

Socially Rare: Using social media in special collections

Audrey Waugh

Social media has revolutionised how we engage with others and how we consume information, but has it revolutionised how archives, special collections libraries, and other similar organisations engage and communicate with their users? In a recent paper examining transformation in cultural communications Angelina Russo determines that while social media has been actively used “in the commercial and public spheres” its effects within the “cultural sector are yet to be fully examined”.¹ This essay provides a definition of social media, discusses the importance of integrating social media with current library practices through policy and appropriate resourcing, and the limitations and considerations that may prevent successful social media activities. It also discusses some institutions that are successfully promoting their digitised special collections in the GLAM (Gallery, Library, Archives, and Museum) sector and the requirements necessary for social media success.

Defining Social Media

Marta Kagan identifies that in its simplest form, social media is “people having conversations online”.² “Online” has grown to encompass many different applications and platforms. In their paper discussing the challenges and opportunities of social media, Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein further define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”.³ Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and YouTube are platforms that encourage discussion, connection and the proliferation of ideas and opinions. These platforms are “designed primarily as network communication tools” that dismiss the traditional one-on-one communication methods, instead they allow for mass communication with an ever expanding audience.⁴ The shift from one-on-one to one-to-many paradigm does not necessarily depersonalise the experience of mass communication because social media has formed a participatory construct that enables individuals to determine how much

involvement they choose to have and who they choose to engage with.

When defining social media Russo determines that it can be anything that encompasses collaboration, communication, gaming, or social connectivity.⁵ Following this definition Sarah Steiner, a leader in social media outreach for libraries, defines social media as “any online platform that allows users to link to each other and contribute and share content and/or commentary”.⁶ The introduction of the World Wide Web meant that audiences were “no longer content to simply watch, listen and read what they were given” instead they wanted an opportunity to digest and discuss what they were being presented with.⁷ The Web 2.0 shift that Tim O’Reilly described epitomises what it means to use social media online:

“A Web 2.0 website may allow users to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to the first generation of Web 1.0-era websites where people were limited to the passive viewing of content”.⁸

While social media is well and truly ingrained in many of our day to day functions it is still an emerging area of research for heritage institutions. While library users are “changing the way they discover, share and consume media” many libraries are not modifying their business process and activities to accommodate their user’s changing needs.⁹ Allocation of time and resourcing is still absent in some libraries who use social media. Yet social media has the potential to be an integral outreach tool for public programmes and collections. Staff who understand the various social media platforms available to them are essential to a successful online presence yet many libraries do not see this as an important aspect of business as usual activities. The shifting nature of how people want to connect with the virtual and physical worlds around them requires GLAM institutions to engage with users through social media. This demand has seen a radical shift in participatory culture especially in the heritage sector.

Some cultural institutions are engaging with social media and users to promote participatory communication and digitised special collections are sparking those conversations. A recent examination of Te Papa’s use of social media for special collections by Georgina Fell determined that social media enables libraries to build “online communities of interest and engage users via participatory communication” and it provides a prime opportunity for users to engage with digitised special collections.¹⁰ Some memory institutions have adopted social media and are using

it to further their institutional goals and expand their user base. If other libraries are choosing not to follow suit, either through a lack of resourcing or knowledge, they risk becoming digitally distant from their users. Whether or not libraries choose to embrace social media and new technologies it is undeniable that their readers, researchers and visitors are using these platforms to engage, promote and access digital content.

Using Social Media in Heritage Institutions

In their work "Making Connections: A Survey of Special Collections' Social Media Outreach", Heyliger, McLoone, and Thomas suggest that most heritage institutions, including those with special collections, use social media and Web 2.0 platforms to increase the visibility and use of their collections.¹¹ Beyond this, social media provides an opportunity to spark discussions based on the content promoted by the institution at international and interdisciplinary levels. Fell determines that social media also allows curators and librarians to "provide access to, and promote, collection and collection-based information" in a way that encourages discussion and engagement.¹² Dickson and Holley extend this idea, arguing that Twitter, and Facebook especially, facilitate conversations about digitised special collection items to a large and diverse audience.¹³

In their work entitled "Collaborative Social Media Campaigns and Special Collections" Garner, Goldberg and Pou outline that a caveat of delivering digitised collections through social media is that users need to be comfortable with the "interfaces of the platform" before interaction can be successful.¹⁴ If your user base does not understand, for example, how to engage, like, comment or follow an institution using the norms of social media, then it is reasonable to question how applicable or required implementing these platforms would be. While educating users on how to use social media does not fall to the institution alone, it is important for creators of social media content to consider who their audience is and how they use social media platforms when considering what level of resourcing is appropriate for their social media outreach programmes.

