

Looking for the Next Big Thing: Libraries and Social Networks

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Abstract:

Library and Archives Canada favours the use of social media to promote our collection and to spread the word about our events, partnerships and programs, and the services we offer. The cornerstones of our strategy are awareness, engagement and collaboration. This paper provides an overview of our social media strategy, with examples of specific campaigns.

Keywords: social media

At Library and Archives Canada, we use of social media extensively to promote our collection and to spread the word about our events, our partnerships and our programs, as well as the services we offer. The cornerstones of this approach are awareness, engagement and collaboration.

As of May 5, our institution had 55,000 subscribers on its French and English Facebook pages and 60,500 followers on Twitter. And we also use Flickr, YouTube and Instagram.

This enables us to effectively disseminate information about our public programming events and our services and that's a big motivator for us, because, as an agency of the Government of Canada, we are not allowed to buy ads in the traditional media to create this kind of awareness. We have to choose other media to showcase our conferences, exhibitions and many services.

We also use social media to highlight documents in our collection. Every day, we highlight two or three documents that tie in with current events. Consider the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation in 2017: for each day of the year, an event that took place on that day at some point in Canada's history appeared with the hashtag #OnThisDay, including Alanis Morissette reaching the top of the charts, women gaining the right to vote and Nelson Mandela visiting Ottawa.

The 2018 Winter Olympics also provided an opportunity for daily messages to focus on past achievements of Canadian athletes featured in our documents.

Sometimes we just take a chance, not knowing what will interest people... *Road Trip*, is a good example. On July 31, 1954, freelance photographer Rosemary Gilliat and three of her girlfriends packed up their Plymouth station wagon and began a 12,391-kilometre road trip across Canada. LAC's Summer of 2015 Facebook posts from her journals and photos of the trip reached over 340,000 people.

Another post that exceeded our wildest hopes happened on April 1, 2016, when we made the military record of James Howlett, a.k.a. Wolverine, available online. As it turns out, James Howlett had quite the military career before he met Professor X! And according to our records, he was gravely wounded in action many times and gained a reputation as a gritty survivor. Of course, I'm just kidding. These are not real papers or authentic documents. But using Wolverine's fake file for our April Fool's joke was our most popular social media post ever. We got 157,000 likes on our Facebook page, nearly 24,000 comments, 45,000 shares, and in total, we reached over 6 million people! We were on TV and made the front page of Reddit, and in addition to the Canadian media, the story was picked up on Forbes.com and even *Entertainment Weekly*.

And of course, that little stunt was conceived to allow us to shine a bright light on our biggest mass digitization project to date, the digitization of our First World War personnel files. 640 000 of them! Some 32 million images! We started in 2014, with box number one, and we'll be going in order all the way to box number ten thousand, six hundred and eighty six! By the end of 2018, in time for the 100th anniversary of Remembrance Day, on November 11, all 640,000 files will be online. As of May, 2018, we had already digitized over 91% of the total. These files include the records and papers of famous soldiers (other than Wolverine): like Frederick Banting, who discovered insulin, One-Eyed Frank McGee, the legendary hockey player, and Grey Owl, one of the world's first eco-warriors... as well as little-known soldiers whose families are searching for information about them. Files like these are a major resource for genealogy and historical research.

Recently, we used humour again to showcase our facilities. On Star Wars Day, May the Fourth, 2018, we aimed to reach new clients "in a galaxy far, far away". We published a photograph of me and Lord Darth Vader with the caption that the Galactic Empire, plagued by a series of data breaches, had unilaterally declared that once built, our new preservation facility would become the permanent repository of all future Death Star plans.

Needless to say, we went viral again and, in the process, drew attention to Phase 2 of our Preservation Centre, soon to be located next to our main one in the suburbs of Ottawa.

On a more serious note, another initiative made possible thanks to social media is *Project Naming*. The idea is to digitize and identify, through Facebook and Twitter, the Inuit, First Nations and Métis peoples and communities seen in historical photos from our collection. Many of them had remained unidentified for decades. Our original goal was modest – to digitize and identify 500 photographs within a year. But *Project Naming* took on a life of its own. Since 2001, we have digitized over 10,000 photographs and it is still going strong. Some 2,500 people and places have been named. People like Martha Kasudluak from Inukjuak, Nunavik, who we see here with photos of herself at three different ages. And so many others.

Families have been re-united. Identities recovered. And mysteries solved. I am very proud of the fact that in December last, *Project Naming* won the innovation award at the eight Francophone Libraries' Livres Hebdo Grand Prize in Paris.

By trial and error, we have found just the right tone for communicating effectively with our clients: irreverent and amusing to attract attention, informative and cultivated to increase our reputation. In taking risks and developing outstanding content, we have demystified the world of library science and shone a spotlight on our extensive collection. Our institution is now a leader in social media within the Government of Canada and among national libraries.

Of course, there are risks associated with using social media, because you are using an audacious medium. We live in societies where there are fewer hierarchies and social media are completely in tune with this. As leader of a national institution, I see my role as setting the stage for our social media staff to be as audacious as their imaginations permit. I think I have created a climate where people feel free to push the envelope. So far we have been lucky with our more audacious initiatives, but I am sure that at some point we'll make a mistake and people will think we have gone too far and blame us for that. I accept that and my social media team knows that when that happens I'll stand by them. That's the price you pay for being innovative!

So far, I have used examples from our institutional social media account. I would now like to take a few minutes to tell you about using personal accounts to tell your corporate story. I was an early adopter of Facebook. Facebook was available to all on September 2006 and I created my account in July of 2007. At the time, I did not envision using it for business purposes. I was using it to keep abreast of what my family, friends and former students were up to. Necessity being the mother of invention, I realized in 2009 that I could use my own Facebook to reach my institution's clients and let them know about public programming and coming events.

I now have 845 so-called friends on my personal Facebook page and 1525 followers on my Twitter account. Compared to Beyoncé and Kim Kardashian (60M followers on Twitter) those are small numbers, but if you think that most of my friends/followers are book lovers and archives enthusiasts, that's a pretty efficient channel to promote our events.

Not all government leaders are comfortable using social media. The borders between private and public lives are necessarily blurred and you need to use a style that is less formal and more engaging. I do think that being able to attach a face and a personal message to an institution through a post or a tweet improves our chances of connecting with citizens. We can engage them as so much more than a “faceless” bureaucracy.