



Utilizing social media to promote Special Collections: What works and what doesn't

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Abstract:

In an age where libraries are experiencing a rapid regularization of collections through electronic resource subscriptions and stock-thinning, the physical holdings of a library and, in particular, special collections departments are slowly becoming what defines one library from another. Standard forms of communications have also changed, and enquiries are no longer coming only via the traditional lines of telephone calls and face-to-face research. Students, researchers, faculty and peers are Tweeting, blogging, Facebook-ing, sharing photographs and videos, creating whole new forums for two-way communication that are ripe for tapping into by Special Collections departments.

How can we, as professionals, engage with these users and researchers and maximise the potential of these new means of communication? How can we express the “uniqueness” of the treasures within our collections and how does this impact our collections and our parent institutions? What are the resource implications? This paper proposes to explore the variety of social media outlets that are available and the advantages and disadvantages of exploiting them. It will be written from personal experience (see biographical note below) and augmented by extensive interviews of other international Special Collections professionals who are working, or have worked, with social media. This paper will explore how Special Collections can raise awareness of the material they hold and the impact that this has on staffing, resources and infrastructure within the department and the larger parent institution. It will explore how institutions in the remotest locations can break open their collections to a wide and international audience and how world-renowned collections can begin breaking the age-old tweedy perception of working in Special Collections.

In an age where libraries are experiencing a rapid regularization of collections through electronic resource subscriptions and stock-thinning, the physical holdings of a library and, in particular, special collections departments are slowly becoming what defines one library from another. Standard forms of communications have also changed, and enquiries are no longer coming only via the traditional lines of telephone calls and face-to-face research. Students, researchers, faculty and peers are Tweeting, blogging, Facebook-ing, sharing photographs and videos, and creating whole new forums for multi-directional communication that are ripe for tapping into by special collections departments.

How can we, as professionals, engage with these users and researchers and maximise the potential of these new means of communication? How can we express the “uniqueness” of the treasures within our collections and how does this impact our collections and our parent institutions? What are the resource implications?

This paper will explore the variety of social media outlets that are available and the advantages and disadvantages of exploiting them. It has been written from extensive personal experience but has also been augmented with interviews of other international Special Collections professionals who are working, or have worked, with social media.

What is social media?

In the past two years, trade journal *Business Horizons* has published some of the most up-to-date articles in regards to social media and the business world. In their 2010 issue, an article by Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein defined 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.”¹ Web 2.0, here, can be defined as a user-centred application or website that facilitates the sharing of information and the collaboration of users. Social media made up for almost 75% of all internet traffic in 2008 and is truly the “third place” on the web, the same “third place” that most physical libraries try to be.² *Business Horizons* followed up this article with a full issue dedicated to social media and the business sector in 2011, a good read for anyone looking for information on industry standards and best practices.³ Also, in a recent study, Harvard psychologists Diana Tamir and Jason Mitchell found that the act of self-disclosure (the

¹ Kaplan, Andreas M.; Michael Haenlein (2010) "[Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media](#)". *Business Horizons* 53(1): 59–68, p. 61 (last accessed 31 May 2012). This article also includes a nice synopsis of the developments that have led to the current social media platforms and current corporate tendencies towards these outlets.

² *Ibid*, p. 59.

³ [Business Horizons 54\(3\)](#) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

simplest of social media interactions) stimulates the same areas of the brain that are associated with sexual attraction or reward from food and money.⁴

Social media is a truly powerful tool, one that is easily and readily harnessed by individual users, small businesses, corporations, journalists and librarians alike. When we discuss the “use” of social media in libraries, and in particular special collections, there are two real opportunities for us to exploit these networks: promotion and awareness. Promotion is something that we are all familiar with, and we’ve all had to put on our public outreach hat from time-to-time, through exhibitions, special events, disposable literature, &c. This traditional promotional voice carries over nicely into the socially networked world: people come to these networks to see what is going on with a place that they like, they come to see how they can get involved and which of their friends are interested too. Awareness of special collections in the social media world is a much more delicate matter: care should be taken in developing a personal or corporate “voice” that is not too formal but fits your library’s needs. Awareness can be raised by individual posts (similar to promotion), but the true power of social media comes in the interaction with your networks. Awareness grows exponentially when you engage in a dialogue with your networks about a specific item or collection or event, and these conversations are seen not only by the library’s immediate networks but also by the networks of those on the other side of the conversation.