Curators and librarians in the heritage sector should identify that there are different intended audiences and purposes for different social media platforms. A curator may not post about in-depth research, historical context or behind-the-scenes processes on Twitter, however this kind of content may be suitable for a blogging site such as Tumblr. Research conducted by Heyliger et al. suggest that Facebook is being used primarily for promoting events, for user interaction and commenting, and

for increasing awareness and visibility of the institution itself.¹⁵ Facebook has also been found to “reach out to audiences with whom [the library] have a difficult time connecting”, this use can also be applied to other platforms that support patron communication and engagement such as Twitter.¹⁶ Their research also identified a conventional format that most special collections use in their social media platforms; “short, frequent tweets on Twitter; somewhat less frequent, slightly longer updates on Facebook; and infrequent, semiregular, lengthy posts on blogs” such as Tumblr.¹⁷ Most heritage institutions adhere to this rubric and users with even a basic understanding of different platforms understand why this formula is followed.

Policy to Support Social Media Use

Social media has been used widely by GLAM organisations with varying levels of impact. This depends largely on the policies and guidelines organisations adopt to support work produced and promoted in the social media sphere. Troy Swanson, author of “Managing Social Media in Libraries”, proposes that crafting a social media policy takes online engagement from “static informational style pages to more dynamic and interactive sites”.¹⁸ Sarah Steiner’s work “Strategic Planning for Social Media in Libraries” advocates for integrating strategic planning into social media as it will allow for “organised, sustained efforts that will create meaning and useful content” for library patrons.¹⁹ On-going internal and external environment scans will evaluate the resources, finances and personnel that the library is able to commit to, as well as what the online community requires and values in order to produce a successful social media presence.²⁰ Most academics and librarians agree that marketing, promotion, setting goals and objectives coupled with regular evaluation are essential when forming an online presence.²¹ However Jodie Bell argues that this is not always reflected in reality with “a significant majority, 75%, of librarians stated that they currently had no policy or management framework in place for their social media output”.²² A social media policy would be beneficial to both the creators and consumers of digital content as it would allow GLAM institutions to promote their digitised collections and foster a successful online community through the use of supportive guidelines and frameworks. Such a policy would also more transparently transmit to their communities how their data and other information would be used by the organisation. Implementing these policies may also give librarians who create social media content guidelines to help them navigate growing public concerns about digital

data collection and individual privacy rights.

Resources and Requirements

International literature has stressed the importance of appropriate resourcing, both in people and funding, in order to present and maintain a successful social media presence as a library or heritage institution. Koontz and Mon argue in their text "Marketing and Social Media: A guide for libraries, archives and museums" that support and resources encompass dedicated technology and staff who are "committed to strategic thinking and execution" of social media initiatives as well as strong policy for social media to be integrated into business as usual workflows.²³ While curators have the most knowledge about their collections they may benefit from further training on how to best use social media. As social media rapidly becomes a primary tool for outreach it is important for the appropriate resources to be allocated to allow a connection with library users and potential users through social media. For institutions to be able to successfully use social media they need to understand their audience and post content that aligns with their interests while still engaging potential audiences. This requires dedicated staff operating social media platforms to have a significant understanding and knowledge of the collections they are promoting as well as the social media platforms they are using.

A major requirement of posting special collections online is that institutions need to have digitised content in the first place. Institutions that have already invested in the digitisation of their special collections were more likely to be early adopters of social media to promote and provide access to their digital collections.²⁴ As researchers are increasingly reliant on digital resources and digitised content it is fitting that GLAM institutions support and promote this growing requirement. Serendipitous discovery through continual collection surfacing on social media platforms encourages users to engage with digitised library collections. Social media provides an opportunity for libraries to connect the virtual and physical worlds as there is an increasing shift towards digital environments.²⁵ This research hopes to determine how successfully the library is promoting and providing access to specialised digital content from special collections on social media platforms.

Limitations

Social media accounts cannot be successful when operating as silos. The nature of social media is to be social yet it is becoming common practice

for heritage institutions to treat social media platforms as a loudspeaker for their events and announcements and have an inward facing approach. This introspective focus means that often there is a lack of awareness as to what trends, tone and interests other institutions are benefitting from. Some professional social media account users choose not to have a personal social media presence which removes the familiarity and awareness of day to day engagement. Successful accounts and users engage with other accounts as much as they promote their own agendas. In her work "Collaborative Social Media Campaigns and Special Collections" Ann Ewbank argues for the importance of "connecting with other institutional accounts for maximum reach" and building reciprocal relationships to foster further communication and engagement, which is the true sign of a successful social media presence.²⁶ Reciprocal engagement and ongoing collaboration also allows users of one account to become aware of other accounts through commenting and posting thereby growing the number of followers. Being aware of what trends and topics are relevant to a broader audience will allow libraries to grow their user base. Insular posts go against the norms of how social media is used today. The spirit of collaboration and communication on an international level provides exciting opportunities for GLAM sectors, if they are willing to take up the challenge.

