# Archives and Social Media

by Mark Vajcner

**1.0    Introduction**

This report examines the growing use of social media by archives through a short literature review and survey of various Canadian archives and archivists. It concludes with a series of recommendations about social media use in archives and a draft social media strategy that may be of use to the University of Regina.

**2.0    Historical Development**

Archives and archivists have been active on the Internet since the World Wide Web made its appearance in the early 1990s. Early practitioners developed the first rudimentary archival websites posting information on location and hours of operation, collections scope, and conditions for use. Over time archival websites grew in sophistication and archives began to digitize parts of their physical collections and make those digitized collections available. Generally these efforts can be grouped into three relatively distinct, yet concurrent phases.

Beginning in the mid-1990s archives and archivists began to create on-line descriptive databases that made collection-level descriptions available to researchers. These were linked with contact information and presented as a discovery tool. Researchers could easily ascertain where relevant collections of records could be found and then contact or visit the relevant archives (Vajcner 2). Many descriptive databases arose based on repository, region, or theme and as these became more and more complex digital materials were added to them. First virtual exhibits were created and later comprehensive digitization projects were launched. Rather than presenting a small sampling of records, as the virtual exhibits do, more substantial projects, which aim to digitize the majority of records in a given collection, were launched (Vajcner 5).

The rise of Web 2.0 and social media applications in recent years has led to archives experimenting with these tools. Web 2.0 and social media is generally defined as "web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration" over the Internet.[1] Such sites allow users to interact and collaborate with each other as "creators" of content rather than simply as consumers who passively view content. For the purposes of this report social media will be used to both refer to Web 2.0 applications and to social media tools. Darlene Fichter (Fichter 58) suggests that there are several basic social media tools. They are

- Weblogs that enable person-to-person communication
- Community sites such as wikis and message boards that serve as forums on particular topics
- Sites such as *Digg*, *Flickr*, or *Technorati* that invite user participation and contribution, and
- Podcasting that allows users to upload, download and share content.

**3.0     Literature Review**

Social media use by archives and archivists is in its early stages. As of yet there is little scholarly literature written on the subject.

In 2008 Mary Samouelian explored the use of Web 2.0 tools by college and university archives concluding that archivists were embracing these tools both to promote their digital content and to communicate with their users. She went so far as to say that the institutions she studied were in the beginning stages of redefining their relationships with their user base (Samouelian 42). Samouelian was one of the first archival scholars to move beyond theory and to interview archivists who were actually implementing social media in their descriptive and digitization efforts. A year earlier Richard Pearce-Moises had issued a call for archives to embrace user participation. While not directly speaking of Web 2.0 tools he advised archivists that "wikis, Amazon, and Google show us how people can work asynchronously and collectively to build useful resources" and concluded that this type of computing was resulting

in "changes in public expectations for access to information" that would profoundly impact archives (Pearce-Moses 14-15, Samouelian 46). Elizabeth Yakel felt archives to be slow in there adoption of social media tools in comparison to libraries and museums (Yakel 159). In earlier days archives were much more interested in the potential of the web. "Part of the reason for this" waning enthusiasm, Yakel postulated

> may be a wariness of moving away from the traditional relationship between the archivist and the researcher. Another may be the fear of overwhelming responses and actually increasing the work for reference archivists or demands that archives make available more digitized or digitally-born materials.

Nevertheless Samouelian showed, using content analysis, sampling, and one-on-one interviews the growing use of social media at several archives in the United States. Of 213 archives investigated 85 archives, or 40%, were hosting digital collections of some kind and of those 85 archives 38 were actively using social media tools (Samouelian 57-58). In 2009 Adam Crymble undertook an extensive study analyzing the social media patterns of 195 archivists and archival institutions. Crymble's study focused on two social media tools, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. The results showed that use of these two social media tools was widespread but that the use of these tools differed significantly between archival institutions and individual archivists. Archives overwhelmingly used services to promote their holdings, services, and events (Crymble 144) while archivists tended to promote information they find useful or interesting in their day-to-day work (Crymble 125).

