

Beyond the Stacks, Episode 10: Interview with Amanda Brennan

Transcript:

Derek: Hello and welcome to Beyond the Stacks: Innovative Careers in Library and Information Science. Today I'm joined by Amanda Brennan, the Internet librarian!

Amanda Brennan specializes in researching the history of memes and other viral content throughout the web. She spent two years as the fandom and subculture expert at [Know Your Meme](#). Currently, she is a member of the Content & Community team at Tumblr where she focuses on taxonomy building, identifying trends, and connecting communities. Her project, [The Fandometrics](#), launched in January 2015 and continues to provide a weekly ranking of entertainment fandoms on Tumblr.

Hi Amanda!

Amanda: Hey! How's it going?

Derek: Good, how are you?

Amanda: Doing well, doing well. I'm excited to be here!

Derek: Yeah, thank you so much for joining me. So, I wanted to get started talking about your educational background. Kind of, how you entered library science, and the degrees that you've attained in the pursuit of the field.

Amanda: Awesome! I started out at Drew University for my undergrad, which is a small liberal arts college in New Jersey, and there I majored in Modernist literature, with a focus in both linguistics and poetry. So it was a super English focused degree. I did a lot of work on James Joyce. I took a really great class out on Commonplace Books and kind of the art of literature. I've always been a book nerd and I've always been really into writing and reading and language.

My school didn't offer a linguistics major, so I did the minor. I'd really planned on going into linguistics after graduating, and that's why my Internet handle is @continuants, which is the fancy word for vowels. Because I had planned on doing all this linguistics study instead.

And the fall semester of my senior year I ended up getting into... I fell down a hill and broke my leg in half, so...

Derek: Oh no!

Amanda: Yeah! And I had this whole big honors thesis I was working on. I'm a full, head-on academic. I like to dive in and do all the things. The accident kind of just threw off everything. I still took two classes, which I still to this day can't even believe that I completed.

Derek: Yeah, that's impressive.

Amanda: Yeah, but I had to not complete my honor's thesis. And it really kind of threw a wrench in my academic idea. So I took some time off after I graduated. I still managed to graduate on time, which, again, can't even believe that I did that.

But I took some time off, and I worked in retail for a while, just... I was kind of disillusioned with getting a job in New York City, and I didn't know where I fit in yet. And then I reconnected with a friend from high school who was applying to the Rutgers masters program.

So I was like, you know what? I love information. During my time working retail I did a lot of inventory and I realized that I loved inventory! Whenever we did it my coworkers were so confused to the fact that I was really excited to organize all the things. Just the idea of organizing information really made me excited.

I only applied to Rutgers. It was like, if this is meant to be, I'm gonna do it here. I liked the program, I liked the professors. I'm from New Jersey, so I knew the campus well. I liked the area. I was like, if this is meant to be, I'm gonna do it.

I got in, and from there... I knew from the beginning that I didn't want to work in a traditional library, just because I wanted to be focused more on organizing information. I started out not really knowing what I wanted to do, and I luckily had some awesome professors that kind of encouraged the idea of spreading out information science to more than just books.

I think it was my first semester I found the website Know Your Meme. Know Your Meme is a user generated Wikipedia-style dictionary of memes and viral pieces of Internet culture. And when I found it, it was the first time I had seen people taking an academic approach to weird Internet stuff. I remember being so excited and thinking "oh, I'm gonna be an information scientist. I could help this website." I thought about the ways that we could build taxonomies and really approach it from an information science perspective.

So I sent them this email. It was late at night. I was like, "hey, I'm a student at Rutgers. I'm getting my Master's in Information Science and I'm also really into Internet culture. Here are a few of my favorite memes. Maybe we can talk some time." And it turned into an internship, which then pretty much informed the rest of my Rutgers time. I took a class in social media. I took classes on database building. I did a study on trolling. So I was able to kind of take this internship and this side project and help it inform my schooling as well. It worked really well in tandem. Then when I graduated I went there full time, and that's the end of the education and the beginning of the career.

Derek: That's an amazing story, that you just reached out to Know Your Meme. Had they ever worked with librarians before that?

Amanda: No. At the time it was still very small. It was before they were purchased by Cheezburger. At the beginning it was a very small outfit run by people specializing in creating video content for the web. They were making a show explaining the Internet memes while wearing lab coats, and really getting down to the heart of why things go viral and what draws people to them. And that's what drew me to them too.

The first time I worked with them was also prior to the acquisition, and I got to really study with Ellie and Kenyatta and Molly and all these incredibly smart people who thought about the Internet in such different ways than I was used to. Actually thinking about the implication of memes that went viral.

