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#FROMTHEARCHIVES: AN ASSESSMENT OF A SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL MEDIA PROGRAM IN AN ACADEMIC ARCHIVES

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#FromTheArchives: An Assessment of a Successful Social Media Program in an Academic Archives

Robert G. Weaver

ABSTRACT

Academic archives can seem intimidating to the public at large. Accessing and enjoying their contents is, for some, a foreign experience. Even when archives leverage extensive fiscal and technological resources to make their materials available as well-organized, online digital collections, this perception often persists. In 2013, the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC) at Texas Tech University (TTU) began an extensive Web 2.0 outreach program designed to overcome that perception for researchers other than TTU students and faculty. Using social media allowed the SWC to creatively and successfully rethink and reframe connections to the nonresearcher public. This article identifies the origin and breadth of that success by walking through the implementation of a comprehensive social media outreach program and providing a qualitative and quantitative assessment of its success, with an eye toward how the SWC and other archives might reframe the use of social media in the future.

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KEY WORDS

Web 2.0, Social media, Outreach, Engagement, Academic archives

Academic archives can seem intimidating to the general public. Accessing and enjoying their contents is, for some, a foreign experience. Even when archives leverage extensive fiscal and technological resources to make their materials available as well-organized, online digital collections, this perception often persists. In 2013, the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC) at Texas Tech University (TTU) implemented an extensive Web 2.0 outreach program designed to overcome that perception, not only among TTU students and faculty, but for the local, state, and national community as well. This article describes the creation and results of a comprehensive social media outreach program to both promote SWC collections and services and educate the public about the nature of archives in an informal, humanizing way.

In 2010, the SWC began digitizing portions of its holdings in earnest, initially focusing on “marquee” collections and items that, anecdotally, would draw the most researcher attention. That approach proved suboptimal, from the perspective of both available institutional resources as well as researcher usage data.¹ Workflows were redesigned and resources reallocated, establishing a swifter and more holistic digital collection creation and discoverability, with a commensurate uptick in researcher usage.² Yet, no matter how complete our online offerings, the marquee method lingered in our mind. How could we still share unique treasures that did not fit the broader digitization project’s scope?

There was a well-proven way to reach significantly larger audiences: social media, or “Web 2.0,”³ and, in mid-2013, SWC staff began to experiment with how social media platforms might fill that gap. What would later become an extensive Web 2.0 outreach program began with a handful of images accompanied by brief expository text on a Wordpress blog, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Viewership increased rapidly. Tumblr rose to 4,460 followers by 2014, and, by 2016, had risen to over 9,000. The SWC’s Facebook and Twitter pages were receiving just over 45,000 views and 50,000 Impressions—or recordable observations of a tweet by a viewer—respectively each year, or nearly 180 visitor interactions per post. By comparison, the tens of thousands of items in our digital collections in 2020 still welcomed only 4,100 users per month; numbers that to date have not grown in proportion to the growth of our social media.

Sharing and discussing “marquee items”—whether in the form of newspaper clippings, photographs of artifacts and ephemera, digitized documents, video, and or other selections—was garnering attention. Why, then, had the marquee approach to digital collections failed by comparison? The most obvious difference is the available audience, both in quantity and breadth of interest. Each Web 2.0 platform used by the SWC has millions of active users, virtually all of whom are interested in social media’s transient curiosities, as opposed to well-described research materials. Also, it is neither easy nor inexpensive to permanently host online representation of research-quality audiovisual

materials, re-creations of 3-D objects such as artifacts, and similar digitized, nondocumentary items. Social media, on the other hand, demands no more than a quick artifact snapshot or a video snippet converted into gifs. This ease of creation required fewer resources, which allowed the SWC to create more content quickly.

Adding a human element to interactions with archival objects also helped to overcome the public perception that archives exist in a rarified, sometimes unwelcoming atmosphere. Humorous observations by an archivist, or a donor's personal story about collections and items, bring those materials to life in a way that a solitary image accompanied by dry metadata cannot. That being said, the SWC's social media outreach has extended beyond sharing individual items. For example, platforms are used to promote exhibits and special events hosted at the archives, as well as offsite projects to which we contribute. The archives has, on occasion, expanded a step further, attempting to educate the public about what archives are, how to access them, and how the public can support our mission, not just in the context of the SWC, but in the archival field. The SWC is not alone in this. One need look no further than the social media accounts of the Society of American Archivists and regional and state archival organizations to see how this is being done.

Using Web 2.0 in all these capacities allowed the SWC to creatively rethink and reframe connections to our nonresearcher public. This article identifies the origin and breadth of our resulting success by walking through the implementation of a comprehensive social media outreach program and providing a qualitative and quantitative assessment of its success, with an eye toward how the SWC and other archives might reframe their use of social media.

Literature Review

Numerous handbooks and guides exist to assist the nascent archival social media curator, most recently "Establishing Archival Connections through Online Engagement" in the Society of American Archivists' *Engagement in the Digital Era*, which draws two decades of knowledge into arguably the most effective how-to available.⁴ But while such guides hold archivists' hands through the cumbersome process of implementing social media outreach from scratch, they do not delve deeply, if at all, into assessing the success or failure of existing programs.

