Three Examples of Archives’ Use of Social Media as Outreach
Stefanie Ramsay, Elan Tomlinson, Lizzie Strumolo

Introduction

Social media sites have become ubiquitous in the modern digital world, from Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr to Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. According to a Pew Research Center study conducted in 2012, “half of adults in the United States and Canada and over three-quarters of teenagers use social networking sites.” The number of social media consumers continues to grow as more platforms are introduced. In order to appeal to a wide variety of users, many archival repositories have adopted social media as a viable means of outreach in the digital age. There are many potential benefits for utilizing social media tools, both for the archive itself and for the users. Additionally, this method is a cost-effective way of promoting the resources and services available. Altogether, establishing a social media presence allows archives to highlight their collections, attract a broader audience, and create a deeper relationship between the archivist and the user.

Much of the current research on this subject “recognize[s] the importance of embracing new technology to remain vital to users in the digital era, but little evidence exists as to what archival repositories are doing to fulfill this critical mission.” Due to this gap in the existing research, we focused our study on how three specific repositories use social media devices to engage their users: the University of Iowa Special Collections, Harvard University’s Houghton Library, and the Beyond Brown Paper project at Plymouth State University. We analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of their social media habits and considered how other repositories can implement social media as an effective tool of archival outreach.
Critical Analysis

George W. Bain wrote about the often forgotten or cast aside role outreach plays in archives. He explains that many archivists mistakenly consider outreach to be unnecessary, a distraction from more important archival work; that archivists adopt an “‘if you build it, they will come’ attitude toward developing an audience or selling the value of our services.” However, this attitude is changing with the rise of social media, bringing a heightened awareness of the advantages of implementing social media platforms as a means for outreach. Social media brings archival repositories into the digital age and provides an easy way to highlight their collections in an interactive and exciting way that will appeal to current and potential users. Instead of relying on the “‘if you build it, they will come’ method that Bain describes, archives are now able to showcase some of their materials to local and distant users. Posting images from archival collections online does not necessarily mean users will stop visiting the archives. Rather, by highlighting materials from their collections, archives can reach more users—users that might not have considered visiting the archives before, or users that cannot visit the archives because of location or schedule. By utilizing social media platforms, archives have the ability to reach a potentially global audience.

Though social media outreach gives archival repositories the ability to reach a wider audience, it also creates a deeper relationship between the user and the archivist. When a user follows an archives on any type of social media platform, it creates opportunities for an informal dialogue between archivist and user. Often, archives post daily on sites like Twitter and Facebook, and also post meaningful content on blogs and photo sharing sites like Flickr. This frequency of interaction also allows the archivist to understand the needs of his or her user better.
Furthermore, by utilizing social media, archives allow for their user to play a more active role—by commenting on or retweeting a post or by tagging photographs from the collection to provide user-generated metadata. By allowing the user to take on a more active role with the archives as well as providing a space where the archivist and user can interact, social media platforms create a stronger relationship between the two.

Another benefit of utilizing social media platforms is the potential for collaboration between institutions. While the literature on this topic largely overlooks this potential, by making materials readily available online, other archives can provide links to the pages they find fun, interesting, or educational. This type of collections promotion is generally mutual. On Twitter, for example, an archive can repost or retweet a tweet from a similar institution. This way, the materials from the original collection reach a wider audience. Users, if they are following a specific institution, can also learn about similar institutions or collections through the retweets.

An additional way for institutions to cross-collaborate is by posting their material on a third-party social media platform. These sites are often thematic in a way, with a particular location or theme in common. One example that Melanie Schlosser and Brian Stamper cite in their work is the Pets in Collections Tumblr photo blog created by the Digital Collections Librarian at Bryn Mawr College. Any institution can post material from their collections on this website so long as it has a pet in it. Contributors link the photo of the material to the institution that has it. This type of collaboration is a unique opportunity to expose users to collections of which they might otherwise be unaware.

While most of the benefits of implementing a social media presence are user-centered, namely promotion and access, there are added benefits for the internal workings of an archives or
Mary Samouelian found that the staff working on social media outreach will develop a technical skillset that can be lend to other work areas such as digitization projects. Additionally, several of the participants in her study found that by utilizing social media applications, the staff improved in the management of digital objects on the Internet. By expanding this particular skillset, the staff can take on new, digital projects. These projects could be promoted and made available online, ultimately providing the users with access to more of the collection.