It was the summer that the Antoine Dodson video went viral. The video, um, the [Bed Intruder Song](#), it was known, after it was remixed.

Derek: Ah, yeah. Ok.

Amanda: Yeah. And we spent a lot of time thinking about, you know, the race implications and the class implications, and how these pieces of Internet culture are affecting mainstream culture and vice versa.

In the beginning, Internet memes weren't something that the major news touched. Thinking back to older stuff like Chris Crocker and [Peanut Butter Jelly Time](#). Are you familiar with that one?

Derek: Yeah, that is the, uh, animation of a dancing 8-bit banana talking about peanut butter and jelly, right?

Amanda: Yeah, that's correct. Um, but, it felt like it was, Internet memes at the beginning were this very niche culture that you had to be in the right place at the right time to really understand it. And then that summer (2006) was really the beginning of this transition into everyone wanting something to go viral. Brands started to really get interested in this Internet culture, and that hasn't gone away.

Spending my time with those people and learning from them really shaped how I thought about it. And thinking about it both from the objective, like, the way things morph and evolve, but then adding on that subjective layer of, ok, what does it mean for us as a culture that we are so interested in this and that we choose to spread this specific piece of information?

Derek: Yeah, there's a lot to think about there.

Amanda: It's very heavy.

Derek: It is, yeah. Yeah, just like these mutating ideas that are so rapidly iterating.

Amanda: Mhm.

Derek: I didn't know that Know Your Meme had such a kind of academic, intellectual approach to, like, sort of a study of memes. That's very cool.

Amanda: Yeah. Most of the stuff is user generated and anyone can make an account and upload their own entry, but the staff is really dedicated to thinking about it from an academic perspective. When I was there it was the librarian, the journalist, and the anthropologist. Which brought in this really interesting connection of three different disciplines. I think we really worked together to get Know Your Meme to a great place that has stood and continues to do great work since I've left, three years ago now.

Derek: Wow, so when you were getting the degree, when you were getting the Library and Information Science degree, did you envision during that time that you might end up specializing in memes and Internet culture?

Amanda: At first, not really. (laughs) I knew I always wanted to do special libraries. I also did an internship at the MTV Tape Library, which was so amazing. It was an interesting time because they were still working with tapes. The whole library had not been digitized yet. I loved being in that environment and I love the idea of being a librarian of a very specific type of knowledge. But, the Internet culture just kind of worked its way out because I saw,

like, when you think about Internet academics, you think about sociologists, and the people working in folklore and media studies, but I wanted to really approach it from the spread of information kind of view and I didn't see anyone else doing that at the time. So I just kind of saw an open door and I was like "well, this is how I can find my place and my career." Because I had spent so much time feeling lost. A little bit was the bitterness of not being able to go through with my original, like, plan. I was like "ugh, I've gotta do something really special to make this worth it."

Derek: Yeah, find your niche.

Amanda: Yeah.

Derek: And I think that's important, finding... It's a good strategy at least, finding the one thing that you are an expert at, that few people are really paying enough attention to.

Amanda: Yeah. And it's important to look at the universe of what people are talking about in the field you want to go into, which I spent a lot of time doing during grad school. Making connections on Twitter and reading a lot of extra literature that wasn't coming up in classes and trying to weave it all in together. Just to find the common ground.

Derek: Definitely. So, you mentioned that you did work at MTV's tape library, which is really cool, and at Know Your Meme. So I'm interested in knowing, were there any other really cool things you were able to work on while you were in school for Library and Information Science?

Amanda: Yes. We didn't really have a thesis at the end, but I did a capstone project, which was an independent study on Tumblr,

actually, which is my current job. At the time it was still a newer platform it was 2009-2010 around there and not a lot of people were familiar with it but I joined the site in 2008 and I was obsessed with this kind of blogging and because I was so involved in the community I noticed that people on Tumblr had the tendency to use entire sentences as tags. So you can post a picture of your cat and tag it #cat #tuxedocat #animals #thisisthecutestpictureivevertakenilovemycatsomuch. That whole sentence would be one tag. Because I was thinking a lot about metadata and databases and how computers read data I was like “Well a computer is not going to understand that whole sentence, it’s going to throw everything off.” I did a project thinking about this type of metadata and what it means to computers as well as what it means to humans and the idea was that if you had a higher following and were more engaged on Tumblr, you would be more likely to use these types of tags as kind of a note to say that you’re apart of the community; that you get it. It was just like barely statistically significant...I had to do a lot of surveys. It took my IRB...my IRB was painful to get through because Tumblr doesn’t require an age. And you had to go on what people said they were.

Derek: Ah I see.