Although the rapidly evolving universe of Web 2.0 has rendered much early literature less relevant, some lessons learned in older projects are still germane. Elizabeth Yakel, Seth Shaw, and Polly Reynolds wrote in 2007 about their efforts to incorporate into their finding aids what would later become the core idea behind social media—engaging outside users in metadata creation through comments and responses on content.⁵ A similar project was implemented at

the Library of Congress (LoC) in 2008, this time integrating an outside platform, Flickr, to capitalize on its ability to gather user feedback on photographs. Project leaders found an audience that did not visit the LoC's website or otherwise interact with the institution. Instead, in a theme common across the literature, their users glanced over the occasional photograph that caught their eye during internet browsing.⁶ The LoC's neighbors at the Smithsonian Institution conducted a similar project in 2016, with slightly greater success partly because of the wider array of Web 2.0 platforms available at that time. The Smithsonian continues to raise awareness of its ongoing document transcription project and to solicit volunteers to participate in it.⁷

As the literature has progressed, articles center primarily around two themes. First, the bulk of studies examine libraries, rather than archives and special collections. Andrea Dickson and Robert Holly's "Social Networking in Academic Libraries" in 2010 is an early example. Their discussion is tentative about the bulk of Web 2.0's potential, choosing to focus on identifying libraries' target users.⁸ Later studies would employ these user bases to articulate return on investment (ROI). Authors such as Nuria Romero weighed the resources required to create and maintain Web 2.0 outreach against quantitative and qualitative resources recouped by libraries. Romero was suspicious of such investments' value.⁹ Later studies would produce similar conclusions, such as Lisa Lamont and Jordan Nielson's assessment of the use of Tumblr and Pinterest at San Diego State prior to 2015. Using Google Analytics to tally site traffic and its origins, they also saw few tangible returns for the library's efforts.¹⁰ Yet, by that time, the ROI argument was already losing ground to the inescapable reality of social media in libraries. The next year, Lisa Levesque took social media as a given, focusing instead on the skills necessary to best utilize it: "managing social media in an academic library setting requires three things: good working knowledge of the digital world of social media, a flair for composing interesting content, and tact."¹¹ Expertise and putting a human face on social media content superseded the budget book. Studies have continued along these lines, with 2019's "Library 2.0: The Effectiveness of Social Media as a Marketing Tool for Libraries in Educational Institutions" circling back to explain that Dickson and Holly's focus on user needs and interests had faded in favor of content that reflects individual librarians' professional or personal interests.¹²

It is worth noting that at least a handful of studies focus on libraries internationally. Sara Humphrey's "Tweeting into the Void?"—discusses at length in the context of Twitter, below—centered around UK libraries.¹³ "Academic Librarians and Their Social Media Presence" by Niusha Zohoorian-Fooladi and A. Abrizah analyzes focus groups containing twenty-two libraries from three universities in Malaysia. They discovered that librarians are hesitantly and sporadically using Web 2.0, principally to promote library services and get feedback

about them from users. In each case, it had failed to flourish due to lack of institutional support; in other words, there was little ROI.¹⁴ Jonathan Mukwevho and Mpho Ngoepe's "Taking Archives to the People" describes similar institutional roadblocks among repositories in South Africa. Throughout "the global periphery," library administrators are not capitalizing on social media "despite the fact that the majority of the population is now connected through mobile phones. . . ."¹⁵

The second thread running through the literature is authorial focus on single Web 2.0 platforms, rather than a broader survey of available tools. Twitter is a favorite tool, perhaps due to the minimal resources it requires to craft a 140- (and now 260-) character message. Noa Aharony's "Twitter Use in Libraries" was published in 2010, during Twitter's earliest years. He compares public and academic libraries, making strong arguments for Twitter's use in both.¹⁶ Ada Kriesberg surveyed thirty-four institutions in 2011, zeroing in on Twitter and asking whether tweets were expanding access to archival holdings. She ultimately deems the platform a worthy use of resources—aligning with her contemporaries' interest in ROI—through "remov(ing) barriers to potential users" unfamiliar with archives.¹⁷ 2011's "From Triviality to Business Tool: The Case of Twitter in Library and Information Services Delivery," which describes a multibranch, web-based survey of Twitter managers, concludes the same.¹⁸ So too does 2015's "Leveraging the Power of a Twitter Network for Library Promotion," which takes a more metrics-based approach to two libraries' Twitter efforts.¹⁹ The best of the most recent is Sara Humphrey's "Tweeting into the Void?," another broad case study of libraries. She emphasizes the importance of using metrics to confirm results of outreach, a practice Humphreys claims is not as common as she had expected.²⁰ Without question, Twitter has for two decades been the toast of library social media, with other platforms receiving far less attention.²¹

Archives-specific studies do exist, of course, principally as macroscopic, multi-institutional investigations. In 2011, Kate Theimer suggested that "meaningful engagement" with users via Web 2.0 was unlikely. Such tools are better suited for basic outreach and marketing.²² Yet, as noted earlier, the LoC and the Smithsonian had fostered meaningful engagement only three years before.²³ That dissonance is not uncommon. Adam Crymble had surveyed several archival institutions in the years before Theimer and also found that Web 2.0 works as an outreach tool with uncertain potential for engagement.²⁴ Melanie Griffin and Tomaro Taylor argued a similar point in 2013. The growing desire for social media programs in special collections is almost solely useful for promoting collections, special events, and similar activities. Engaging with external constituents is not nearly as successful.²⁵ Over the course of the SWC's work, we came to agree with these authors: successful outreach is a given; engagement is not.