Different social media tools are useful for different tasks. As Crymble writes (Crymble 129):

> In many cases, the most effective promotion requires using multiple forms of social media in concert. Some of the more useful services for archives are those that allow information to be broadcast. Much like traditional newsletters, the social networking sites *Facebook* and *Twitter* provide this opportunity.

Crymble further found that overall use of social media tools by archives and archivists

in Canada was low when compared to use in the United States and the United Kingdom (Crymble 138). On average, archives had more followers on *Twitter* than *Facebook*, 135 as opposed to 40 (Crymble 138). No connection between number of posts and number of fans was found. Institutions that hardly every posted had as many fans and followers as those that offered daily or regular updates. The greatest single factor influencing number of followers and fans seems to have been the status of the archives. Larger, more well known, and national institutions outranked smaller, less known regional institutions no matter the quantity of quality of their posts. The exception was archives strongly associated with a social cause, with video or audio collections, as well as archives strongly connected to genealogy tended to attract the largest amount of followers (Crymble 139-40)

Crymble suggests that *Facebook* users are more interested in connecting with friends than institutions and cited this as a fact for the generally lower number of followers than was recorded on *Twitter*. His study also found a large attrition rate among archives. Over half of archives abandoned their accounts within a year (Crymble 146). "*Twitter* may be a better choice for archives that want to minimize the time spent on outreach activities and avoid building resources that recreate content that is available elsewhere. Archives looking to drive traffic to an institutional website, or engage in dialogue with users and other archives, should find *Twitter* an easier solution." (Crymble 146). Some of this engagement may also be due to the demographics of the two tools. *Facebook* tends to have a younger user base while *Twitter*'s largest demographic is the 35 to 54 age group (Crymble 133). Archives tend to be interesting and relevant to users as they age. Archives tend to be associated with the past and recording the past, things that younger demographic groups typically have little interest in.

A recent news story declared *Facebook* the most popular social media tool in the world with 685 million monthly active users. Fully 49% of Canadians maintain a *Facebook* profile but the story went on to say that the number of Canadian users was actually in decline and that roughly 1.5 million Canadians have abandoned their profiles in recent months. [2] The spectacular speed and unpredictability of the rise and fall of social media platforms means that archives

must exercise caution in placing all their effort into one single social media tool.

Today user-generated information is already being integrated into archival description. As an example numerous archives have established digitized photographic collections on *Flickr*, the popular image sharing website, and these images are being "tagged", or indexed, by users. Users are also adding comments to the images. While many of these comments simply exhibit approval of the image subject, others add substantive information to the record. For example, when the Library of Congress posted a set of vivid color photographs from the Great Depression and World War II era on *Flickr* and specifically asked users to help identify the subjects tags were established, debated, and refined by users. One typical image, of commuters waiting for a bus, had 47 tags associated with it. These ranged from general subject descriptors, such as "bus stop", "travel", and "transportation" to less obvious ones like "daily grind".[3] Items within the picture were also tagged. Commonplace things such as light posts and a no-parking sign were identified and tagged. Another image of a wartime barrage balloon generated a discussion about the differences between zeppelins, dirigibles, and barrage balloons followed later by a discussion about effective training tactics for the use of barrage balloons in air defense.[4]

The Northern BC Archives recently used *Facebook* to identify photographs from a former asbestos mining town in Northern British Columbia. Social media was used as an "aide-memoire" tool soliciting former members of the mining community to help identify a series of photographs donated to the archives by the mining company. Former residents of the community had kept in close touch after the closure of the mine and town in 1992 and this network was tapped into by the project. A *Facebook* group was established and photographs posted. The news feed option in *Facebook* made it easy to alert the 330 members of the group each time a new set of photographs was posted and of the 115 photographs posted to the group 97% were identified (Rose). In addition to identification, users also provided addition detail. Some added electronic links to their commentary others copied, resized, and rotated images to explain how they should be viewed. One user even identified a series of unknown mountain

ranges and plotted their location, uploading them to *Google Earth*. Users also regularly went beyond the perimeters of the photographs to describe places and buildings outside of the camera's view. Users engaged in online discussions sharing memories about technical machinery, mining processes and personal or community pasts. About 35 members of the *Facebook* group were most active providing the majority of descriptions and adding content to the group page.

