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An Instagram is worth a thousand words: An industry panel and audience Q&A

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Download date: 09 Oct 2020

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Introduction

Since the launch of Instagram in October 2010, the network has grown to one hundred million users and four billion photos have been uploaded. At the end of 2012 Instagram passed Twitter in daily active users on mobile for the first time. Instagram had 7.3 million daily mobile users for the month while Twitter had 6.9 million (Mashable, 2012).

Bond University Library has been experimenting with Instagram as a way of connecting physical and digital spaces, enhancing online presence and identity, interacting with customers and for marketing and promotional purposes. The library Instagram profile was created on the 5th of July 2012. As of May 16th, 2013, the profile has 199 followers and the 136 photos shared have received a total of 918 likes. The library has hosted two photo-sharing competitions and two "Insta-walks" in which students were invited to share photos of the library to win prizes.

To stimulate discussion and share experiences of mobile photo sharing, Bond University Library hosted a panel session at the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Information Online conference (Be Different, Do Different) in February 2013. The session which focussed on the use of Instagram in a library context was arranged and coordinated by Wendy Abbott, Jessie Donaghey, Joanna Hare and Dr Grace Saw. The panel members were as follows:

- Daniel Brennan – Lecturer in philosophy and literature (Panel Host)
- Christian Bowman – Internet Marketing Manager
- Inger Van Dyke – Professional wildlife photo journalist and expedition leader
- Joanna Hare – Librarian
- Peta Hopkins – Manager, Digital Library Services
- Mitchell Willocks – Student
- Dr Jeff Brand – Professor of Communication and Creative media (video contribution)

The panel session was introduced with a short video clip on the growth of Instagram and its use at Bond University. Throughout the panel session live mobile polling was used to gather feedback and responses from the audience on their photo-sharing practices. Real examples from Instagram profiles were shared to encourage discussion. The session concluded with a Q&A session with the audience. The session was attended by approximately eighty delegates.

Following is a summary of each of the three sections of the discussion. The full panel session is available online at the following web address: http://bulibrary.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/instagram-for-libraries-panel.html

Attention seeker or game changer? The popularity of Instagram and listening to your audience

Leading into the panel discussion, the audience was polled for their use of mobile photography. The majority (88%) indicated they use their mobile devices to take photos, with Facebook (39%) and

Instagram (18%) being the networks of choice, followed by Flickr, Twitter and other sites. A small percentage (8%) indicated they do not share photos online.

Do you share your mobile photos online? If so where?

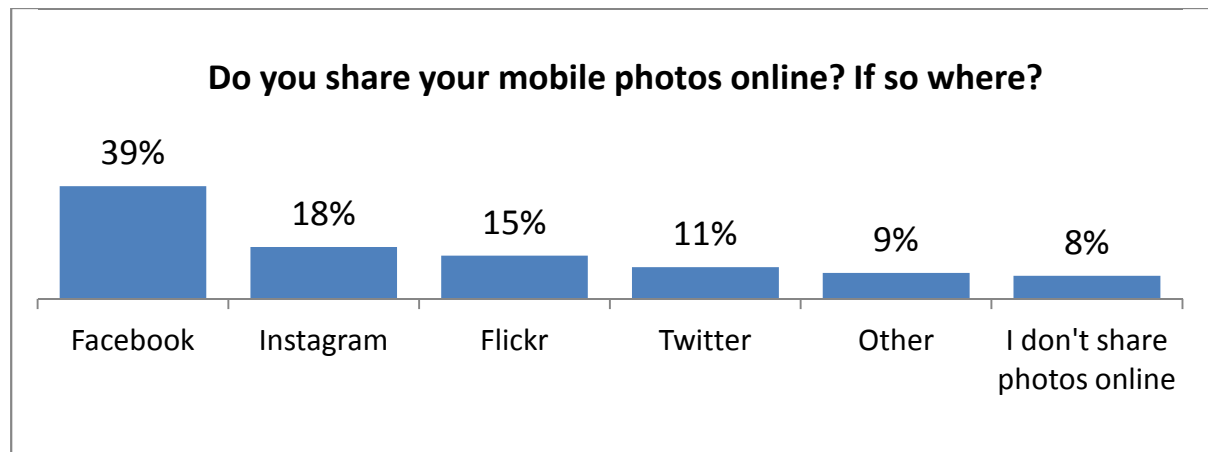| Facebook	Instagram	Flickr	Twitter	Other	I don't share photos online
39%	18%	15%	11%	9%	8%

Figure 1 – Poll Question 2

The panel members then moved into a discussion on the popularity of Instagram and how people are using this photo-sharing social network to communicate in new and innovative ways. For example, many Instagram users assign hashtags to their shared photos as a way of describing contexts that may not be self-evident in the photos. Christian commented that by assigning hashtags, users are able to attribute geo-location, emotions, opinions, etc. to their photos enabling them to conduct a conversation that's "in-between the lines". In essence Christian felt that "people are trying to connect with others in similar situations" or sharing similar interests. Examples given by panel members included sharing photos of personal restaurant experiences, photos endorsing good hotels for other travellers, and from a student perspective, sharing photos commenting on lecture experiences.