Other large-scale studies, such as Joshua Hager's "To Like or Not to Like," zero in on other facets of archival social media. He highlights the primacy of visual media; the need to restrict content to ideally one, or at least only a few, specific subjects, rather than trying to appeal broadly across all of an archives' collecting topics; and the dubious utility of Facebook's Insights feature to document user interactions.²⁶ The SWC found the former to be true, the middle to be inconsequential, and the latter to be false. His fourth suggestion, however—to seek collaborative opportunities with other internal or external institutions on content—can be crucial to a program's success.²⁷ Amanda Harrison et al. agree in yet another survey of several academic libraries. Those with ARL accreditation that also share a campus with MLS degree programs evolved existing collaborations with the master's program into "establishing community connection(s)" via social media with groups that would later access the institution's content. Institutions without MLS programs, however, tend only to post content from holdings and updates on library events. Meaningful engagement is not common.²⁸

Single-institution case studies vary widely in focus, but often expand into larger frameworks for institutions to develop their own social media programs. "The War of 1812 in 140 Characters or Less" describes the Archives of Ontario's tweeted snippets from the journals of Ely Playter, an eyewitness to the conflict. As with earlier articles, it restricts its assessment to Twitter, but is able to walk through the archives' methods to ensure that the platform was effective at both revealing archival holdings and promoting educational events held in conjunction with the war's bicentennial.²⁹ Greg Bak and Amanda Hill take a different tack, exploring Web 2.0's suitability for answering reference questions and acquiring donations. This new "hybrid online/offline identity" might overcome the perceived academic unapproachability of archives. To facilitate this, they explain the perils of Web 2.0's ever-changing interfaces and emphasize creating consistent user experiences through well-designed workflows.³⁰ A 2013 project at the Parrish Library of Management and Economics at Purdue University detailed the creation of a Twitter account. In her description of the project, Ilana Barnes describes special collections as "ideally suited to become social media destinations," but suggests that successful social media programs should distribute responsibilities among employees and departments.³¹ Her observations are perhaps the most robust attempt at a "how-to" outside of actual handbooks, although other high-level, strategic guides exist. Derek Mosely's description of the Ernest J. Gaines Center's Web 2.0 efforts is an incomplete but helpful walkthrough containing insightful qualitative conclusions, particularly about attracting community members to events.³² Walking through the ins and outs of a two-year social media project at the University of Wyoming (UW), Shannon Bowen-Maier and Rachael Dreyer explain how to build a following by studiously

identifying the enjoyable content. These final two articles most closely describe, albeit in abbreviated form, the SWC's aims for its own program, and the realities it discovered.³³

Policies

When the SWC's Web 2.0 program began in July 2013, it started with four social media sites and plans to add at least two more after deployment. We were fully cognizant of the ephemeral nature of social media. Therefore, these images and accompanying text would not replace the relative permanence of digital and physical access. Furthermore, users would likely never see even the most viral of our images after their first encounter. We simply wanted to share highlights from the holdings with any visitor willing to click.

Before uploading any content, however, the SWC wrote policies and to manage potential interactions. The first consideration centered on staffing. Which employees had the bandwidth to curate the program in the long term? Because the required time commitment was not yet known during these early stages, only one staff member was assigned to create and post content, with the understanding that the decision could be reevaluated after the initial months. The duties were added to the staff member's job description, and, at the present day, a monthly allocation of about six hours for that staff member has proven sufficient to quickly develop several weeks' content via the processes and tools described to follow. A small amount of time was afforded the SWC/SCL Audio Visual (AV) Department manager to create gifs using their greater expertise with AV tools. This required approximately eight hours every few months, which also still proves sufficient.

While we assumed that most engagement would acknowledge (or dispute) the archival materials' quality, some users might request access information or offer potential donations. Workflows were designed to filter and deliver access requests to reference staff and channel potential donors to the appropriate archivist. Being social media users in their personal lives, SWC staff also knew to anticipate "problem users." Web 2.0 is designed around facilitating interaction between content creators and users, as well as users with other users. Policies were written to ensure accounts were monitored to keep conversations collegial. While every archives should develop its own definition of problem users, the SWC singled out anyone who was hostile toward other users; used inflammatory language, such as profanity or hate speech; or shared offensive media content. Vigorous debate ensued over whether the archivists should delete such interactions, ban users outright, or go a step further and delete our own content. Each step rang dissonant with our archival instincts to preserve the online historical record. Ultimately, because the original images reside on

SWC servers, we elected to delete banned interactions when possible, with the option to delete our own content if it was the only viable option. Our Web 2.0 space would foster a sense of goodwill, not animosity.

The project was also required to be analytics-driven, so, before posting the first image, staff mapped the usage statistics available on each platform. With all social media, content is no sooner posted than it is buried beneath newer content, which is rapidly buried in turn. Thorough, frequent analytics gathering was the only way to empower staff to adjust content to align with user interest and, more practically, justify the SWC's investment. Facebook Insights and Twitter Analytics are free, on-board services, providing post-level and aggregated views. Other sites' offerings were nonexistent and required a tedious manual count of interactions. Staff were also cognizant that some social media platforms offer the option of paying to promote a single post to garner wider viewership. The SWC deemed that unnecessary, hoping that the content would stand on its own. As discussed later in this article, that assumption proved accurate.