Where worlds collide:

Survey of the most active and popular channels of social media

This section will provide a quick overview of the most established social media networks used by special collections departments and what they are currently doing on them. This is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but should provide a good idea of what networks libraries are currently finding as the most useful and profitable.

a. Twitter

On Twitter, anyone can read, write and share messages of up to 140 characters. These messages, or Tweets, are public and available to anyone interested in them. Twitter users subscribe to your messages by following your account and these followers receive every one of your messages in their timeline, a feed of all the accounts they have subscribed to. In Twitter’s most recently publicised statistics, they claimed that the service currently has over 140,000,000 active

⁴ Diana Tamir and Jason Mitchell. “[Disclosing information about the self is intrinsically rewarding.](#)” *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences of the United States of America*, Early Edition 7 May 2012 (last accessed 31 May 2012)

users and these users create 340,000,000 tweets per day.⁵ Special collections departments from all over the world use Twitter to communicate quick messages to their followers about new exhibitions, acquisitions, about changes or disruptions in service or to communicate with other professionals. In fact, in April 2012, a whole discussion on using bookseller's descriptions in rare books catalogue records was carried out on Twitter between librarians at Harvard, the Folger Library, Cambridge, British Library, Washington D.C. and Michigan.⁶ Twitter is also used by special collections departments to regurgitate information produced on other networks such as a blog or Flickr. For those just getting started in Twitter, the *Library Marketing Toolkit* has put together a great slide show on 'How not to tweet,' which, I think, is a must-read for Twitter veterans and newcomers alike.⁷

b. Facebook

Facebook's mission since its founding in 2004 has been to "to make the world more open and connected ... people use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them."⁸ The network is populated by individuals who create their own profile on which they can share pictures, interests and experiences with other users. Facebook may not have been the first 'social networking' site, but it has certainly been the most successful. Students, teachers, librarians, moms, dads, grandmas, libraries, rare book sellers can all be found on Facebook. Facebook reported that by the end of March 2012 the social network had over 901 million monthly active users, of which approximately 80% were outside the U.S. and Canada, and that on average 398 million users were active with Facebook on at least six out of the last seven days.⁹ Also, almost half of these monthly users of Facebook accessed this social network via a mobile device. Facebook allows companies and institutions to create 'pages' which individual users can 'like', which in turn allows the corporate body to set up a direct line of communication with its potential consumer or user. For example: by 'liking' a library's Facebook page, the user will see any updates created by the library's

⁵ "[What is Twitter?](#)" Twitter for business (last accessed 31 May 2012)

⁶ "[Adding bookdealer's descriptions to catalog records](#)" a Storify collected by Sarah Werner (last accessed 31 May 2012)

⁷ Potter, Ned. "[How NOT to Tweet – for libraries and information services](#)" *The Library Marketing Toolkit* (last accessed 31 May 2012)

⁸ "[Key Facts](#)," *Facebook Newsroom* (last accessed 31 May 2012)

⁹ *Ibid.*

page and will be allowed to communicate on the library's page wall. A quick search on Facebook for 'Special Collections' brings back hundreds of results, however, the majority of these pages average only around 200 'likes'. Some of this certainly comes from the niche nature of our profession, but it also has to do with how special collections departments use Facebook. Many Facebook pages in the heritage sector are simply used as a second web page, which is infrequently updated and which rarely involves any kind of communication between individual user and the page moderator. Public and academic libraries have outstripped user subscriptions compared to many special collections' Facebook pages by creating a social 'voice' that is constantly changing and updating and staying in tune with its users. Lessons are to be learned by some of these pages, as many of these libraries are also using apps for library catalogues and other services that can be accessed within Facebook.¹⁰

c. Blogging

Speaking as a special collections professional, of all the social media outlets available, blogging feels like the most comfortable fit. Blogs (or *web logs*) were in their infancy before many of today's mainstream social media platforms were even thought of; for some, blogs were the first foray into a socially connected world wide web. Blogs began as personal journals and evolved into platforms for people to share their experiences, political views, thoughts and commentary in long-hand format. Corporate or institutional blogs have existed almost just as long, and libraries and special collections can be found across the varying blog platforms (Blogger and Wordpress being the most popular) or within their own institution's collection of blogs. Most blogging sites or software allow for large format photographs, embedding of videos and turning-the-pages software and, most importantly, allow a creator of a post to apply rich metadata to describe a post, which in turn is picked up by many of the major search engines. Many special collections departments use the blog format to highlight items from their collections, to talk about upcoming or recently passed events and exhibitions and to highlight any new acquisitions. Blogs are also a great way to get local academics involved with your collections, as it provides a platform for short-form articles and commentaries on highlighted items from the collections. In many ways the blog has replaced, and in fact surpassed, a monthly or quarterly