Amanda: Going through those surveys - I have nightmares about it still! But, I did really well in the class and it eventually, it helped me get, I don’t know if it specifically helped but it kept my interest in Tumblr long enough that when I was applying for the position I was like “Oh, and you know, a couple years ago I did a whole thesis on Tumblr” and I’m very grateful that the world has worked out in this weird way.

Derek: Yeah that's great. So after your work at know your meme, you went to Tumblr. I guess I'm curious to hear more about what brought you to Tumblr, like were they seeking out a librarian specifically?

Amanda: Yes and no. The person who hired me told me after the fact that when she was creating the job description she had a librarian in mind which I think is so funny because at the time she had no idea that there was a librarian actually kind of working in this field which she told me many times after the fact. She was like "This is why I wanted a librarian" just because of the way I was trained to approach information. And the way that I think about organization is an incredibly helpful skill for the type of work that I do. We do a lot...I think it's interesting because my obsession with pop culture intersects really well with my obsession with information so whereas a lot of people are very good at organization and taxonomy building and stuff like that, I also am a sponge for knowing exactly what TV characters belong to which TV show without even having to look it up. I'm able to really harness that kind of information overload into something that makes sense for a computer to read and understand.

Derek: That's what the Fandometrics is about, right?

Amanda: Yeah, Fandometrics is my dream project. It's basically just organizing all of these fandoms into different genres and week-to-week we publish the top 20 fandoms and 600 categories and this is just...every time I talk about it I get so excited. It's just so cool to see you think I don't know what do you think of when you think of Tumblr?

Derek: Well I would say that fandom is definitely a big one.

Amanda: Yeah.

Derek: I'm trying to think...I do use Tumblr; I have a few of them actually.

Amanda: Oh awesome!

Derek: Yeah, I mean I guess you think of the whole reblogging system, you think of GIFs, you do think of memes, Tumblr social justice is a big one, yeah that's what comes to mind for me.

Amanda: I totally agree and this kind of idea that people have in their ideas I love being able to back it up with data. Like yeah we are the home of fandoms. Here's how wild fandom is week to week. Here's how things change. Their direct effects from what's happening in pop culture to what happens on these lists week to week. I just love data. I love being like yes Game of Thrones had a huge finale, they were number 1 this week.

Derek: I've actually seen those Fandometrics posts; it's pretty cool.

Amanda: Oh awesome! Yay.

Derek: Do you find that there's a big community reaction to those posts?

Amanda: It depends, recently the show Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug and Cat Noir really blew up. It's a French-Korean animated show and the day it hit number 1, we also publish this weekly recap on Wednesdays where we just highlight a few of the big movers and shakers. The week that it was number 1 that post got...I think it almost broke 10,000 notes. Just from fans being so

excited that their fandom was being recognized. They had the power to beat out Supernatural. Which is one of those shows...like you think of like Tumblr as like Dr. Who, Supernatural and Sherlock. And some people will get really, really excited. We also have this web celebs category, which is all the Internet famous people. danisnotonfire...he's this YouTuber, he's British, he's been number 1 for most of the time that Fandometrics have been live. I think he has not been number 1 maybe 5 or 6 times. It's wild! And that list doesn't have as much movement as some of the other lists, which is interesting. Celebrities is always up and down. TV depending on the season, like season finale time it's always really wild to watch it move. But web celebs, people have their favorites and hang on to them very tightly. And then someone new will come along and they'll move up on the list but the top 5, they're just like the favorites that don't really move.

Derek: Well, now throughout your professional career, what have been some of your most exciting experiences? We've talked about a few cool projects you worked on. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

Amanda: Year in Review. Which is we've done it at Tumblr for 3 years now. And it's kind of where Fandometrics started in that I started at Tumblr in November 2013 and they were like lets review the year, lets think about all these big things that happened. And that was the first time I worked with a dataset to kind of put these things into categories and it was the most exciting thing. I was like yeah! Let's make a list of these top celebrities! What are the most reblogged TV shows? And getting to work on that year over year as it gets bigger and evolves is just so fun. This past year, I think we did over 100 categories and just like seeing all the press that comes out of it too, it's like have you heard of Tumblr's #1 most reblogged model this year? Its like, ahh

that's cool to see. I also do a lot of speaking engagements, which is so fun. I got to do San Diego Comicon last year and being able to talk about fandom in a professional way is so thrilling. I just, I have so many thoughts about the ways fans connect and even outside of Tumblr, like I am in fandom myself and I use more than just Tumblr in my life and thinking about how like, how the cat communities interact via Instagram hashtags and how people connect in places like black Twitter or hair Twitter. There's so many interesting communities online that I think about both as an Internet expert and an information scientist that I just want to talk about them with everyone all the time.