In terms of why people spend time on Instagram, Christian talked about the philosophy behind the creation of Instagram which was to fulfil the desire of users to take photos using their mobile phones, and to be able to connect with others 'in the moment' through sharing their photos.

In response to a question about the significance of communicating uniquely via images, panel members had some interesting and diverse views. From the Library's perspective, Jo commented on using shared images to communicate an approachable identity for the Library. "Instagram is really powerful in that respect because you can just snap a few photos [and] show what's going on … so that students don't view the Library as being intimidating".

As a professional photographer, Inger maintained that visual images retain more impact and are far more engaging that text alone. To illustrate her point, Inger presented three iconic images which are universally recognisable and which graphically communicate the personal impacts of three major international conflicts (the Vietnam War, the civil uprising in China and the conflict in Afghanistan) in a highly moving manner.

Instagram is finding a niche in educational settings. Jo presented examples of photos from a [primary school Instagram profile](#) (lhighfill on Instagram, est. 2011) where photo sharing is being used to collaborate and communicate on the work students have done. Peta described other educational
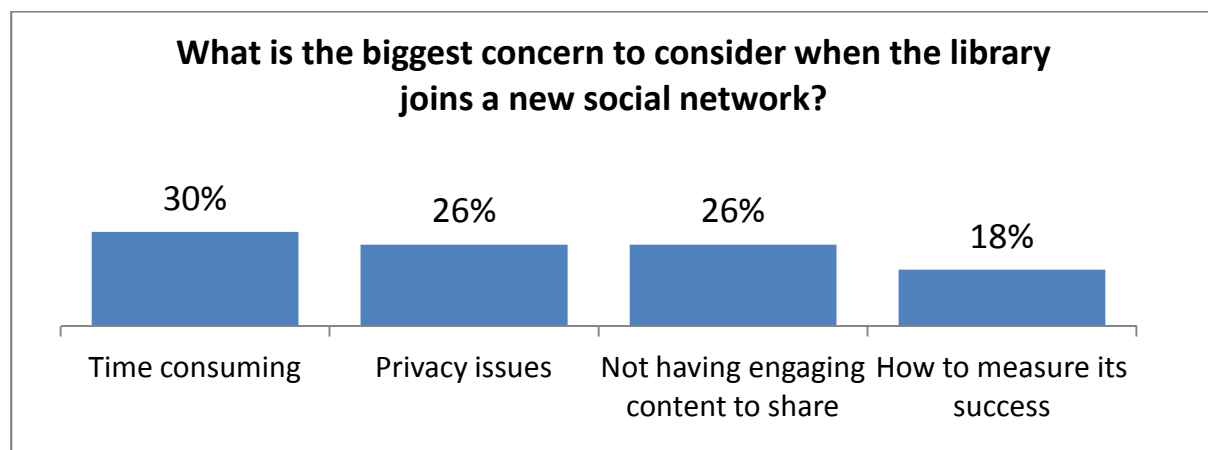
uses where students are creating photo essays and to illustrate what they have learned in mathematics and in vocabulary skills.

Another educational example presented by Jo was an Instagram profile from the University of Michigan (spartanswill 360 on Instagram, est. 2013) promoting the research projects of the University. Jo commented that the profile is "a really powerful way of story-telling with their research - not just talking to people about it but showing people what research is being done."

From a student standpoint, Mitchell commented that Instagram "has the potential for all libraries to use in a way where they can create engaging content". Mitchell suggested possibly creating images with tips for students – "it's something that definitely can be used to have a positive impact on the students and the library as a whole."

Instagram Unfiltered: The risks, limitations and disadvantages of using Instagram

The next section of the session opened with an audience poll on concerns when an organisation joins a new social network and the results are presented in Figure 2.

What is the biggest concern to consider when the library joins a new social network?

| 30% | 26% | 26% | 18% |
| Time consuming | Privacy issues | Not having engaging content to share | How to measure its success |

Figure 2 – Poll Question 3

One of the audience's major concerns related to privacy issues and this topic was tackled following the poll. Jo described one image found by the library that showed a student eating food in the library, which is against library policy. The panel made suggestions for appropriate ways to respond to sensitive images posted on Instagram, such as posting a humorous response rather than reprimanding the student. Jo highlighted that viewing content of this nature on Instagram is not necessarily a threat but an opportunity to get feedback and see what actually may be going on in the library.

