

Danielle Salomon

Moving on from Facebook

Using Instagram to connect with undergraduates and engage in teaching and learning

Is Instagram worth the additional effort from a library to support another social network? Possibly. At UCLA Powell Library, we have had more success connecting with our students and engaging in teaching and learning on Instagram than on any other social network we use. Instagram makes sense for our library because it reaches a young, urban, and diverse demographic—one that reflects our undergraduate population. Our library maintains a presence on four social networks—Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram—but we prize Instagram for being the place where we have the most rewarding interactions at the moment. Our Instagram followers tend to be highly engaged and attentive to our content. While there is no chance of truly “moving on” from Facebook (Facebook purchased Instagram last year for a much-publicized \$1 billion), Instagram has breathed new life into our social media activities.

What is Instagram?

Instagram is a mobile app (iOS and Android) that enables users to instantly turn their mobile snapshots into visually appealing images, which are then shared with others on the network. The images can be shared on other social networks, as well, including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, and Foursquare. Instagram launched in October 2010, was purchased by Facebook in April 2012, and currently has approximately 130 million monthly active users.¹ On June 20, 2013, Instagram added the capability to post short videos, a response to the growing

popularity of Vine, a six-second video app owned by Twitter.

Instagram is dedicated to the mobile experience, and part of its growth was fueled by the rapid adoption of smartphones with high-functioning cameras. Although it now provides a Web site where users can view posts, images still can't be posted from a Web interface without a workaround.

Why would an academic library be interested in Instagram?

Instagram is currently the third most popular social network used by U.S. college students.² While it still trails Facebook and Twitter in terms of adoption rate, the level of engagement on the network appears to be higher. According to Melanie Shreffler of Smarty Pants, a youth and family market research firm, teens and 20-somethings are spending less time on Facebook and more time on niche social networks like Instagram.³

Instagram reaches a younger, more diverse audience than other social networks. Instagram users skew much younger than Facebook users,^{4,5} which means that every incoming class of college students is bringing with it a larger pool of Instagram users. Many of them are eager to follow campus identities as they adjust to their new home. Instagram also indexes highly with African Americans and Latinos, and is particularly popular

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among urban residents.⁶ If your library is targeting a young, diverse, urban demographic, you might have more success with Instagram than other social media outlets.

Our own experience certainly reflects the trends noted above. At Powell Library, we appear to be reaching a distinct audience on Instagram that has little overlap with our followers on Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, our Instagram followers are much more interactive, even though we have a larger number of followers on Facebook. One reason for this might be Facebook fatigue. Another reason might be that Instagram users still see every post from

an account, @ucla_powell_library, posted a few photos, and started “liking” students’ photos of our library. We liked every photo that was geo-tagged in our library and would search the hashtags #ucla and #powell for any other photos we felt were appropriate to like. Despite maintaining only a minimal presence on the network, our user base started to grow.

Occasionally, we would come across a particularly interesting photo of our building and would ask the user if we could re-post it. Posting students’ photos has become a regular feature of our feed. No one has ever declined to have his or her photo re-posted,

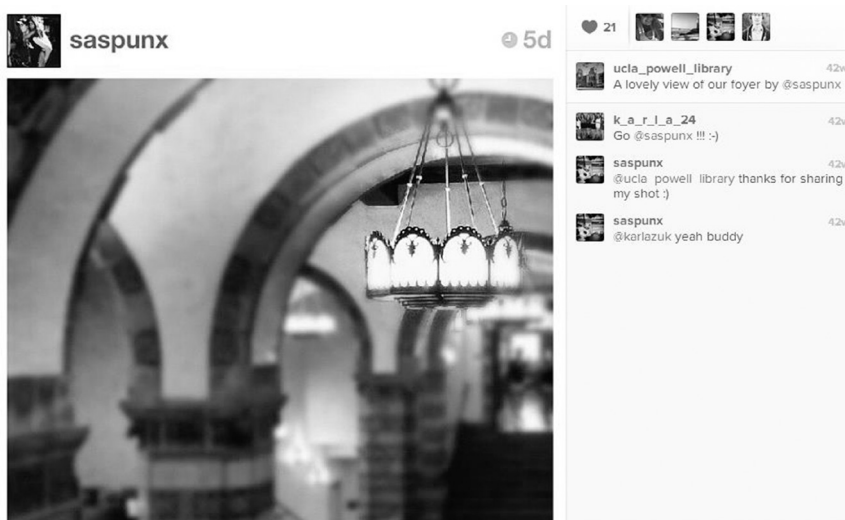


Photo of the library taken by a UCLA student and re-posted by @ucla_powell_library. View this article online for detailed images.

the accounts they follow—unlike Facebook, which, by default, filters out posts it deems less interesting to the user.