A loose schedule outlined on which days and at what times content would appear. Although many scholarly and trade publications in a variety of fields have delved into the best days and times to upload media, no two sources agree.³⁴ At the SWC, posting content on specific dates and times has never correlated to increased views and comments. In fact, except in rare viral instances, only infrequent posting exacerbated sites' algorithmic tendency to exclude contributors' content from users' feeds. Uploading consistently, rather than posting on a whim, has proven the only consistent rule for increased engagement.

Frequency, however, meant constantly accessing a site and working through its upload process. Within a few weeks, we realized uploading post-by-post was untenable. Three of the sites we chose—Facebook, Tumblr, and WordPress—have on-board schedulers. At that time, neither Twitter nor Pinterest, which were both being considered as a fifth platform, had a scheduling functionality. Instagram, added to the roster 2016, still does not. The SWC explored several third-party scheduling sites before settling on Hootsuite, which was able to schedule and push several weeks' worth of posts to multiple platforms. Hootsuite could not interface with Tumblr, so that platform was the only concession made to on-site options. Fortunately, its interface was straightforward enough to make it palatable. The steps necessary to perform these functions were added to the workflows.

Within the last several months, however, Hootsuite moved to a pay-to-use model, pushing it out of the resource-scope of the SWC. A growing number of other pay-to-use sites also exist, but their cost falls outside of SWC resource limits. Other sites offer free scheduling options, the most useful of which, at the time of publication, are Later and Buffer. Although they allow a lower number of scheduled posts, which necessitates more frequent scheduling week-to-week,

they perform as well as Hootsuite. TweetDeck is an option for Twitter, but because the aforementioned sites also push content to that platform, the SWC does not use it. This recent development has led to exploring criteria and procedures for anticipating changes to scheduling platforms, an aspect not covered during the development of the SWC's Web 2.0 project (although it should have been). As this exploration proceeds at the SWC, it will doubtless lead to adjustments in procedures, workflows, and possibly content as well.

Platforms

Simultaneous with the scheduling conversation was ascertaining which Web 2.0 platforms to use. Of the many available, three were deemed mandatory. The first was Twitter (@SWCArchive) because of its ubiquitous use by other archives and libraries. The second was Wordpress (southwestcollection.wordpress.com), still the most widely used and arguably most user-friendly blogging platform, with robust metadata options and the ability to display or embed almost any kind of content.³⁵ The SWC still uses it as the lynchpin of the content we upload. Facebook (facebook.com/SouthwestCollection) was the final platform chosen. Although it was already large in 2013, it now represents a user base of over two billion accounts spanning a variety of ages and socioeconomic brackets.³⁶ It also supports static images and accompanying text, which was the core content SWC staff wished to share. While it does struggle to share moving images, such as gifs and videos, initially those were not a concern. The SWC later discovered that Facebook's algorithmic dissemination process inhibited the number of users who encountered our content on their daily feeds, but this was offset by the site's gargantuan number of users. An unanticipated hurdle was creating a Facebook "Page," which required affiliation with an existing personal account. Because the early stages of the SWC's program required only one content contributor, this was moot. In ensuing years, page curation necessitated sharing administrative rights among multiple users, without apparent consequence.

Tumblr was a unique case. Initially, the SWC had not considered it. Then, in 2013, just as the SWC was finalizing its project documentation, James and Felicia Williamson—then of Sam Houston State University (SHSU) Archives—presented on Tumblr's possibilities at the Society of Southwest Archivists Annual Meeting. By sharing gifs created using their audiovisual holdings or by animating static images, such as simple drawings on clean backgrounds, SHSU had literally overnight gained hundreds—and soon, thousands—of Tumblr Followers.³⁷

Instagram was a late addition to the fold. The SWC adopted it (@SouthwestCollection) in August 2016, recycling years of images from other platforms as part of our debut. Instagram also struggles to share moving images,

including gifs, but enjoys the most tightly knit community of archives and special collections. Mutual support provided by following and tagging one another—a phenomenon to be explored later in this article—proved to be its biggest benefit.

The SWC has experimented with two other platforms. The first was Pinterest, a purely image-based platform with an amazing aggregating infrastructure that first attracted us at the beginning of our program. Lack of an automated scheduling function and tepid results during the first year led SWC staff to abandon it. Although a return to the site has remained on the table, to date, that option has not been exercised. The second site is Giphy. Gifs, as proven by Tumblr, have the largest potential for exposure of all our media. Giphy is designed around sharing the file type en masse. Surveying other accounts on Giphy led us to include a rights statement and a watermark on our gif files. SWC workflows now require that gifs, whether shared on Giphy, Tumblr, or elsewhere, be branded with a @swcarchives watermark. The site is now in our rotation, but, because we have only used it since mid-2019, meaningful data about viewership are not yet available.