Overall, social media is a budget- and user-friendly form of outreach. Samouelian found that most of the participants in her study felt that the implementation was easy. The challenge is managing both the outreach via social media platforms and the general archival work. In Samouelian’s study, the major concern the participants voiced was the time commitment, most “acknowledging that they grapple with balancing more traditional archival duties with maintaining and staying current with these Web applications.” It is important to strike a balance between these two activities. Outreach loses its meaning if materials are not accessible or well maintained. Therefore, though there are many benefits to using social media platforms, institutions should carefully consider the time commitment and which platforms will be most beneficial for their collections. Taking on too many platforms may be unsustainable and could lead to sacrificing important archival work to maintain.

Our analysis serves to fill a gap in the existing research by focusing on how particular archives have successfully implemented social media into their outreach program. By exploring the social media practices of the University of Iowa Special Collections, Harvard’s Houghton Library, and Plymouth State University, we can understand the many advantages and
disadvantages of using these platforms as a device for outreach.

University of Iowa

A leading university located in Iowa City, The University of Iowa (UI) Special Collections & University Archives have wholly embraced a multitude of social media platforms as a tool for user outreach. Their collections include manuscripts and diaries from the Civil War, the original scripts from sixteen James Bond films, and a history of Culinary Arts from 1600-1960, among many others. For those unable to visit these items in person, many of these collections have been digitized for online access. However, many user groups may be unaware of the items available for public use or research. By establishing a strong online presence through a variety of social media mediums, including blogs, a Twitter feed, and even creating a program that allows its users to transcribe material, UI is able to feature their unique collections and open their doors to a wider user base.

Outreach and Special Collections librarian Colleen Theisen pioneered the use of blogging for UI Special Collections. Theisen created and continues to maintain UI’s blog, sponsored through the popular site Tumblr, which features some of the most exciting and rare items held in the UI repository. UI maintains four blogs in total: a central UI Special Collections Tumblr, the Rusty Hevelin Science Fiction Collection, the Map Collection, and Iowa Women’s Archives. Theisen herself regularly updates the main Tumblr and even created special features, such as “Miniature Mondays,” weekly photographs and descriptions of some of the university’s miniature book collection. Readers are allowed to comment on posts, thus creating an open and informal dialogue between users and archivists. These features create a fun and exciting way to
view archives. Because UI’s blogs can be accessed without any restrictions, they potentially attract a new audience.

In addition to their popular blogs, UI also regularly posts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, thereby creating an integrative social media experience that allows for cross-promotion. The archive can direct their Twitter followers to check their Instagram feed by posting a link, or can post to Facebook about a recently created YouTube video. These platforms also allow for users to share posts with their friends or followers by retweeting or sharing posts on Facebook. Using social media creates connections not only with local researchers but puts UI’s collections on display for global users. UI’s social media pages can be accessed worldwide. Overall, as one UI librarian stated, “it’s show-and-tell on an exalted level.”

In addition to featuring their items on social media, UI also created a program titled DIY (Do-It-Yourself) History, which “crowdsources” their work by allowing users to actually transcribe material for digital access. This program is promoted heavily through UI’s social media pages. Volunteers can access manuscripts from certain collections and transcribe them into a digital format to be uploaded onto UI’s website. It began with online volunteers transcribing the Civil War Diaries and Letters, and quickly expanded to include many other collections, including transcribing cookbooks and recipes. UI provides instruction and materials, but allows users to transcribe on their own time and from their personal devices. Because the task is relatively simple, many types of users can get involved with the project. Additionally, there is no registration or login required. As Nicole Saylor of UI says, “We didn’t think users would tolerate barriers to participation.” This openness signals a trust between the repository and its user, which helps to cultivate a positive relationship within the community.
Due to the limited restrictions placed on project participation and the chance to contribute to an exciting project, the DIY History endeavor became hugely popular. After several websites and blogs mentioned the opportunity, UI’s project “went from about 1,000 daily hits to our digital library on a really good day to more than 70,000.” Saylor also points out that not only have many users contributed, but they continue to contribute to new DIY projects, thus solidifying a long-lasting relationship. UI has received positive feedback from users who write that they feel they are helping to create and preserve history. The DIY History page is a fun and innovative way of reaching out to a new user base and involving potential patrons in their work, while also digitizing a mass of new material. Because of budget and time constraints, the work involved in this process may not otherwise be completed. This project maximizes efficiency by outsourcing work to excited volunteers while also creating stronger ties between the archivists and the users. UI also notes that the project has boosted monetary donations, which helps to promote similar programs in their repository.