Connecting with undergraduates

In the beginning, we stumbled upon Instagram as a way to connect with our undergraduates. In early 2012, while monitoring our library’s Twitter feed, we kept finding photos of our library that had originated on Instagram. Our students were using Instagram to document their time inside the library, a clear sign that we needed to be in this online space. We subsequently created

and the posting student appears to be genuinely thrilled when we re-post it (always with attribution). There are several re-post apps, such as Repost, that facilitate the quick and easy re-posting of others’ photos. Some of our users have gotten into the habit of tagging us when they take a picture of our building to alert us of a new photo.

We also connect with undergraduates by posting content based on a hotlist of topics we know our students care about. For us, that includes photos of our building, campus, and study spaces; unusual books; special collections items; historic photo-

graphs; events; and anything having to do with grades. For example, we have used the hashtag #BooksYouNeverKnewWeHad to feature some of the more eclectic books in our collection, such as *Food is a Four Letter Word*; *Horror and Science Fiction Films III*; *UCLA Slang*; and *The Tattoo Encyclopedia: A Guide to Choosing Your Tattoo*.

Engage in teaching and learning

Instagram has become a fun learning tool for us and our students. Last summer, our library had an exhibit that featured medical artifacts from the Civil War. We took a picture of a kit of surgical tools, which included a

and owned by the library. We posted it on Instagram with the question, “Does anyone know what this map of the head is?” Someone guessed correctly right away, and we followed up with some interesting facts about the history of phrenology.

Special collections items and digital library images can be a treasure trove of social media content. One of our library’s goals is to increase students’ exposure to special collections items, so we draw heavily from these collections.

One of our former interns, Robert Mitchell, would scour our digital library for historical photos related to the current day in



Photo of a Civil War surgical tool kit, featuring a saw used for amputations.

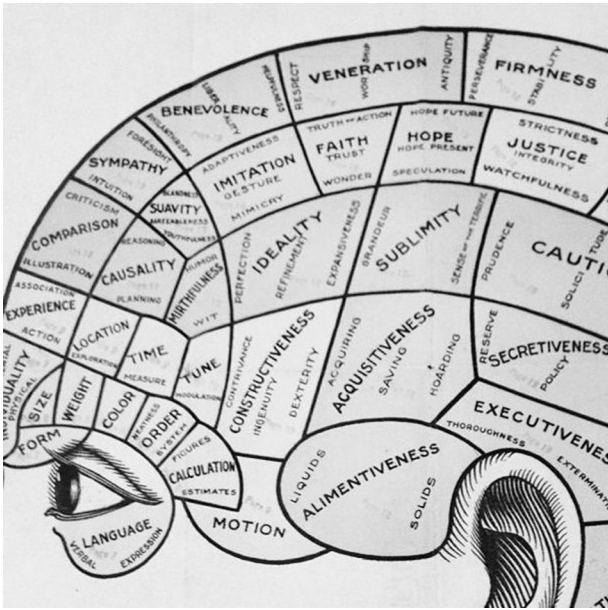
small traveling saw used for amputations, and posted it with the question, “Can anyone guess what that saw was used for?” At the time, we had only 95 followers, but we received a few guesses and several “likes”—much more interaction that we would have seen on Facebook.

We also incorporate content that emerges from UCLA’s curriculum. By doing so, we seek to distribute to others in the community the knowledge that comes from one course. For example, last year we worked closely with a class studying the history of the brain. We took a photograph of a beautiful, old phrenology map that was used in the course

history. He would post the photo with some interesting commentary about the event or person. Many special collections items are old enough to avoid copyright concerns, but this is not always the case, particularly with digitized photographs, so it is best to check with your library’s copyright expert before posting.