¹⁰ Morris, Debbie and Adam Watson. "[Leeds Met Library Facebook application](#)" *SCONUL Focus* 48 (Spring 2010), p. 23-25 (last accessed 31 May 2012)

'update' style newsletter. I recently co-authored a blog post on the importance of blogging within the rare books community with Brooke Palmieri, cataloguer at Sokol Books (London), which is worth a look for any current or potential special collections blogger.¹¹

d. Flickr

Flickr is an image hosting website that has been in operation since 2004. The platform allows users to upload, describe and tag pictures to a very large community: Flickr reported in August 2011 that its 6 billionth photo had been uploaded.¹² Users can then create their own collections of photographs and browse through other user's collections. Flickr allows for rich metadata tagging of photographs, and can be utilized quite easily when importing images from local databases and repositories. Even though archives and special collections departments make a good showing on this platform, with over 800 Flickr accounts active, museums have the lion's share of this platform amongst the cultural heritage sector. There are over 2,500 Flickr museum pages, and special collections departments should be looking to their example at how they use the Flickr network within the platform, but also how they are using Flickr as a hosting site for embedding images into home websites or blogs. Smaller and special interest museums have been known to create a group managed Flickr account that allows for a variety of images to be contributed to a wider repository and therefore provide access to a larger community of users.

e. Pinterest, Tumblr & other smaller social network platforms

Tumblr has made its name as a micro-blog, which is something of a hybrid between Twitter and a blog. Tumblr posts are short form in text and rely mainly on multi-media elements. Most Tumblr pages are very clean and focus on the visual elements of a blog post. Because of their personal nature, these type of short-form dispatches work well for short-term projects and quick commentary or highlights. Pinterest has come to prominence in the past year as a new social network which takes elements from Flickr, Facebook and Twitter and creates a new service that allows users to 'pin' images and links to themed 'pinboards' which they can share or co-create with their friends. The service is a very individual platform, and it is still hard to tell how easily corporations and

¹¹ Green, Daryl and Brooke Palmieri. "[Bloggers of the world unite: Rare book bloggers and the links they build](#)" *Echoes from the Vault* (15 May 2012) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

¹² Kremerskothen, Kay. "[6,000,000,000](#)" *Flickr Blog* (4 August 2011) (last accessed 31 May 2011)

institutions will be able to integrate into the network. A few special collections libraries have created accounts on Pinterest, but these have had limited success. Because the service requires links or images already out on the web to share, special collections haven't made much headway into this platform yet, and those that have are basically recycling links to Flickr image posts.

Other sites such as LinkedIn, LibraryThing, Academia.edu and even the professional list-servs that many of us subscribe to can be construed as social networks, although they are not as dynamic and socially interactive as some of those listed above. These networks also are more geared toward the communication between professionals and so fall on the outside margin of the topic of this paper, but nonetheless should be considered in a wider departmental social media strategy.

Metrics: harnessing the power of the social media

Aside from their obvious benefits of raising the profile of a special collections department, many social network platforms provide metrics on the usage of your pages. These metrics range from general daily statistics in the most basic form, to very detailed breakdowns of how people are coming to your site and what they are searching for.

The two most detailed providers of metrics to institutional users are Facebook and Wordpress. Facebook offers 'insights' for all pages created. These statistics include how many people like your page (or, your direct network), how many people are friends with those people who like your page (or, your extended social network), how many people visited your page and what links people clicked on from your page.¹³ Facebook also provides statistics on individual posts including how many people your post has reached directly, the number of people that have clicked on a link embedded in a post and the number of people who have created a story, or 'shared', a post created by your page (termed as 'virality'). These statistics are currently updated weekly and exportable to Excel spread sheets where page managers can then feed them into a department's large cache for statistics or create visualizations from these numbers.

¹³ "[Page Insights](#)." *Facebook Help Center* (last accessed 31 May 2012)

Wordpress' statistics are an incredibly powerful tool, and offer some of the best 'behind-the-scenes' numbers available on any social network platform. Not only can you monitor the number of people visiting your blog live, but you can also see what countries people are visiting your blog from, what terms they are searching for in Google or other search engines that has brought them to your blog, you can see from what websites they are coming to your blog from and what links they are clicking on in your blog posts that are taking them on elsewhere.¹⁴ In my opinion, the search terms tool is the most useful amongst these: by monitoring how people are 'stumbling' upon your blog from search engines, a blog creator can develop his/her metadata tagging taxonomy to closer match these terms. Also, by monitoring these terms as well as the most popular posts, a blog creator can learn what types of topics are trending at the moment and can capitalize on this information by creating another blog post on a similar theme. Wordpress also provides graphic summary tables for statistics involving total visits, visits on any given day or month or visits recorded on an individual post. These statistics can help the newcomer to any social media platform to quickly get a grip on what is working and what is not, and identifying some traction with your users.