UI has adopted social media wholeheartedly and maintains a strong presence on a variety of platforms, thus expanding their user base and showcasing their unique collections on a local and global scale. While not every repository must participate in social media to the extent that UI has, there are many lessons to be gleaned from UI’s online presence. Signing up for a variety of social media platforms allows for cross-promotion of events or materials, which draws in a variety of users. Using that social media to promote projects in which users can volunteer their services to complete time-consuming projects creates a stronger tie between the repository and potential users. Moreover, the way UI has utilized social media makes their archives an interesting and exciting place for all visitors. UI’s heavy online footprint not only showcases the
unique collections, it achieves the ultimate goal of highlight the archive as a whole and the services it provides.

The Houghton Library

The Houghton Library, Harvard University’s repository for rare books and manuscripts, utilizes many social media platforms as a means of keeping connected with their user base. The Houghton Library uses most of the major sites including Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and blogs to varying degrees. In utilizing some platforms in particular the Houghton has the ability to promote their collections, provide access, and create a rapport with their user as well as with other archival institutions.

The strength of the Houghton Library’s social media outreach lies in their blogs: the Houghton Library Blog, the Houghton Modern Books and Manuscripts Blog, and the Hyde Collection Catablog. Links for each blog are provided on the Houghton’s main website as well as on each blog site. The main blog is the Houghton Library Blog, which posts material from the whole repository, while the other two post material specific to their collection. There is some overlap between the three blogs as the main blog reposts entries from the Hyde Collection and Modern Books and Manuscript blogs so as to reach a wider audience.

The Houghton Library blog posts material regularly, ranging from every other day to once a week. It is a very user-friendly interface, with links to different categories on the side: events, exhibits, acquisitions, and preservation to name only a few. That the Houghton is trying to reach a wider audience is evident in the style of the posts, which targets the general user, not necessarily scholars interested in specific materials of the collection. An example of this
approachability is the series of posts documenting the Julio Mario Santo Domingo collection, which “documents psychoactive drugs and their physical and social effects, from cultivation and synthesis to the myriad cultural and counter-cultural products such altered states of mind have inspired and influenced.” These posts often display a sense of humor and lightheartedness, with blog titles like “Not Suitable for Snuggling,” and “I Need that like I need a hole in the head! Oh wait…,” the latter describing a drawing of the procedure of drilling a hole in a person’s head to treat health issues, called trephination. The joking, colloquial nature of these titles is likely to catch the interest of the user who will learn more about the collection by reading further in the post.

The issue of access is important, especially in the Santo Domingo collection, because not all the materials are physically together within the repository. In fact, they are spread out around six libraries on campus. The Houghton Library Blog provides access to a virtual space where the collection can exist as a whole. In addition to providing users access to collections, the blog also uses its online presence to promote new digitization, as well as exhibits and events. The “Medieval Sermons, On Display and Online” post announces a new online exhibit “A History of Medieval Christian Preaching.” This post provides information on and access to the online exhibit as well as information on the physical exhibit and an accompanying conference, with dates and locations. Users can access this information easily, and can browse through the online exhibit before visiting in person or attending the conference.

The Houghton uses another type of photo-based blog on Tumblr, which was recognized in Tumblr’s yearly review of 2013: “Tumblr analyzed more than 150 million sites and 70 billion posts to collect and showcase the best of the Internet from 2013. Houghton’s blog is joined by 19
other honorees that include the White House, National Geographic and Financial Times.”\textsuperscript{16} With this recognition, the Houghton not only has the ability to reach a wider user base, but can also promote their collections to potential users across the country and even worldwide. Curator of Early Modern Books and Manuscripts John Overholt gave the reason for starting the Tumblr as “a great way in to the use of special collections for somebody who has a general interest in our materials but doesn’t know where to start. It gives a great feeling for the diversity of our holdings.”\textsuperscript{17} Not only does the Tumblr page display such diversity, each image links directly to the HOLLIS database so that an interested user can continue—or start—his or her research easily. Knowing that the diverse materials they house have the potential to garner interest on a large scale, the Houghton has used social media to promote their collections and to provide access to them.