Posting

The better your photos look on Instagram, the more successful you will be. The quality of your photos is more important on Instagram than on social networks that are more textual. A good tip to get better-looking



19th century phrenology map posted by @ucla_powell_library.

photos is to never take the photo with the Instagram app! Take a few shots with the camera on your smartphone or iPod, choose the best one, and then go to Instagram to upload, crop, filter, and post. Consider using a photo-editing app like Snapseed, which can turn dark, mediocre photographs into bright, interesting images.

Another good rule of thumb is to be judicious with your posting. Every image you post will appear in your followers' feeds and they will un-follow you if you clutter up their feed. We have learned from experience not to post any more than two or three photos per day. The sweet spot for us is one carefully-crafted photo per day.

Analytics

One of our former interns, Michele James, evaluated a number of social media analytic tools as a part of her internship. As a result of her evaluation, we use Statigram as our source for Instagram analytics. It is free and provides a limited, but useful, data set including historical trends, engagement metrics, community analysis, and recommendations for the best times to post content.

Demonstrating the library's impact on student success

Social media has become a crucial means for our library to demonstrate its impact on student success. We regularly collect content about our library that students have created and posted publicly on their own. We use the anecdotes in combination with quantitative measures, such as circulation statistics, to tell a story about how we are making a difference in students' lives. In presentations and written reports, these pictures and quotes are often what are remembered the most.

For example, last year, our library opened up additional 24-hour study space on a trial basis during finals. When it was deemed a success, our team created a proposal to request additional funding to keep the spaces open on an ongoing basis. Included in the proposal were social media anecdotes, which included a photo from Instagram posted by a student happily studying with his friends overnight in the expanded study space.

Interns and student employees

A question I often get asked is, "How do you fit in social media along with your other aca-

democratic librarian duties?" It would be impossible without the tremendous help of our interns and student employees. UCLA has an MLIS program, and I recruit one to two interns per quarter from the program to help with social media and receive course credit. When the interns are working, they do a majority of the content curation and posting, and they do an amazing job.

Occasionally, I also recruit the help of our undergraduate student employees. They assist by using a library iPod Touch to log into our Instagram account and "like" all the photos geotagged at our library and in the surrounding areas. This tactic is particularly effective at the start of the academic year, when new students are taking hundreds of photos of their new surroundings.



Photo posted by @brandonryancrawford with the caption, "One of many study nights to be in our study lair with @domeskee Rockwell and Allie."

Great examples of use

For creative inspiration, the below institutions are excellent examples of how Instagram can be used to connect with a community:

- The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, @amhistorymuseum, is a model for incorporating teaching and learning into its posts.
- The Hammer Museum, @hammer_museum, strikes an edgy combination of style, art, news, and community.
- UC-Berkeley, @ucberkeley, posts spectacular campus photos that are tremendously popular with followers.
- The New York Botanical Garden, @nybg, features one breathtaking photo per day of its flowers and plants.

Today, Instagram is a valuable place for our library to be engaged. It has allowed us to connect in a meaningful way with our diverse, urban, undergraduate student body and further our goals of teaching and learning. The factors that influence our success may change in the future and diminish our impact, but that is to be expected in the fluid environment of social media. We maintain a flexible and experimental approach with our social media strategy

and are eager to see where our audience takes us next.

Notes

1. Instagram Press Center, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://instagram.com/press/>.
2. re:fuel, "College Explorer," conducted by Crux Research, June 13, 2013, <http://totalaccess.emarketer.com/Chart.aspx?R=140262&dsNav=Ntk:basic%7cInstagram%7c1%7c,Ro:6>.
3. Danielle Drolet, "Millennials Migrate to Niche Social Networks," May 1, 2013, <http://totalaccess.emarketer.com/Interview.aspx?R=6001077&dsNav=Ntk:basic%7cInstagram%7c1%7c,Ro:12>.
4. Pew Internet & American Life Project, "The Demographics of Social Media Users – 2012," Feb. 14, 2013, <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Social-media-users/Social-Networking-Site-Users/Demo-portrait.aspx>.
5. Heather Dougherty, "Facebook acquires photo-sharing network Instagram," April 10, 2012, <http://www.experian.com/blogs/marketing-forward/2012/04/10/facebook-acquires-photo-sharing-network-instagram/>.
6. Pew Internet, 2013. *↗*