Derek: Its definitely interesting stuff.

Amanda: Yeah.

Derek: That must be a lot of data to sift through to compile these reports.

Amanda: Yeah, I have a lot of spreadsheets. [laughs] Like, currently on my computer I've got about 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...6 tabs open and they probably each have 4-5 spreadsheets in them.

Derek: Wow!

Amanda: Not to mention the terminal program that's reading spreadsheets right now. That's my life.

Derek: That's wild. So what skills have proven most helpful in your career from library school?

Amanda: Library school really made me more organized, in general. I know its not a specific skill but when I did my masters I

was also working and at times doing an internship and it really made me focus on while I was learning how to organize information and databases, I was like well, I've got to learn how to organize my own information so you know, that I get to the Hot Topic on time and get to class on time, too. That has proved to be, like, the game changer for me. Learning how to organize information as well as my own life.

I took a lot of databases building classes so I learned some SQL in library school, which is the coding language, which helped me actually dive into the database and look at how information is stored to think about how it is spit out by the computer. If that makes sense?

Derek: Yeah, totally.

Amanda: And a metadata class. I actually took a digital metadata and that serves me every day. Thinking about the motivations behind the way people add metadata.

Derek: For sure. And like you mentioned earlier, you do see some creative use of metadata in Tumblr's tagging system and that must be exciting...I mean this is like...I guess don't they call it folksonomy?

Amanda: Yeah, it really is, there's a lot of interesting ways people use tags.

Derek: I've done that thing you mentioned earlier about tagging with a whole sentence.

Amanda: It's so fun!

Derek: Yeah it's fun, it's like you can add an extra joke at the end of it. It's almost the same purpose as a footnote, kind of.

Amanda: Yeah and because of reblogging, like, maybe you want to add something that's personal or like a joke that you don't want to get stuck in the reblog, especially if it's a viral post. The tag space really adds the extra level of connectivity between you and your followers.

The social media class I took was with Mor Naaman who did an incredible job with Flickr tags. I learned so much from him and just tag motivation...tagging is what I am obsessed with in general. And the Flickr tagging project is really interesting. I would love to do work on Instagram hashtags, too. Instagram hashtags are a completely different beast. I was lucky enough to be in a program that they encouraged you to experiment as long as you hit your required classes. We had a social media track and I was really able to play around with my schedule to get classes that I thought would be more helpful for Internet use. I think learning about the way people use information that is not myself because I am a very different use case. I use information and tags in a very different way than most of the population; so learning about how the average person works with information was also helpful.

Derek: Yeah definitely. The ability to see outside of your own ways that you use technology and tagging...

Amanda: Yeah, totally. Just opening my eyes to the world.

Derek: Mhm. So, do you do a lot of work with memes at Tumblr? Or was that more a Know Your Meme thing?

Amanda: While I was doing a lot more meme history at Know Your Meme if something blows up on Tumblr, I'm usually the person my coworkers ask about it. I don't do any really hard documentation anymore unless it's something incredibly weird or something I get really excited about. Just because there's only so many hours in the day. But I do love to keep up with everything that's going on and I'm always looking to see what people are talking about. And just finding the source of it when I can.

Derek: Yeah it's interesting. I really wanted to ask, I know this goes back to your previous job, not your current one but I am very curious about what your process for kind of investigating and writing about cataloging memes was because it's such an ephemeral thing.

Amanda: Yeah and especially at my old job, I was obsessed with older stuff. So like memes that took place on NewsNet or the history of Long-Tail language that evolved online. One of my favorite pieces that I worked on was the history of the term "shipping" which is short for "relationshiping" when people really want two of their favorite characters to be together. And I did a lot of digging in these NewsNet archives that weren't really meant to a) be archived or b) be searched. I had to learn inventive ways to Google, a lot of Boolean searching...that's another important skill that I learned in library school. Working backwards is really hard. The Internet tools that we have are not really meant...as you said it's very ephemeral, it's not really meant to be archived which is not necessarily a good thing because things get lost and thinking to another meme...if you think about old LOLCats, pictures of cats with words of them. So many of the original owners of those photographs are missing because they were uploaded to the Internet in a time where the focus was not on ownership if you think back to the late 90s, early 2000s, the

Internet was a place where you shouldn't put your personal information, you should not be tied to who you were in the real world. So people would just upload photos with handles to places like Photobucket and Tripod where the originals would get deleted and these pictures just persist but no one can really trace them back and it's really sad that we've lost that piece, so many pieces of cultural information just because that was the nature of the Internet in the beginning.