**4.0     Survey**

For the purposes of this report a short questionnaire was sent to archives and archivists across Canada on 21 June 2011 via the ARCAN-L listeserv.[5] ARCAN-L is a long-established forum for Canadian archivists to discuss professional issues and concerns. A summary of results follows.

The Archives of Ontario (Boden) currently uses *YouTube* and *Twitter*. *Flickr* and *Facebook* have also been considered although no concrete actions in that direction have yet occurred. *Twitter* forms the core of their social media activities to date and has been used for event announcements, general promotion, public education and engagement. It seems to be most effective for engagement, since content related to their collections and activities is most often commented on or retweeted. While the Archives of Ontario were anticipating a *Twitter* audience made up of students across Ontario, they found that most of their followers are archivists and other heritage professionals. This seems to be a common phenomenon in social media use and archives. The tools generally, although certainly not exclusively, reach those who already have a connection or affinity to archives and archival materials.

Smaller institutions find mixed results in their use of social media. The Musée Héritage Museum Archives in St. Albert, Alberta utilizes a blog as well as a *Facebook* page and finds social media a useful tool to publicize events and announcements. The archivist, however, feels that the user base has not been completely receptive to the museum's social media efforts. User-

generated comments are rarely posted to the blog and people "say they'll attend an event on the *Facebook* invite but few show up. Sometimes I'm not sure who is reading the blog and how exactly to reach out to users who would be interested in us" (Georgopalis).

Despite comments such as this many smaller archives responding to the survey saw social media as being part of an effective outreach strategy (Smith). "So many younger people are using these sites on a daily basis" one wrote, "it is perhaps an effective and immediate way to reach them" (Smith). Others are internally discussing the prospects of social media and are finding mixed reactions to the usefulness of these tools among their colleagues (Vinh-Doyle), but the evidence of success is promising. The City of Wetaskiwin Archives uses *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and occasionally posts to a blog but found *Facebook* to be the most useful social media platform as "it can be adapted to do the same things the other social media sites do individually" (Smith). The University of Winnipeg uses both *Facebook* and *Twitter* (Prefontaine),

> We use *Facebook* for announcements but the primary purpose is for mini exhibits because it's the only digital space we really have at the moment. I usually send a tweet about whatever we post on *Facebook*, but I don't have them synced.
>
> Our students are the most receptive to *Facebook*, in fact student interest in the archives has skyrocketed since going on *Facebook*.

In addition to exhibits and announcements the University of Winnipeg posts comments from staff, general archival information, such as the celebration of International Archives Day, and its participation in *Historypin*, a social media platform where users can overlay old pictures on *Google Maps* and *Google Street View* allowing comparisons of current and historical views  by geographical location.[6] These innovative tactics have resulted in numerous comments and feedback posted to the University of Winnipeg *Facebook* page and may be behind the archives growing popularity among students.

The University of Winnipeg, like most archives became interested in social media as a

result of the interest of staff members. Interested staff usually takes on the maintenance of their institution's social media presence. Most institutions are too small for a formal or semi-formal social media maintenance structure. The Archives of Ontario has developed a social media management model. It directs its social media initiatives through an advisory committee made up of representatives from functional units across the institution. Ideally this opens initiatives up for diverse content as each unit contributes ideas and content (Boden).  Among survey respondents, however, this formalized model was the exception rather than the rule.