From a professional photographer's perspective, Inger highlighted other Instagram limitations or faux pas such as 'selfies', pictures of food and clouds. Inger believes these images aren't as engaging or effective as images created with a creative eye and following the rules of photography. Inger said that creating engaging content is crucial, because "the more you post engaging content the more you are going to get a following".

Christian noted that some Instagram users have a false sense of security, posting images that they might not share on other social networks. This false sense of security is evident in the types of

photos taken by students and geo-tagged at Bond Library, such as images of students sleeping on tables and eating in the library, which they might not intentionally share directly with the library.

Instagram's Terms of Service represent another possible risk for institutional users. In late 2012, Instagram announced new Terms of Service which came into effect in 2013, causing uproar in the Instagram community. One particular concern revolved around the potential for Instagram to exploit user photographs for advertising purposes without the user's consent. While there were reports of users closing their Instagram accounts en masse in the wake of the announcements, Peta highlighted that not long after the announcement, the monthly active Instagram users *grew* to ninety million. In response to the negative feedback, Instagram retracted some of the changes and rephrased other sections of the Terms of Service, meaning that ultimately the changes had minimal impact (Instagram, 2012). Despite this, Mitchell indicated it is important for organisations to take the terms of service and privacy policies into account when creating and using an Instagram account.

Jo maintained that the risks of using Instagram for libraries are similar to the risks of using other social media sites which are already in service in many libraries. Seeking permission from people you are going to photograph is essential when taking and sharing photos on Instagram. Librarians also need to be aware of their organisation's existing social media policy and any other guidelines in place to govern its use. Not only are policies and guidelines important for those responsible for Instagram, but also for the whole organisation, so all staff have the opportunity to understand how the medium should be used. Jo believed the changes in terms of service didn't provide any direct risks for libraries but "provide an opportunity to talk to your students about privacy online and how they're being perceived online".

Jo and Christian agreed that viewing user photographs taken in the library is not a risk but in fact an opportunity to gather and respond to feedback. Christian made some suggestions for being creative in responding to inappropriate photos shared by your users on Instagram: "if they're eating McDonalds, you can either take it as feedback that maybe we need to get some hot chips in our café or… you can be creative and put up a post saying 'the benefits of eating healthy'".

Almost Instafamous: engaging followers, measuring value and the dos and don'ts of Instagram

The final section of the session commenced with a poll on the types of images that the audience thought would be most engaging as indicated by the number of comments and likes garnered. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Which category of images do you think received the most likes in the library?

- Day-to-day goings on: 46%
- Behind the scenes: 37%
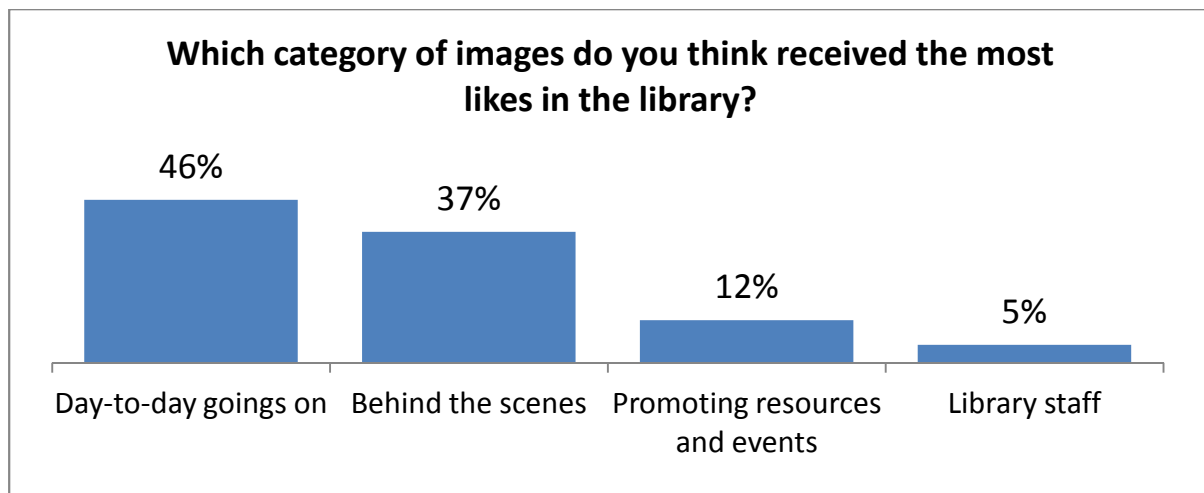- Promoting resources and events: 12%
- Library staff: 5%