Finally, these statistics provide the hard data to back up the work that goes into setting up and supporting these social networks; they can be used to show the impact that the work being put in to these efforts in a very visual and easily communicated way. This helps promote institutional buy-in and future support for larger, more intensive social media campaigns. They also help individual special collections departments to custom-design their social media strategy by seeing what kinds of posts are getting the most attention, what platforms are the most effective for the types of social media promotion intended and what platforms could be cut out or ignored.

Resource implications & staffing

Of course, all of these activities require staff hours, specialist training and equipment for proper execution which implies an increase in budgetary resources and possibly staffing. Many of the social media platforms listed above are easy enough to navigate for a moderately computer literate user, however, especially when joining a new social network and setting up a new page, they do take time to become proficient in. Most staff should be able to self-train on these networks and be able to create a Facebook page, a blog platform, or a Twitter or Flickr account without much difficulty, but, especially in larger academic

¹⁴ "[Stats.](#)" *Wordpress.com Support* (last accessed 31 May 2012)

libraries, there may be an outreach officer or a member of staff doing this for the wider library that could assist. One should approach creating any new entry on a social network with the same kind of design as a web-page: How formal do you want to be? What kind of branding will you require from your institution? Who is your target audience?

Most of the set-up and design work for these platforms is done on the web, and so can be done from any reasonably robust computer or laptop. It should be kept in mind, though, that the majority of the most successful blogs and Facebook pages are very photo- and graphic-intensive. Indeed, many of the most visited or re-blogged posts that I've come across are usually accompanied with very good photographs of the items being discussed. Sometimes these images have been taken by the blogger by a hand-held or stationary camera, and sometimes they have been captured via a book-scanner. In both cases, there are time and proficiency implications for the creating, manipulating and posting of images as well. Core competencies in this area include: basic knowledge of photography, lighting and reproduction, operational knowledge of Adobe Photoshop or other photo-editing software, a clear understanding of copyright laws for reproduction and a good eye for composition and striking images or illustrations. Usually, this also requires a computer that is powerful enough to handle image editing and processing software and the tools (camera, scanner, &c.) to capture the images.

The question, then, which is most obvious after considering all of these issues is: can we do it ourselves, or should we hire in specialist staff with the right background and experience to do it for us? For some libraries, the second option doesn't exist, and so the amount of time dedicated to social media activities and the extent of a department's social network is totally dependent on the available time and proficiency of the staff involved. In this instance, a successful, small-scale social media campaign, which returns a good number of results, can often lead to an increase in staffing in order to continue the forward momentum. Other special collections attach social media duties onto newly created roles such as an Outreach or Exhibition Officers, and it is expected that these new members of staff will bring the competencies needed to begin navigating through all of the available social networking platforms to the department.

New and developing areas of social media

While some of us in the special collections world have been playing catch-up in this new, socially networked world, some libraries have been pushing the envelope of socially designed programmes and tools for exploiting collections materials. In the past two years, Oxford University has launched two very successful crowd-sourcing sites which bring together previously hidden materials and new users from across the globe. Crowd-sourcing is a problem solving model based on a distributed group of problem-solvers: a problem is hosted online and is open for users to provide answers or suggest solutions which are then vetted by the hosting site. These can be very small-scale problems such as help in identifying a subject of a portrait or in deciphering a particularly hard-to-read manuscript. However, Oxford has created its *Ancient Lives*¹⁵ and *What's the score at the Bodleian?*¹⁶ on a much larger scale, by putting loads of surrogates of previously unknown or uncatalogued items online for volunteers to help transcribe or catalogue. Both of these projects have been hugely successful mainly because of their openness to the public and their accessibility and ease of use: *What's the score* has already had over 5,000 sheets of music transcribed since launching the site in early 2012.