Several sites went unconsidered. Snapchat, in its infancy at the time, and similar platforms had the potential to facilitate the greatest amount of user engagement, albeit through informal social interactions and ephemeral viral sensationalism. But, because the SWC wanted to establish an informational tenor, with moments of humor only interjected as appropriate, it remains an avenue that we will not explore. YouTube is the standard platform for audiovisual materials, but copyright concerns and TTU Library administrative reluctance steered us away from it. Vimeo caused similar concerns, and its smaller user base eliminated it from consideration as well. Flickr, which the Library of Congress had used to great effect many years before, was also considered.³⁸ Automated upload scheduling—which was poor on the site at the time and is a perpetual consideration in our workflows—prevented us from pursuing it, although the possibility remains open. It is worth noting that YouTube and Flickr arguably provide the closest experience to browsing digital collections of all the most popular Web 2.0 platforms. Users can discover materials via general inquiries and topic searches similar to those found on archival websites. Nonetheless, these factors were not able to overcome the obstacles they presented.

Content

With extensive policies and workflows in place, and a full roster of sites, the SWC was finally able to get down to what had attracted its archivists to Web 2.0 in the first place: sharing our holdings. Ample evidence of SWC patron

research interests was available through Reference department statistics and finding aid and digital collection analytics. This not only informed initial image selection, but, because these materials had already been used and, in some cases, digitally reproduced, digital images with confirmed copyright eligibility already existed. This made for a solid starting point

File type, dimension, and size requirements, often specific to each Web 2.0 platform, threw up some early hurdles. The patron digital copies often exceeded the dpi and image sizes we wanted to share, much less those allowed by social media sites, whose file size and dimensions requirements are typically single-digit megabytes and no larger than 1,000 by 1,000 pixels/inch. However, the SWC scans its digital collections at a much lower resolution than those used for patron requests, which are usually intended for publication and exhibition. Early on, those became the least labor-intensive option for our content creation, but our workflow had to be revised in anticipation of extensive image editing, principally file conversion to Web 2.0-friendly jpgs when digitized files were in tif or pdf format. Fortunately, once converted, jpgs could easily be shrunken to accommodate sites' maximum dimensions.

Gifs offer more flexibility. File sizes of up to five megabytes were the largest that platforms such as Tumblr and Giphy accept. This did require carefully edited pixel size, video resolution, length of clip, and number of frames, but this level of effort paid off. Some of the SWC's earliest gifs were what catapulted its Tumblr follower count from double digits to the thousands in a single month. Accumulated experience with the editing workflow led to consistent gif uploading by late 2014, which continues to the present day.

At the project's outset, Wordpress contained the SWC's core content, both images and text. Each blog post acted as a mini-exhibit, simpler in content and presentation yet less complicated to create than exhibits on more robust technologies, such as Omeka. Blogs were written as short-form essays punctuated by images. They describe popular collections and topics from the SWC's strongest collecting areas, such as ranching and agriculture, meteorology and wind power, aerospace, and the nineteenth-century history of Texas and the US Southwest. Every blog was also tagged using terms germane to its content, as well as ubiquitous tags such as "archives," "history," "FromTheArchives," and—just in case—"Southwest Collection." Every month, the blogs' images were shared individually as other sites' social media content. Archivists cull text from the blog to provide captions, hashtags, or other metadata.

Each blog's six to eight images were not enough content to fill an entire month of consistent, frequent posting, however. To hypnotize algorithms into prioritizing the SWC, staff brainstormed thematic scheduling. Blog-spawned images would appear on Mondays and Thursdays, allowing space for unique features such as "SWC A to Z," a series of one-off posts every other Friday

about materials from anywhere within our collections, posted in alphabetical order. On opposing Fridays, users would see “Artifact Friday!” featuring photographs of items that had most recently caught an SWC archivist’s eye. “Western Wednesday” and “Wednesday? Map Day!,” scheduled on alternate weeks, rounded out the offerings. Once gifs, initially created from some of our oldest archived news footage, became available, staff began uploading them every Tuesday. Finally, because Texas Tech University closes for over a week each December, content for that month consisted of a “This Year’s Highlights!” series that recycled the year’s most popular images. Recycling not only provided content creators with a much-needed break, but also lets the items that shone brightest that year get a little more time in the sun.

Finally, to provide opportunities to access the physical or digital archival holdings, staff included links to online finding aids, digital collections, and LibGuides and Reference sites in relevant image captions. Attempts were made to correlate social media post visits to online finding aid and digital collection usage, but this has been hard to do. Most sites’ analytics platforms do not trace the origins or departure locations of visitors. Also, the sudden popularity that an image or blog might receive weeks or even years after its posting threw statistics off. As content ballooned, data became ever-more unintelligible. Reference requests have resisted correlation as well, although, in both these instances, data collection and efforts are ongoing. Regardless, providing such links necessitated only a small addition to a post’s total text; a negligible effort to ensure the possibility of researcher rewards.

Analysis

The SWC cannot stress enough how consistently successful our strategies have proven. Although at its outset the project expected to reach a handful of users and expose them to our holdings in an informal way, over the project’s seven years, the overarching trend was an increase in followers, interactions, and other metrics, with only occasional plateaus. While content contributed to this, the frequency with which we shared that content was the critical factor in all instances. Neither day of the week nor time of day or night affected the SWC’s overall popularity.