John Overholt has a large presence in the Houghton’s social media outreach. The Houghton does have a Twitter page; however Overholt’s personal Twitter account, on which he posts mainly about his work at the Houghton, is far more effective in reaching a wider audience for the repository and creating meaningful relationships with users. Overholt is extremely active on Twitter, posting upwards of ten times a day. The tweets are pictures of materials from the collection accompanied by a one-sentence description and links to articles as well as personal and professional correspondence. Promotion—whether for the Houghton Library or similar institutions—plays a large role on Overholt’s Twitter page. He often retweets other institutions such as the Getty, Bodleian Rare Books, and University of Iowa Special Collections and often has conversations with them, especially with his colleagues at UI.

Perhaps the reason why Overholt is so successful is because you can see the man behind
the tweets. A short article enumerating the benefits of library Tumblr pages claimed, “readers like to know the person behind the blog. Even if you are keeping up a Tumblr for your library, feel free to field questions and engage with other bloggers.”

Overholt embodies this idea wholeheartedly. In between pictures of the materials he works with, Overholt will include clever or amusing personal facts such as “My 4yo nephew sent me a birthday video saying I was the best librarian ever. I think he's been coached—he doesn't even follow me on Twitter.”

This allows users to feel like they know Overholt and can connect with him as an archivist, and a person, on a deeper level.

The Houghton Library has fully embraced the idea of social media as a form of outreach. They have three successful blogs that they update regularly, a Tumblr that has received national recognition, and have an active presence on twitter. However, there is room for improvement. The Houghton’s Facebook page, for example, is static, providing only general information about the repository. Given that they are on a college campus, they should not overlook Facebook as a potential source for finding new users. College students are extremely active on Facebook, therefore it would benefit the Houghton to be active on that platform as well to tap into that user base. Overall, the Houghton has a solid online presence that allows access and promotes their collections while at the same time creating a deeper relationship with their users and with similar institutions.

**Beyond Brown Paper, Plymouth State University**

Over 45,000 photographs, from collections hosted by Plymouth State University (PSU) are currently available to the public through the Beyond Brown Paper project
Built on a blogging platform, the website invites users to contribute to the process of identifying and interpreting archived photographs while engaging in conversation with other members of the community. Begun with the 11,000 photographs from the Brown Company archive, the project is an ongoing collaboration between three departments at PSU: Lamson Library’s Michael J. Spinelli Jr. Center for University Archives and Special Collections, Karl Drerup Art Gallery, and the Center for Rural Partnerships. The project’s creators consider Beyond Brown Paper both “an uncurated exhibit and an unstructured archive.”

From its founding in 1852, the pulp and paper industry of the Brown Company dominated the economy and shaped the town of Berlin, New Hampshire. At the height of their reign, the company hired photographers to document their equipment, workers, and processes. When, in the 1970s the Brown Company moved its operations out of the U.S., the photograph collection was entrusted to Lamson Library Special Collections, at the college that is today Plymouth State University. PSU is located nearly 80 miles north of the town the Brown Company built, and there was concern expressed by Berlin residents regarding ownership and access to the historic images. According to the creators of the project, “these concerns inspired efforts to make this collection available online.” In 2002, grant money was obtained and the project of scanning the Brown Company photographs began. Four years later, the website was up and running.

“To insure community participation and understanding,” Beyond Brown Paper set up a computer workstation in Berlin which, in addition to providing access to the website, was managed so that viewers would have assistance relating information regarding the images by
phone as well. “For some community members, the desire to view the photographs, read other peoples’ comments, and add their own memories and thoughts prompted them to use a computer for the first time.”

This social media outreach project not only created a stronger connection between the archive and the community it serves, but actually fostered technology literacy within that community. It has certainly reached far beyond the walls of PSU. While the bulk of the online labeling has been completed by members of the Berlin/Coös Historical Society, the site gets hits from historians and bloggers from across the United States. Many leave comments on the homepage praising the site and collection, continually generating positive publicity for the departments involved.

Photo interpretation from a variety of users with a range of experience, is aided by the project’s use of “familiar (emic) terminology that is easily understood by people who use Google and other social media.”

The use of natural language also makes it easier for users to access the photographs. The images were uploaded into an open source software product created by a PSU employee; this management system, Scriblio, combines blog technology and library software to enable multifaceted communication on library web pages and integration with the rest of the Web. The collaborators behind Beyond Brown Paper intentionally used a system that was “user-friendly for non-technical users.”