Further limitations of social media use by libraries are navigating terms of use and ownership exerted by social media platforms. Institutions "often use Facebook pages to direct traffic to [external] blogs, websites, or digital collections" which is a reflection of the hesitancy many institutions have to post content directly to Facebook due to Facebook's reuse, ownership, and copyright.²⁷ Some GLAM institutions have difficulty with the rights and reuse statements exercised by Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, and as a result are hesitant to post digital collections directly to these platforms. This is especially a concern for heritage organisations that must follow internal policies including donor agreements, the Copyright Act, and the Privacy Act when posting content online. This is something that libraries need to navigate when they choose to promote and provide access to collection items online through social media platforms. One way to mitigate the ownership controls exerted by Facebook is to post links to the library's own website instead of posting content directly onto the sharing site. This allows for an image to be displayed on the Facebook page or newsfeed without a transfer of ownership to Facebook. An example of this can be seen below:

Other institutions with digitised special collections, such as the Penn

 **National Library of New Zealand**
March 28

A recent perusal of drawers in the Ephemera Collection resulted in the discovery of some posters and other printed material that reflect the situation in occupied Europe during World War One.

While most of this material is a little outside our normal collecting scope, it does give some context to the activities of our own military personnel in Europe at the time, and at this time one hundred years later, it seems an opportune time to talk about it.

<http://natlib.govt.nz/.../pos.../words-from-the-occupying-forces>



natlib.govt.nz
/natlib.govt.nz

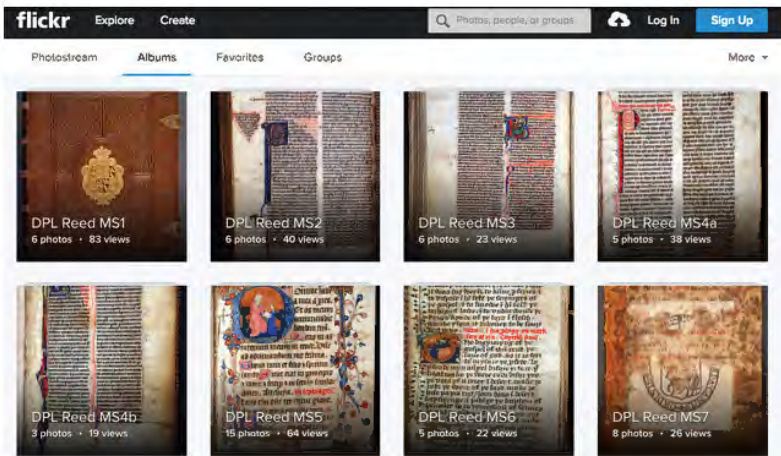
Like Comment Share

10

1 share

National Library of New Zealand's Facebook page, May 2017.

Library and the Dunedin Public Library, have successfully engaged with social media to provide access to and promote their collections online. Dunedin's Heritage Collection has one of the most developed "medieval and Renaissance manuscript collections" in New Zealand.²⁸ They have used a Flickr photo-stream to provide access to their collections online. Flickr is a photo sharing site that can host high resolution images which is ideal for researchers who are investigating detailed manuscripts online. An example of their digitised collections available online is included below:



Dunedin Public Library's Heritage Collection on Flickr, May 2017.

As well as the digitised image, researchers are also provided with a historical summary of the individual item including date, size, provenance, decorative features, references and any notes added by the curator. This kind of information is similar to what researchers would receive during a one-on-one consultation with a curator, however when it is presented in such a manner online it caters to a wider range of potential viewers. Similarly, the Provenance Online Project (or POP) has encouraged many institutions to post their digitised special collections online in order to crowdsource further information about their holdings. This collaborative approach is an integral element of Web 2.0 platforms and a participatory online community. New Zealand libraries could benefit from external knowledge and commentary on their special collections as well as the opportunity for international institutions and communities of interest to engage with their own collections.

Conclusion

While some special collections have demonstrated the potential of social media to promote and provide access to digitised content it is evident that more could be done to foster a collaborative and engaged online community. Some studies have been conducted on social media in libraries and other heritage institutions but few have focussed on special collections and archives. Drawing on the available literature it is clear that researchers and novices alike would benefit from an opportunity to view collections online through social networking sites such as Facebook,

Twitter, Tumblr, and more. As social media incorporates a number of different channels and platforms it is something that requires regular appraisal. The concept of future planning and adaptation is difficult to predict and realise due to the fluidity and relatively short lifespan of Internet based applications. There is a demonstrated need for further qualitative research into how special collections and archives are using social media.

Audrey is a librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. She recently completed a Master of Information Studies at Victoria University of Wellington entitled: "Socially Rare: An examination of the Alexander Turnbull Library's Rare Books and Fine Printing collection's social media presence". The literature review included in Archifacts formed part of her research.

Endnotes

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