Facebook saw steady growth, and, by 2020, consistently received almost 300 views per post, with inconsistent spikes resulting often unpredictably from unique content. Without question, images and gifs related to the history of Texas Tech University were among the most popular. For example, in 2017 a photograph of whiskey bottles molded into the likeness of TTU and other sports mascots of the now-defunct Southwest Conference comprised 32 percent of that year’s 114,000 total views.³⁹ Posts commemorating the anniversary of the May

1970 Lubbock Tornado, an F-5 event that cost twenty-six lives and caused \$1.6 billion in damage, also received a great deal of attention.⁴⁰ It looms large in Lubbock's historical memory, and so images of newspapers' front pages, photographs of damage, and related items resulted not only in above average views, but also greater engagement via comments. Users from the Lubbock community, Texas Tech alumni, and others with ties to the disaster shared their recollections of the event. These were in turn documented by the SWC and have led to oral histories with and collection donations from some commenters.

The Lubbock Tornado also created extra traffic on the Wordpress blog. Overall, in its first year, the site only welcomed 735 visitors who viewed the blog entries just over 1,200 times; 2020 has seen this increase to just over 4,800 visitors and 7,500 views. This growth was assisted by ensuring that every Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram post contained a link directing users to blog content, creating a vector that has consistently generated 10 percent of Wordpress views. Regardless, each May on the anniversary of the tornado, the SWC sees 10 to 15 percent spikes in both visitors and views, with a record setting 1,000 views and 641 visitors on the tragedy's fiftieth anniversary in 2020. Yet, the impact of Lubbock tornado content on Wordpress is the result of only two blogs, the first in May 2014 and the second in May 2020.⁴¹ This is an outlier from the conventional narrative of social media's transience; sometimes the most popular content can, in fact, have a long shelf-life.

Wordpress provides one analytic that other Web 2.0 platforms do not: traffic from search engines and external websites. On average, 50 percent of blog views come from search engines, mostly from Google. Traffic outside of search engines is rare. The most notable instance came from two blogs about the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) and the records we hold relating to its protest events in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴² They received more almost 15 percent of their attention from referrals from AAM-related sites, with the bulk coming from the Archive of Public Broadcasting.⁴³ The SWC has yet to devise a way to capitalize on search engine and external site interest. Large quantities of tags, even when topically targeted, do not correlate to it. The search for a reason why continues, nevertheless.

The SWC's Twitter account had a noticeably different experience. Rather than a sharp upward trend, Impressions from 2013 to 2015 remained negligible, although, to be fair, Twitter's on-board analytics were not as robust during those years. When Twitter eventually increased tweets' character limits and disentangled its images from its character count, SWC was able to tweet more images and received an immediate increase in visitors. Impressions per tweet increased from 107 to 494 between 2015 and 2017, with total impressions topping more than 100,000 each year, as compared to 2015's 28,000. In terms of content, on Twitter, the Lubbock tornado received almost no attention.

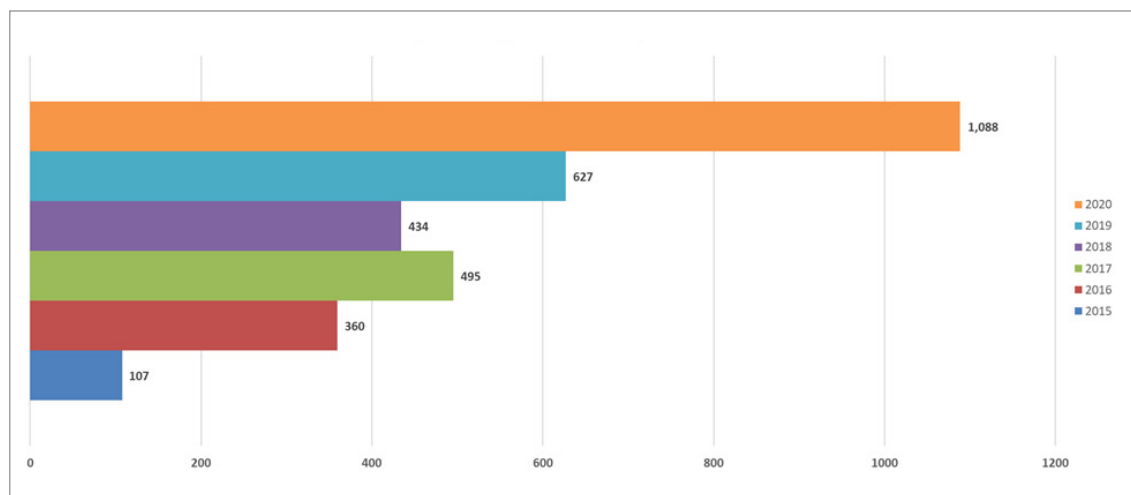


FIGURE 1. Yearly growth of impressions per tweet since SWC's adoption of Twitter (2015–2020)

Instead, as with Facebook, tweets documenting the visual history of Texas Tech University campus, as well as its sports programs, proved immensely popular. They received retweets and comments from alumni organizations throughout the world, as well as from by the institution itself and its constituent departments. A single gif of 1950s aerial footage of the campus centerpiece, Memorial Circle, received well over 10,000 impressions, with another 5,000 tacked on when it was shared during our end-of-year image recycling.⁴⁴ Together, these comprised 15 percent of 2019's views. A photograph of championship women's basketball coach Marsha Sharp received 4,800 impressions, and gifs of TTU football received comparable attention.⁴⁵ The project had not explicitly set out to engage the campus community and its followers worldwide, but nevertheless achieved it. These factors are now a regular consideration when designing content. As a final note, Twitter hashtags have never had a measurable effect on Impressions. Because they consume valuable character space better used for captions, as well as finding aid and blog links, they have been infrequently added to tweets since 2016.