The site had over eight million hits in its first three years, and today, over a decade since the photographs were first scanned, Beyond Brown Paper continues to see almost daily user contributions. Links are provided for bookmarking an image at over a dozen social media sites including Facebook, reddit, and StumbleUpon. It is also easy for users to subscribe to updates regarding site activity through email, Google, or Bloglines. Beyond Brown Paper’s
Beyond Brown Paper was a focused attempt at utilizing social media as outreach for an archival collection; PSU has by no means put comparable projects into place to support all of their archives and special collections. However, with the success of Beyond Brown Paper it may be worth their while to implement similar projects for other collections which could use the attention. Not every collection need have a presence on every social media site. PSU’s experiment with archival photographs demonstrates the effectiveness of choosing the right platform and concentrating available efforts and resources. Paying heed to the needs and interests of the residents of Berlin certainly laid the foundation for the success and popularity of this project. Certainly this is a well designed use of social media which other photo archivists could borrow from to strengthen the impact their collections have on the communities that they serve.

Catherine Amidon, Director of the Karl Drerup Gallery at PSU, and Beyond Brown Paper collaborator, describes the website in this way, “What interests me in particular about this project is that it’s not a photo database – it’s an exhibition. And it’s an exhibition that invites the oral history process into it.” By offering the public not only access to, but the opportunity to take part in the shaping and care of a collection of such importance to their history, Beyond Brown Paper continues to generate support and interest for the photograph collections and archives managed by Plymouth State University.

Conclusion

The specific examples from University of Iowa Special Collections, Harvard’s Houghton
Library, and Plymouth State University offer a departure from George W. Bain’s “if you build it, they will come” attitude that archivists often display (Bain, 406:4). Outreach is no longer an unnecessary distraction from more important archival work. With social media platforms readily available, archives can reach a wider audience and interact with users on a deeper level.

While the advantages of implementing social media platforms are many, repositories should think critically about which social media platforms are advantageous for their collections. Intentionality is more important than scope when it comes to web presence—while Beyond Brown Paper doesn’t have a need to cultivate a Facebook following, it makes sense for the Houghton Library to pursue a platform frequented by college students. When resources are scarce, it is wasteful to dedicate time to keep up social media sites not populated by the community that the archive is attempting to support. A well maintained outreach project will elicit positive feedback, such as that witnessed by Beyond Brown Paper and the University of Iowa’s DIY History program. Due to the nature of social media sites, such posts reinforce and advertise for developing online communities.

One of the greatest benefits of using social media for outreach is the way most platforms facilitate conversation. Any program which allows space for users to comment and respond to each other and with archive staff as well as to the collection, can create community. Frequency of interaction also allows the archivist to understand the needs of his or her user better. Allowing the user to play a more active role gives the user a sense of having a stake in the archive. In addition, social media can have a positive impact on use of technology within the user and developer communities. As noted by UI, straightforward access is an important factor when it comes to involving users in participatory roles. Plymouth State University unintentionally
increased computer and web fluency when it installed a computer center in a town with ties to its photographic collection.

Using social media for outreach increases user access. It generates conversation and builds community. When users repost, or retweet, material has a chance to quickly reach a wider, and potentially untapped, audience. When they have the opportunity to engage with collections, users develop a deeper connection to the archive. Such relationships foster continuing public support, benefiting the archival organization as needs continue to develop and shift.

Notes

5. Samouelian, 66.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


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Division of Labor

Much of our discussion when choosing a topic happened over email. Stefanie and Lizzie decided to work with the topic of outreach and exhibits. We saw on the Canvas page that Elan was interested in that topic as well and asked her to join us. We began discussing topics broadly, such as interactive exhibits or the role of social media in exhibits. We were able narrow down the topic to the use of social media platforms as a form of outreach based on the articles we found interesting. Additionally, we recognized a gap in the existing research, and were interested in taking this opportunity to contribute some new ideas.

In order to make the division of work easier, we each chose an institution to focus our research on based on how they are using social media in their outreach programs. We created an outline comprising of our notes on the articles that we had picked out as well as notes for each individual institution. Stefanie took on the introduction. Based on the notes we took and common themes that we each pulled out, Lizzie wrote the critical analysis. Elan wrote the conclusion. For our individual sections, Stefanie wrote about the University of Iowa Special Collections, Lizzie wrote about Harvard’s Houghton Library, and Elan wrote about the Beyond Brown Paper Project at Plymouth State University. We worked independently on our sections, then compiled our findings to create a complete paper. Each of us had the chance to edit the paper and work together to unite our themes into a single voice. It is always difficult to coordinate schedules and timing because of our varying projects and assignments, however we utilized collaborative tools, particularly email and Google Documents, to successfully complete this research paper. Through this paper, we were able to explore an aspect of archives of particular interest to us as a team.