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Using Social Media and Web 2.0 Tools in an African-American Repository

Aaisha Haykal

Abstract

The College of Charleston's Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture in Charleston, South Carolina is an archival repository, museum, and center for public programming dedicated to collecting, preserving, and making public the history of African-Americans in Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry. Currently, the social media strategy consists of maintaining a blog called "Not Just in February" and a Facebook page, but we are investigating other mediums. These platforms were chosen by the administration to promote the programs and archival collections at the institution. The effort to create an indelible Web presence is imperative if the institution wishes to stay engaged and current.

The Avery Research Center's staff uses Facebook to upload photos of its programs, highlight current news and events happening around Charleston, and share information on African-American history and archives on a national scope. Alternatively, the blog is a behind-the-scenes look at what archivists do, highlighting items within collections as well as bringing historical context to the records. The blog is used as a space for African-American and Charleston history scholars to engage the public with their history. As a result of using social media, the Avery Research Center has been able to connect with individuals and organizations locally and nationally to inform them of local African-American history that was hidden while concurrently getting people interested in preserving their own collections. However, some of the main challenges in using social media have been staffing and time to commit to updating the page and the blog.

Introduction

Within the past five years or so, the use of social networks and media has become the predominate mode of communication in both the public and private spheres. Initially, social media was a way for people to connect with their friends and family; but now, all types of organizations, associations, and businesses use it to connect with their markets on a more personal level. Archives and other cultural institutions can use social media to harness the power of connecting and providing constant contact with their audiences. Archives and other cultural institutions are using social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and blogs to push content out to people, but they can also receive feedback and information from their users. Communication now becomes a two-way street. Users can provide their input on the collections and even offer more context to an event or record than what the archivist may be able provide. They are also able to ask more questions about the archival and/or curatorial process. As a result, archival work becomes more transparent than it historically has been.

The staff and the administration at the College of Charleston's Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture are embracing the notion that social media and Web 2.0 tools are necessary in order to connect and engage with current users and to cultivate new user groups.

Avery Research Center's History

To understand the importance of communicating with the public, it is important to know the history of the Avery Research Center.

The Avery Research Center is dedicated to preserving and making public the lived experiences and culture of African-Americans in Charleston, the Lowcountry, and South Carolina. The Avery Research Center was originally the Avery Normal Institute, which was established in 1865 by the American Missionary Association (AMA) to educate African-Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. The students were trained in teaching and other professions to create a classically educated segment of the African-American community. The school closed in 1954 due to social and financial pressures. However, when a developer was considering turning the building into apartments, Avery Institute alumni (forming the Avery Institute of Afro-American History and Culture), the College of Charleston, and other interested individuals rallied to purchase the building to create a center to document and preserve African-American contributions to Charleston and South Carolina. The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture opened in 1990 and the first collections came from Avery Institute alums who donated their papers and other school memorabilia.

Social Media

Due to the grassroots nature of the Avery Research Center's creation, using social media and Web 2.0 tools to make collections more accessible to the public is a natural extension of its mission.

Graduate students and/or grant-funded staff members maintain social media activities at the Avery Research Center primarily. Full-time staff members have the ability to update the social media platforms; but due to other responsibilities, this does not occur on a regular basis. Presently, the Avery Research Center maintains two social media platforms, the "Not Just in February" blog and a Facebook page.

Blogging

(<http://blogs.cofc.edu/averyarchives>)

"Not Just in February" is a Wordpress-based blog and was originally created by Amanda Ross and Harlan Greene, the archivist and project investigator respectively, for the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) grant that the Avery Research Center was awarded in 2007 to process their "hidden" collections. Grant staff updated the blog to inform the public about the collections on which they worked. In addition, the blog featured guest contributors such as Dr. Jeffrey Green, Joi Mayo, and Dr. Dale Rosengarten, who provided additional contexts to the Avery Research Center's collections and Charleston's and African-American history. The CLIR grant ended in June 2011.

The purpose of the blog is two-fold. It allows the archival staff to make collections more accessible to students, scholars, and community members who may not have known about them and it allows readers to comment and discuss the posts. The comments received on a blog post vary from "good job" and "very interesting" to "Really, the ledger can be an invaluable historical archive...because it

is very unique.” The various levels of engagement with the posts do not take away from the fact people are learning about our collections.

Since the blog was created for the CLIR archives grant, the grant staff maintained the blog; but now that the grant has ended, other staff members are being asked to contribute to the blog, such as by writing a post about what they are doing and the conferences they are attending. Inviting other elements of the Avery Research Center to appear on the blog shows readers all the aspects of the institution they otherwise might not have expected or known.

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Avery-Research-Center-for-African-American-History-and-Culture/122353217454>

Facebook has become the primary resource people use for information about institutions they want to visit and to keep abreast. As of December 4, 2011, the Avery Research Center’s Facebook page has 1,140 “likes” up from 1,077 (+63) from September 2011. The work I have done as the Outreach and Processing Fellow probably helped this increase, and it demonstrates the need to have a dedicated person to undertake a social media initiative. Updating a page only once a month or only when one has an event does not cultivate a following—one has to be proactive when connecting with Facebook “likers”. Being proactive entails sharing articles, links, status updates, photos, etc. with other pages on the site that share a similar mission and interest as ours such as Lowcountry Africana and the Auburn Avenue Research Center. Once we share something of theirs, they return the favor and share one of our posts; thus, we are able to connect with people who like their page, but were unaware of the Avery Research Center. One can see this as the 21st-century word-of-mouth method.