Figure 3 – Poll Question 4

While Bond Library staff had expected that photos of staff and people in the library might be the most popular based on published advice to share those types of photographs, the results showed a consistent level of engagement across the categories used. Paradoxically, this included images of food and other examples of 'faux pas' highlighted in the earlier discussion. Figure 4 shows a sample of Bond Library's images that received the most engagement.
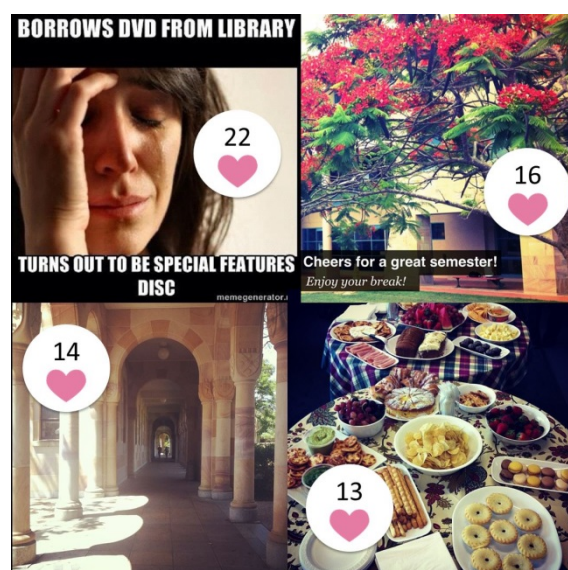

Figure 4 – Bond Library Instagram images that received the most engagement.

This pattern of engagement may be specific to the Bond community, or to communities focussed on libraries. Inger described the types of images that stimulate engagement across the wider Instagram community.

- Images that conform to the general rules of photography such as the rule of thirds, using leading lines and creativity
- Images that are completely relatable to the viewer – often simpler images
- Images of recognisable people as these tend to be re-shared on other social networks.

Inger said that "You are going to get far more people who are engaged through really, really good quality images than you will through someone who just shares fifty of them a day".

This raised a question about librarians' visual literacy and whether they have the skills to make visually engaging content. Jo affirmed that she found Instagram and other photography apps made it really easy to create engaging content, and that this experience could be empowering for people who don't have advanced photography skills. Peta supported this view, suggesting that the diversity of personal interests amongst librarians is the same as in any industry, and in fact librarians have the advantage of having excellent access to information resources to learn something new. Peta concluded that there is no reason why librarians cannot develop their visual literacy skills.

The panel then considered how success of an Instagram account might be measured. Christian's point of view was to go back to the original objectives for setting up an Instagram account. Success does not necessarily equate to the absolute number of likes or comments. An objective may be to get more people physically visiting the library as a result of seeing images on Instagram. His advice is to set some objectives at the start and see if you meet them.

When asked about the likely longevity of Instagram, panellists shared a common belief that either Instagram or similar mobile photo-sharing services were popular and would be in use for quite some time. Inger pointed out that initially many professional photographers were apprehensive of the service, but now there are examples of Instagram images being accepted as a genre of photography.

Dr Jeff Brand, Professor of Communication and Creative Media at Bond University who was unable to attend in person, contributed a video-recording describing the properties of Instagram that provide opportunities to take action. His key point was that "at the highest level of [these] affordances there is a […] grand opportunity, but it's often quite disruptive." His examples for libraries of socio-technical affordances include images of key information such as past exam papers, contents pages, etc., images of shelf locations of books for future reference and images of instructions and guides; e.g. how to use the automated self-checkout machine.

The final recommendations from the panel were to get excited and start experimenting with Instagram. In Christian's words: "This is a great opportunity to use something that doesn't cost you anything to do something really extraordinary whether it's being creative in the way that you respond or engage discussions with your students and with other staff members and it's also an opportunity to raise the profile of your business unit within the university and you might find that you can get all sorts of positive consequences out of doing something amazing with Instagram."

Conclusion

This industry panel session covered a wide range of practical issues relating to the use of mobile photo-sharing in a library context. The format of the session was interactive, stimulating a lively debate between the panel and the audience, as well as on Twitter and in other media during and following the session. This summary of the panel discussion makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on the use of social media in a library context, dynamically demonstrating the conference theme, 'Be Different, Do Different'. Following the panel session, Bond University's work on Instagram has been commended in a blog post written by Kim Tairi on the ANZ 23 Mobile Things Blog (2013).

The panel organisers recognise the panel members' commitment, enthusiasm and insights as Instagrammers and educators, and appreciate them giving their time in preparing and presenting the session.

Links:
- o [Bond Library on Instagram](#)
- o [Bond University on Instagram](#)
- o [ALIA Information Online conference 2013](#)

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