The most surprising success occurred on Tumblr, a site we explored only because of the success that fellow archivists had enjoyed using it.⁴⁶ Local events such as the tornado, local institutions such as Texas Tech, and even topics such as Texas and Southwestern US history garnered negligible traction. Interest on Tumblr is predicated on novelty, which was why it was only after we began to create and upload gifs from our audio/visual holdings in late 2014 that users paid attention. One of the SWC's first gifs, depicting a line of toy tractors driving slowly past our registrar's desk, was so popular that our followers—or individuals who subscribe to our Tumblr site specifically, rather than simply noticing

SWC images as they click through other content—rose from 288 to 4,460 the night they debuted. The tractors became a staple of our gifs for two years, and, when they were filmed driving off into the sunset in June 2016, we had increased to 9,049 followers with thousands of notes on the tractor gifs.⁴⁷

Frustratingly, Tumblr does not provide on-board metrics aside from followers and notes, nor does it separate discrete user interactions with images, such as distinguishing likes from comments. Therefore, while we knew these and other gifs' appeal was broad, we had no way to ascertain to what extent beyond our own page they were popular, outside of serendipitous discovery. The best example of this was our “big book gif,” displaying an archivist in the 1950s laboriously turning the pages of a one-foot-thick, three-foot-by-three-foot ledger. An unknown Tumblr user reblogged the image, captioned it “s*** I was right about,” and quickly received 398,000 notes. Another user captioned it “if every mistake you’ve made was written in a book . . .” and got another 460,000 notes.⁴⁸ One of the SWC’s archivists stumbled across these by chance, because there is no way to backtrack a Tumblr item’s journey. Even hashtags—which have proven as ineffectual on Tumblr as on Twitter—provide no way to connect an original image to its eventual popularity on the site.

This level of success raised a new question: are we able to assess the value of this in relation to the SWC’s archival mission? The “big book gif” was not a valuable research item, although the physical ledger no doubt is. Did the gif bring public attention to the SWC? Unlikely, as that required a user bothering

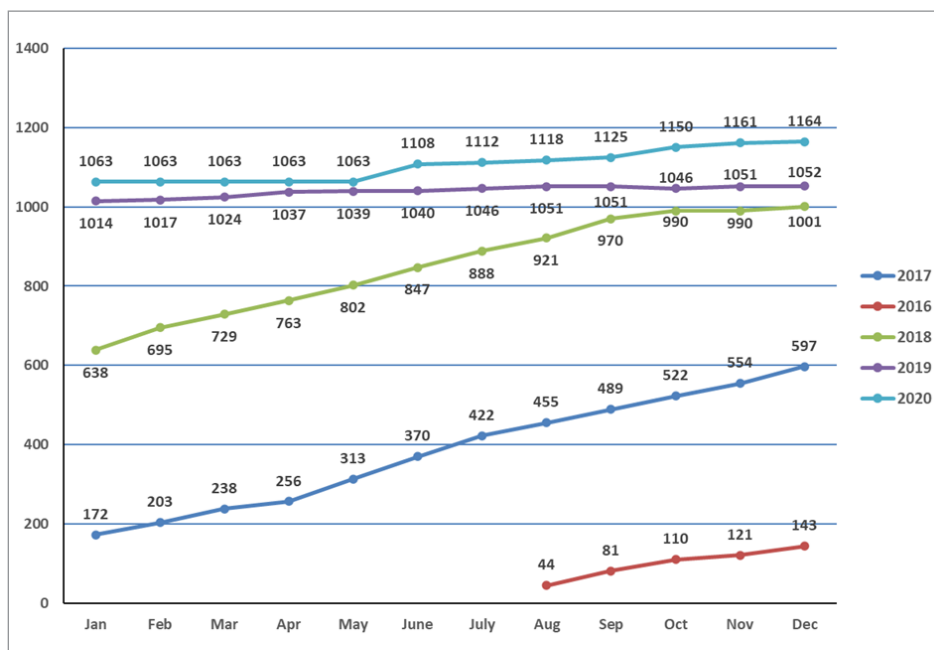


FIGURE 2. Yearly growth of followers since SWC’s adoption of Twitter (2017–2020)

to backtrack via the @swcarchive handle branded on the bottom right corner of the image. Even so, such a search produces no available metric. In short, there is no answer, only an inescapable, existential futility to posting content on Tumblr.

Our final and most recent platform was Instagram. We began with an image blast, posting the most popular items shared on other platforms in previous years. This resulted in an immediate forty followers, which increased by over thirty per month through consistent, scheduled posting until reaching its current total of 1,161. On this site more than any other, collaboration with other archival institutions is key. Through a focused program of following other archival accounts, welcoming reciprocal follows, and interacting with one another's images through likes and comments, every archives' account has grown consistently. Sadly for the SWC, this method reached a saturation point in late 2019 when the number of new archives joining Instagram began to dwindle, and everyone that could be followed, had been.