The platform is currently used:

- to update “likers” about upcoming events and commenting on past events that occurred at the Avery Research Center;
- as a place to upload pictures of events;
- to send out news article links and videos about Charleston, historic preservation, genealogy, African-American history, and issues facing cultural institutions to keep them informed about what is going on in the broader dialogue; and
- to highlight items in our digital library <http://lowcountrydigital.library.cofc.edu/cdm4/browse.php?CISOROOT=%2FART> (Note: this aspect of our social media initiative is new, but we hope it to be successful as people may be unaware of the digital library consortium to which the Avery Research Center belongs).

Possible future uses:

- Ask-an-archivist day(s)
- Archive chat day(s)

The technical challenges of maintaining a Facebook page are relatively minor as the platform is

easy to use and relatively self-explanatory. Recently, the site has added ways for administrators to see how people locate their organization and how they engage with us. This insight is important and allows us to examine the impact of what we are doing; what does and does not work; and how to improve.

The benefits of using Facebook as a way to engage with our “likers” are that we can expose them to information and resources about which they otherwise would not have known. Additionally, we are able to keep in contact with researchers and visitors once they physically leave the building (or even the state) and keep them constantly informed about what we are doing at the Avery Research Center. One of the biggest successes that we have had with Facebook has been the photos we upload to the site of our events and conferences. People comment, like, share, and tag people in the photos for us. This is good as it creates a community of supporters of the Avery Research Center in a virtual space.

Future Platforms: Twitter and Tumblr

The Avery Research Center does have a Twitter account that was started by a graduate student, but it has not been fully utilized. Thus, when the revised news blog gets rolling, we will integrate the blog to filter into the Twitter feed. Furthermore, the Avery Research Center staff, graduate assistants and scholars (college and high school volunteers) will be able to tweet important statements from speakers to include those who wanted to attend an event, but could not. Right now, Tumblr (a microblogging platform) is not on our priority list; but in the future, it will probably be used as another information source to see what kinds of conversations are happening amongst different communities and how the Avery Research Center can participate. The implementation of these two resources will require a more refined strategy for our Web presence than what we currently have.

Web 2.0 Tools

Social networks are not the only Web 2.0 tools that exist, consequently, archives and cultural institutions need to seek other ways for their patrons to engage with them and their collections. I have been considering other types of tools for the Avery Research Center to use, such as 21st-century subject guides, virtual exhibits, and user-contributed digital collections. I will discuss the last two.

Virtual exhibits

The Avery Research Center has done exhibits both alone and in collaboration with other institutions. The Avery Research Center has made it a priority to reuse exhibit information for community events and programs, but the benefit of a virtual exhibit is that it can be accessed by a wider audience. Additionally, developing virtual exhibits allows this information to be presented in more interactive ways. Thus, I have been looking at developing virtual exhibits for at least two past exhibits and using multimedia sources (YouTube, iTunesU, etc.) and interactive tools (timelines, visualizations, etc.) to provide information about the collections and to get people thinking about them in a different way.

User-Contributed Digital Collections

Currently, the Avery Research Center's collections do not reflect the lived experiences of African-American youth (ages 14–21) in Charleston, South Carolina. So I am leading the effort to create a digital collection of stories in varied formats of these experiences on seven themes including social justice and relationships. African-American youth in the Charleston area will be encouraged to submit their stories to a Web site based off of the Omeka Web-publishing platform. The benefit of this collection is two-fold as the underdocumented community will have the ability to share their stories and the Avery Research Center is able to connect with and engage with a population that has not historically been reached. Since this program has not been fully developed the outcome cannot be determined, but we at the Avery Research Center are excited about the possibilities of using this technology to involve youth in history and archives.

Challenges

As aforementioned, historically the maintenance of social networks and Web 2.0 tools have mainly been the responsibility of grant funded staff and graduate assistants. This model is unsustainable and a defined strategy needs to be created to involve everyone. To get started, I have been encouraging more staff to contribute to the blog and information for the Facebook page.

Some reasons that staff have given about their lack of participation with the social media aspect of archives previously are that they are not familiar with the technology; they are busy; and that it is not a part of their job description. Yet, as I explain to them that in general the updating of Facebook, to comment on a feed or to write a short post to place on the blog does not take an inordinate amount of time. The demographic of the Avery Research Center staff is that most have not grown up with social media as the primary way to communicate; therefore, showing these staff members different Internet-based tools and how they can be used to improve access to the collections and extend their impacts has been one of my endeavors as the outreach fellow.

Conclusion

As a whole, the Avery Research Center is embracing social networks and Web 2.0 technology/tools as a way to engage with both new and old users of our collections and that with a strong leadership, the Avery Research Center is ready to enter the 21st-century.

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