## 5.0  Conclusions and Recommendations

After an assessment of the articles, presentations, and responses to the informal online survey, it is clear that the use of social media among archives and archivists is growing.

Social media tools require little up front training and archivists can create a social media presence very easily and quickly. The maintenance of this presence, however, is more time consuming as archivists must develop content to share with their social media followers. Archives need to carefully weigh the efforts placed into developing and maintaining social media tools against the outcomes received. Archivists need first assess what they wish to accomplish with their social media presence (this becomes their Social Media Strategy) and then choose the social media platform most suited to achieve that outcome. As different social media platforms have differing strengths and differing audience characteristics this choice is a critical one. Further, social media tools rise and fall in popularity quickly and archives should not over commit themselves to a single platform. They should endeavor to develop a variety of social media tools and use each to their strengths. This both increases audience and guards against the inevitable fall in favor of a platform. However it also creates the very real threat of duplication of effort in posting the same or similar information to a variety of platforms. One possible technique to avoid such duplication is to post content to a central and stable location (such as a webpage or a blog) and then link to it with tweets, *Facebook* posts, and other social media communications.

As the landscape of social media changes so quickly archivists must frequently assess the success of their social media presence and be willing to drop platforms and otherwise radically rethink their strategy and practice. This again highlights the importance of a central reference point, like a webpage or blog, as the relatively constant online face of the archives. It becomes the touchstone from which the social media presence will draw.

| Recommendations in building a social media presence: |
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| 1. Develop desired outcomes (Social Media Strategy) for a social media presence and then choose the social media platform most suited to achieve those outcomes. |
| 2. Enlist a variety of social media platforms to implement a Social Media Strategy and gear the use of each platform to its strengths. |
| 3. Use a webpage or create a blog as the central reference point for information. Post content to this central and stable location and then link to it in tweets, *Facebook* posts, and other social media communications. |
| 4. Frequently review and assess the success of the social media presence. |

The informal survey indicates that many responding archives feel that their social media efforts tend to reach those already interested in archives (eg. genealogists, archivists, and other heritage professionals). Social media, as any other communications tool, can be used by archives to attract new audiences. In this case social media should be part of a developed outreach and public awareness strategy and it should be deployed in a thoughtful manner that takes advantage of the various strengths that social media presents. It is beyond the purview of this report to postulate on such an outreach and public awareness strategy. The literature review

shows examples of possible uses for social media in identifying and strengthening archival descriptions. The *Flickr* site employed by the United States Library of Congress is a strong example of such a use as is the photo identification project at the Northern BC Archives.

Another approach for social media use is to strengthen the existing community of those with an interest in archives. Social media can effectively distribute information about new collections, events, and other news. These may not elicit conversations but they strengthen the connection to existing researchers, donors, and other supporters by keeping them up to date. But social media is not simply a one-way communication tool. Social media may also be an effective vehicle to highlight significant research projects and researcher discoveries in the archives. These may elicit conversations among research users as they begin to discuss their findings or other sources in other repositories. It will be important to experiment both with platforms and with content to learn what engages the community. This may lead to revisions in the Social Media Strategy as feedback, or lack of it, informs the established outcomes initially set out by the archives.

Knowing the community will be important. In fact there may be several differing communities and the archives may attract different followers on different social media platforms. Understanding these communities may involve more that simple trial and error. Various survey instruments exist to poll followers in various social media platforms, these should eventually be employed to learn about those communities, who they are, and what they are interested in.