Virtual environments and augmented reality applications are also being developed in conjunction with special collections departments which are allowing curators to tap into a whole new world of users and interfaces. Currently, at St Andrews, the Department of Special Collections, in partnership with Computer Science, is adapting an already successful re-creation of the medieval St Andrews Cathedral produced in an OpenSim environment.¹⁷ The aim is to construct a virtual re-creation of the medieval Cathedral's book presses and scriptorium which will bring together, for the first time in almost 800 years, extant manuscripts, charters and the building in which they were produced in.¹⁸ This model will then be placed within the larger cathedral reconstruction and allow OpenSim users to access this virtual library within the context of being in the cathedral and being surrounded by the sights and sounds that a medieval reader might have experienced. This model could eventually be used to develop a "history window" application for tablets and smart phones which a user could take onto the existing cathedral ruins and literally look back into time at what the building, and its contents, might have looked like. Similar models have been created to help

¹⁵ University of Oxford. [Ancient Lives](#). (last accessed 31 May 2012)

¹⁶ Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. [What's the score at the Bodleian?](#) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

¹⁷ University of St Andrews. [Virtual St Andrews Cathedral](#) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

¹⁸ Green, Daryl. "[Special Collections stepping out into a new virtual world.](#)" *Echoes from the Vault* (2 May 2012) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

visualize new public library building projects and to get the users involved at the design level.¹⁹

At the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, a JISC funded project is also exploring the implementation and research usage of an augmented reality application designed for special collections. The SCARLET team (or, *Special Collections using Augmented Reality to Enhance Learning and Teaching*) aims to address the problem that “students must consult rare books, manuscripts and archives within the controlled conditions of library study rooms ... materials which are isolated from the secondary, supporting materials and the growing mass of related digital assets. This is an alien experience for students familiar with an information-rich, connected wireless world, and is a barrier to their use of Special Collections.”²⁰ The SCARLET team has recently released videos of the prototype application for tablets and smart phones which would allow a reader to hold their device over a special collections item which would then provide a “research window” full of commentary and tools for further exploration.²¹

These new projects and their usage, which are very exciting models of how to adapt digital humanities research and special collections materials, are tied together by their social networking aspects. They rely on the constant input of their user base and they adapt to user feedback and comments. Many of these types of projects are starting to pop up all over the special collections sector: augmented reality applications are being explored by many different institutions for the support of undergraduate research and to supplement primary resource teaching and the provision of high quality digital surrogates, with their augmented commentary, is being considered for items that will be in deep storage due to refurbishments or relocations.

Conclusion

Social networks provide a unique resource to special collections departments that has not been available before: a real, multi-directional connection to an interested and international readership with the ability to respond to enquiries and conversations in real-time. Previously,

¹⁹ The Birmingham City Library is a great example of this, see: “[Virtual library opens in Second Life.](#)” *Hypergrid Business* (4 July 2011) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

²⁰ “[About the project.](#)” *Project blog of SCARLET* (last accessed 31 May 2012)

²¹ Ramirez, Matt. “[Mapping out a user journey.](#)” *Project blog of SCARLET* (12 September 2011) (last accessed 31 May 2012)

these kinds of conversations between curators and users that are now bubbling up on Twitter or blogs were often confined to the coffee room of a special collections department. That small, local space has now been surpassed and expanded by the use of social networks, and it is now open for all to come and take part in the conversations that we have about the wonderful things that we curate. However, it is now part of our jobs as curators to keep an eye on that web-based “third space” and to move and change with it when it does change. One of the earliest lessons I learned when dealing with the constantly shifting world of social media platforms can be best summed up in something my father recently told me: “expect change...embrace change...encourage change.” New social media platforms are being developed and released all the time: just last year Google tried to compete with Facebook by launching its answer to the social network platform in Google+ (to mixed reviews and subscriptions), and new social photo sharing platform Pinterest exploded onto the social media market.²² Being successful in the social media sphere means being able to adapt quickly to new trends, not being afraid to try new social media platforms and, most importantly, keeping up with our users.

I hope that this paper has provided some input on how institutions in the most remote locations can break open their collections to a wide and international audience. What I have certainly learned while working in St Andrews, itself being a small town in the back of beyond, is that harnessing the power of social media can be incredibly fruitful: our departmental blog, *Echoes from the Vault*, saw over 40,000 hits in under a year’s operation and drew local and national media attention to our collections on more than one occasion. I also hope that I have been able to show how, through the power of social media, world-renowned collections can start breaking the age-old tweedy perception of working in Special Collections. Thank you for your time.

²² Pinterest became such a rapidly popular site that it was named as one of the 50 best websites of 2011 by *Time Magazine*. McCracken, Harry. “[The 50 best websites of 2011](#)” *Time* (16 August 2011) (last accessed 31 May 2012)