Derek: Yeah it's true. I mean some of those LOLCat pictures had a really huge influence on the culture. Yeah I guess it's kind of sad that they're anonymous.

Amanda: It's true. Now like if you look at the way people are so fierce about their content it would not stand in this Internet climate for people to just upload something and let it be like that. People are always trying to track down where their images go and that's...there's no judgment call on whether or not if one is better than the other...it bums me out that the people who went viral in like 2002 don't have that kind of ownership.

Derek: Yeah you're right. There's not so much, there's not any reputational or monetary value to those people that kind of went viral before going viral was a thing. That is a shame. So when you were investigating and cataloging these memes, was your focus kind of on preservation or kind of on education or reference or all of these things?

Amanda: Yeah it's a combination. What we tried to do was document the experience if it was happening right at that moment, document it as well as we could. If it happened previously, trace it back as accurately as we could. We kind of wanted to be like a history book and an encyclopedia at the same

time. Depending on where a meme originates it could rise for a different purpose or tastemakers are really important because you might post something on your blog and then it sits there for months until the right person will point it out. And so knowing where the pieces of the puzzle fit is a good way to kind of explain why something took off. Something I get asked a lot is how do you make something go viral? And there's no exact formula. Having these examples might help us get to one. I don't think so...it's all so right place, right time. Just trying to figure out what that right place and right time are, are really important.

Derek: For an up and coming librarian, maybe someone who's just graduating from library school who might be interested in working with Internet culture or social media, do you have any advice for kind of finding your place in that sphere?

Amanda: Participate. Hands down, participate. I don't feel like someone who would want to get into Internet culture would just do it blindly but being a part of it and seeing what's happening really drew me to wanting to document it. I will sign up for whatever social media site pops up, I will try it out and just really try to be a part of the community and make contacts...like, Twitter has really helped me build my professional network. Not being afraid of tweeting at someone I think is really important or doing something cool to just say like, "hey, I love your work!" If you have any thoughts, reaching out and emailing them, it's a good way to make contacts. Even if it doesn't work out, trying to become part of the conversation is so key.

Derek: Yeah, I think that there's a lot of librarian activity on Twitter.

Amanda: Yeah, library Twitter is so good.

Derek: There's a lot of networking that happens, a lot of interesting conversations. I'd certainly recommend any listeners who aren't on Twitter to check it out, it's worth your while I'd say.

Amanda: Mhm.

Derek: Great, that's everything I had to ask about. Is there anything you'd like to add to the conversation that didn't come up?

Amanda: I'm always happy to talk to people who are curious about figuring out how to do this Internet culture thing from an academic perspective or from an information perspective. Tweet at me!

Both: (laugh)

Derek: What's your Twitter handle?

Amanda: It's [@continuants](#).

Derek: Fantastic. And is there anywhere else that you'd like to share that people can find you online?

Amanda: My website is [memelibrarian.com](#) and pretty much anywhere the handle @continuants exists, it's me. My email is [continuants@gmail.com](#). I'm pretty easy to find on the Internet if you Google me.

Derek: Awesome, and you've inspired me. I never actually share my social media handles when I'm on this show. But hey, why not? Listeners can find me on [Twitter @dereklmurphy](#). Wait...I

acted like I was gonna add a “at Twitter.com” or something. Uhhh, you can find me @dereklmurphy. And yeah, come follow me! Tell me what you thought of the show.

Amanda: I’m going to follow you right now!

Derek: Do it! I think I’m already following you.

Amanda: Oh man. So, I am followed by [Gerard Way](#) from My Chemical Romance.

Derek: No kidding!

Amanda: I don’t know how it happened but he does follow me. So every week I’ll get 5-10 My Chemical Romance fans following me.

Derek: That’s amazing!

Amanda: Oh wait, I think I already was following you and now I just unfollowed you!

Derek: Oh, no!

Amanda: It’s ok, I fixed it. Phew!

Amanda: I never look at my followers because it’s just like teens wanting to put me in DM with Gerard Way.

Derek: That is hilarious, that is so hilarious!

Amanda: It’s bizarre.

Derek: You've got in roads with the My Chemical Romance community.

Amanda: (Sigh) I mean, I'm there. I'm with them. I've seen them an embarrassing amount of times.

Derek: Nice. Yeah, that's always fun when someone that you appreciate follows you, it's cool.

Amanda: Yeah, it's a good feeling. Twitter is the best!

Derek: It's fun. All right, well thanks so much Amanda, it was really great having you on and talking to you.

Amanda: Thank you so much for having me! This was so fun. And anytime you want to have me back, I mean, we can talk about more stuff!

Derek: Most definitely. Thanks!

Amanda: All right, thank you!