All of this implies a sizable online community that follows the archives. Polling may not produce meaningful results in a community of a few dozen. Nor will their likely be much conversation in a small community. Tagging, and other methods of online identification of archival materials may not be effective if the numbers using or viewing the materials offered for description is small. Size of community (and its devotion) will play an important role in participation levels and thus play an important role in how the archives social media presence

evolves. Small communities, or marginally engaged ones, may exist simply to receive one-way communication on news and events and that is okay.

| Recommendations for Using a Social Media Presence: |
|---|
| 5.  Know your online community/communities. Learn what engages these communities and employ survey and other polling tools (if the community is large enough). |
| 6.  Revise Social Media Strategy based on knowledge of your online community/communities, surveys, and general interaction. |
| 7.  Use social media in a manner appropriate to the size (and evolvement ) of the online community/ communities. |

Social media is about communication and collaboration. The ultimate aim of any social media strategy is to engage a community in dialogue about archives and archival materials that allows both archivists to learn from their users and archives to inform an every-growing user base. At it highest ideal, the aim is, as the United States National Archives eloquently stated in its Social Media Strategy (US National Archives 2), to

> make the research endeavor smoother for newcomers and help make the records more discoverable by history lovers who don't know yet about the National Archives. By engaging in more conversations with you and getting to know you better, we seek to exchange our insights and thereby improve access to our nation's documentary heritage together.

**6.0 Draft Social Media Strategy for the University of Regina Archives and Special Collections**

**6.1 Objective**

Archives and Special Collections is making increased use of social media in its operations. The purpose of this strategy document is to set aims and measures for our use of social media. Social media tools assist Archives and Special Collections in connecting with researchers and others in the community with an interest in our collections. Our ultimate aim is to make the research endeavor smoother for researchers and to learn from their research experiences to strengthen our collections and our service delivery.

**6.2 Coordination with Library social media tools**

Archives and Special Collections is a component unit of the University Library. As such it will utilize the social media and other external communications tools maintained by the Library. Archives and Special Collections will participate on the Library/Archives External Communications and Promotions Team and will use Library social media to communicate general information about our collections and services.

**6.3 Specific social media tools for digital collections**

In addition Archives and Special Collections will maintain a separate suite of social media tools to communicate and engage with users of its digital projects and digital collections. The aim of this suite of tools is to specifically engage and interact with researchers around our digital materials.

| Desired outcome | Social Media Tool |
|---|---|
| Communicate updates and information about our digital projects. | Facebook |
| Highlight materials recently digitized and specifically digitize materials of interest to given topics. | Flickr, Facebook, HistoryPin |
| Actively seek user feedback. | Facebook |

As the University moves toward a new content management system (CMS) Archives and Special Collections will develop a weblog to serve as a central pivot around which to cluster its social media tools.

**6.4 Assessment and review**

This Social Media Strategy will be reviewed six months after adoption to ensure that objectives are being met.

**7.0    Endnotes**

1      Wikipedia article on "Web 2.0". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0 (Accessed 19 June 2011)

2      Michael Oliveira. Number of Canadians on *Facebook* Declines. *TheRecord. com* (13 June 2011).
http://www.therecord.com/living/article/547018--number-of-canadians-on-facebook-declines
(Accessed 21 June 2011)

3      Library of Congress *Flickr* page
http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2178248615/in/set-72157603671370361/
(Accessed 1 July 2011)

4      Library of Congress *Flickr* page
http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2178246585/in/set-72157603671370361/
(Accessed 1 July 2011)

5      Full text of the ARCAN-L message:

I am currently developing a short report for the University of Regina Archives and Special Collections on possible social media strategies. I'd like to hear from list members about your institutions' experience with social media (*Facebook, Twitter, Flickr*, etc...). I'm specifically interested in the following:

- How many different social media tools does your institution use?
- Do you find certain social media tools more effective for certain types of communication? If so which tools for which types?
- What section of your user base is most receptive to your social media presence?

And finally, I'd be interested in anything else your institution has learned from its social media experience.

I should have my report ready by mid-July. I'd be happy to share it with anyone who is interested.

6      University of Winnipeg *Facebook* page. http://www.facebook.com/uwarchives
(Accessed 4 July 2011)

## 8.0    Citations

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  Rene Georgopalis, 21 June 2011
  Gabrielle Prefontaine, 4 July 2011
  Angela Smith, 21 June 2011
  William Vinh-Doyle, 22 June 2011

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