love of reading, direct links to calendars/scheduling, and links to social media.”

The prevalence of personal pronouns came up in several interviews. This could indicate that the display of pronouns as a deliberate inclusive practice has become increasingly widespread throughout American library culture.

In another dimension of inclusivity, a public librarian explained, “My signature is formatted in sans serif script to make it accessible for people



An example of a simpler email signature

with low vision or using screen readers.” An academic librarian commented that they had noticed people using university graphics in their signatures but noted that images might not display clearly across email interfaces. As people become aware of accessibility concerns, signatures may be one element of library outreach to be evaluated, particularly if the sender desires a more elaborate and visually engaging signature.

Signatures serve an important role in establishing the credibility and authority of the sender. An academic librarian stated, “I also made sure to include my PhD after the previous subject librarian encouraged me to do—she suggested that by including my credentials I might be taken more seriously by faculty in the English department.” A school librarian said they “try to keep it as simple as possible since I have multiple titles/degrees, and I only put information I think people would actually use.” This raises the question of the signature’s audience. It stands to reason that librarians would design their signatures with a general recipient in mind. Members of the public? Faculty at a university? Fellow employees? Vendors? Signatures may be representative of a particular job’s primary function, especially if that job has significant digital responsibilities.

Signatures can also be used to advertise. One library media specialist noted signatures that displayed a current or last book being read. A public librarian said their signature has a tagline advertising the library’s new website. An academic librarian included their professional

social media account. Similar to other library programs, signatures must balance the desire to inform against the possibility of information overload. Additionally, advertisements may require upkeep to stay current, although automated widgets or plugins could alleviate this concern.

Next Steps

Given the format of the email questionnaire, it was impossible to pursue any of the themes on a deeper level. What do people dislike about other signatures? Have they ever received a comment or a compliment about a signature component? How do their perceptions of their signatures relate to their identity at work in general?

It would also be useful to analyze quantitative data about signatures. What percentage of Georgia school librarians put pronouns in their signatures? How many academic librarians list their degrees? Getting good data could be linked to larger library trends. These questions could be explored in a larger research project, ideally with both a qualitative and quantitative component.

By itself, a signature is only a few lines of text, possibly with a small picture and a few hyperlinks. Yet, as a symbol of identity, it can have a profound impact. How we introduce ourselves can change conversations, attitudes, and libraries.

Jacob Lackner is the teaching and learning librarian at Oxford College of Emory University

Appendix: Email Questionnaire

1. Tell me about your email signature?
2. How did you create your signature?
 - a. Did you copy from a template or coworker?
3. When, if ever, do you modify your signature?
 - a. Tell me about the last thing you added (or subtracted) to your signature?
4. Have you seen any trends in other library email signatures?

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