Despite this national level of interaction, our local content garnered the most attention. Our two most popular images were of Buddy Holly, one of the progenitors of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s who died tragically in a plane crash in February 1959. A Lubbock, Texas, native, Holly's life and career are celebrated in the city-funded Buddy Holly Museum, and, during an August 2018 collaborative exhibit between the SWC's Crossroads of Music Archive and the museum, "The Day the Music Died," the SWC Instagram account shared several exhibit images.⁴⁹ Receiving sixty-eight and seventy-one notes respectively in their first few hours online from users locally and abroad, these images and a handful of others like it suggest that Instagram may embody an intersection between the local appeal of Facebook and the broader reach of Twitter. SWC archivists continue to explore that comparison, but, in the interim, early data suggest that Instagram is the only site whereon hashtags verifiably increase viewership. #FromTheArchives, #ArchivesOfInstagram, #LibrariesOfInstagram, and, in some instances, content-specific tags have clearly driven users toward the SWC account. Instagram has no useful on-board analytics, so such connections are difficult to make, but, through diligent backtracking of selected tags, SWC archivists have been able to rediscover our images in larger aggregations.

Conclusion

When the SWC began to experiment with Web 2.0 in 2013, we hoped only to fill the gap between our researcher-focused digital collections and the audience of people whom we hoped would value our unique treasures. A comprehensive social media outreach program soon encompassed a Wordpress blog, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram, with small but unsuccessful forays

into Pinterest and Giphy as well. Through consistent and frequent posting, thematically focused content, and a willingness to devote resources to initially unanticipated media such as gifs, the SWC user base grew, reached the wider public and, in some cases, did so far beyond our expectations and in ways we could not have anticipated.

There are two observations we now know to be true. First, content drives user interest. It may not be consistent with the intellectual goals of academia, but a post of silly artifacts hidden deep within our collections or moving images of researchers grappling with old ledgers have broad public appeal. Second, consistent and frequent posting guarantees that content gets seen. The date and time when items are posted, regardless of platform, matters far less. Users want unique and unexpected content, and they want it all the time. For better or worse, novelty, consistency, and frequency should be the watchwords of any archives beginning a social media program.

As the SWC's social media efforts continued through the peculiar and sometimes tragic year of 2020 and into 2021, our focus has slightly shifted. During COVID-19 restrictions on visiting our archives, many SWC posts since mid-spring 2020 focused on how, when, and if one should access our archives physically. We shared archivists' experiences while working from home, ranging from the difficulties posed by attempting to arrange, describe, and digitize collections in this environment, to more personal stories about organizing their workspaces and schedules around family and pets. We have also written about our struggles to assist patrons whose urgent research needs were not lessened by the pandemic. Finally, the SWC saw this as a chance to document our own history, posting photos of empty hallways, vacant exhibit cases, and a hauntingly quiet Texas Tech University campus; a visible, narrated archival record of this unique time. Moving forward, when other such opportunities arise—hopefully less tragic if not less noteworthy—SWC archivists will be able to use these lessons as a baseline to document those events in turn.

Examining the data accumulated to write this study has led to plans for further experimentation through targeting specific collections. For example, the papers of multiple donors describe early twentieth-century tent shows, a phenomenon of plays and musicals that traveled the rural United States providing entertainment to audiences who otherwise had no access to the theater. Usage statistics from finding aids paired with reference requests prove that these are popular collections. By sharing them extensively on our social media platforms, we hope to discover if current research popularity can, despite the observations of the SWC and other institutions, be duplicated on Web 2.0, and vice versa.

We are also working toward broader collaborations library- and university-wide. In recent months, outreach efforts have taken into account TTU's desire for greater Lubbock and regional community engagement. This dovetails with

the archives' growing emphasis on collection development and oral history acquisition centered around communities that have been traditionally underdocumented at the Southwest Collection, particularly Lubbock's Latino/a and Black communities. There is no doubt that promotion of new acquisitions and interviews, as well as collaboration with outside groups and individuals to cultivate relationships through, for example, promoting community events, will further this new archival priority.

These new approaches will be facilitated, at least in part, by a modest dispersion of content creation throughout the SWC. By granting our new acquisitions field representative and the processing staff access to our Web 2.0 platforms, unique experiences captured within and outside of the building will be shared instantaneously with SWC followers. Although the current creation of content organized around a monthly theme will continue, this real-time sharing will add a new, even more personal facet to what we share.

There is a final concept, perhaps unrealizable, that has risen from this analysis—one that we look forward to exploring over the next several years. Can Web 2.0 be more than a tool for outreach, or even for informing users about the existence and contents of our collection? Perhaps we could reconceive of it as a preemptive reference service, an alternative point of access that, using the data accumulated by the aforementioned projects, could help fill in researcher-request gaps that traditional digitization workflows and reference desks policies cannot. This is probably not possible, but with the successful baseline established by our current seven years of Web 2.0 programming, we can at least rest assured that the SWC's treasures will not go undiscovered.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robert G. Weaver is currently the manuscript archivist of the Southwest Collection within Texas Tech University’s Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. He oversees archival processing, focusing principally on EAD finding aid creation; curates the Southwest Collection’s digital collections; and serves as the archives’ social media coordinator. He has served as chair of Texas Archival Resources Online and as editor of the *West Texas Historical Review* for the West Texas Historical Association. His current research focuses on archival description, automating archival processes through technological innovation, and archival outreach with a focus on social media.