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Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Instagram's instant appeal

Katie Elson Anderson

The rise in the popularity of smartphone apps is hard to ignore. People are accessing information and connecting through social media on their smartphones at increasing rates. Almost half of the total digital media time spent by US adults is spent on smartphone apps (comScore, 2015, p. 6). Smartphone apps account for two-thirds of all growth in digital media engagement in the past two years (p. 8), and those users spend the most time using social networking apps (p. 37). Photo apps were found to have some of the highest engagement in users, and the photo app Instagram is the second most used mobile app among US adults in the age group of 18-34 years (p. 43).

Instagram is one of the several mobile apps that are examples of "mobile-first" social networks. These networks and apps are created primarily for mobile use and, in many cases, focus on the smartphone's camera for content creation and dissemination (comScore 2014, p. 18). Other apps in this category include Snapchat, Vine and Path. These mobile-first social networks are also part of a group of social networking platforms that make up the Visual Web, that is, platforms that use images and videos as their primary content (Lewine, 2014). Platforms such as Pinterest, Tumblr and Snapchat, while not all primarily mobile, join Instagram in representing a growing Visual Web presence on both smartphones and desktops.

For many iPhone users in the target demographic (18-34 year olds), Instagram is old news compared to newer Visual Web applications. In late 2010, the app with a logo resembling a polaroid camera appeared in the Apple

app store. The app was created by Kevin Systrom in an effort to create technology that combined his love of photography with the location and sharing elements of social media (Bertoni, 2012). The name of that app was Instagram, and the original was inspired by the Polaroid OneStep SX-70, which includes a rainbow stripe and large camera lens[1]. The premise of the app was straight-forward: provide a place for users to take a picture, edit the photo and share it with friends. Filters and options within the app expanded the iPhone camera's capabilities, allowing users to render their photos in the style of the original Polaroid camera, square and grainy. From its launch in October 2010 to December 2011, Instagram gained 10 million users[2] and also modified that original logo to be less like a camera, though still clearly inspired by the retro technology (D'Onfro, 2013). In just over a year from its initial appearance in the Apple app store, Instagram was presented with the iPhone App of the Year award in December 2011.

Android users would have to wait until April 2012 to enjoy the "fun and quirky way to share life with friends through a series of pictures"[3]. Only a few days after the release of the Android app, Instagram was purchased by Facebook for a reported \$1m, though the actual amount appears to have been under that reported amount (Fox, 2012). The addition of Android users and streamlined integration with Facebook introduced the app to even more users, and by July 2012, Instagram could boast 80 million users. The popularity of Instagram continues to grow, with over 400

million users at this time[4], which surpasses Twitter and makes it the second biggest social network (Gaudin, 2015). Statistics from the Pew Research Center demonstrate instant appeal and fast growth, with Instagram users doubling from 2012 (13 per cent of Internet users) to 2015 (28 per cent of Internet users)[5].

According to Pew Internet, these 400 million users are primarily 13-29 years old and heavily engaged. Of the 28 per cent of adult Internet users reporting use of Instagram, 55 per cent are 18-29 years old[6], and 52 per cent of teens (13-17 years) reported using Instagram, making it the second most popular social media platform for teens, below Facebook and above Snapchat[7]. These users report a high engagement, with 59 per cent of them accessing Instagram on a daily basis[8]. Instagram reports that an average of 80 million photos are being shared by its users, 75 per cent of whom are located outside of the USA[9]. This demonstrates a significant global reach in line with its parent, Facebook.

This global reach has not been ignored by the marketing world: "it's not news that customers are turning to image-based social media sites such as Instagram, Tumblr and Pinterest to document their lives" (Smilansky, 2015). Instagram also has recognized what marketers want from a social media platform and provides businesses with analytic tools. A report by marketing reporters eMarketer forecasts rapid growth in Instagram's ad revenues, even going so far as to predict that Instagram will have higher net mobile display ad revenues than both Google and Twitter in 2017

(eMarketer, 2015). Enhancements, such as displaying view counts on videos, are targeting marketers, and the option of 60 s advertising videos are luring brands, as Instagram seeks to shift marketing budgets from televisions to smartphones (Johnson, 2016).

Sponsored stories have begun appearing in newsfeeds, giving brands the opportunity to tell their stories via Instagram photo or video, while encouraging their followers to share their own stories about the products.

Libraries often look to marketing trends for useful tools for outreach and engagement. Telling a story is a concept libraries and librarians are quite familiar with, and Instagram is an excellent storytelling tool. Libraries using the platform connect with their audiences in a variety of ways, from highlighting collections to using it in instruction settings. While the numbers of Instagram users increase, so do the number of libraries with a presence on the platform. Almost 300 libraries using Instagram have been identified on a growing list compiled by the author through postings on social media sites, where librarians share their institution's Instagram names and in a search on the hashtag #librariesofinstagram[10]. This list is a work in progress and by no means comprehensive but does provide Instagram users with a list of libraries with Instagram accounts.

Following the libraries that are currently using Instagram is an excellent way to observe the different ways to use the app and identify frequently used library hashtags. The libraries using Instagram demonstrate unique and diverse ways to connect with an audience. The best way to learn a social networking site is to jump in and start using it; fortunately, there are several resources and articles addressing best practices to help one get started. The 5 Minute Librarian blog held a "31 Days of Instagram Challenge" in October of 2015, which gives ideas, hashtags and how to's to other librarians using Instagram for

their libraries[11]. Wetta (2016) provides instructions on how to engage young users with Instagram, from attracting followers to taking great pictures and ideas for content. LibraryLinkNJ, the New Jersey Library Cooperative, provides a quick start guide for Instagram, which includes useful links, along with tips for getting started[12]. Bell (2013) shares ideas for using Instagram in the classroom while also introducing examples and considerations.

Academic librarians have been writing about their own experiences using Instagram to connect with students for several years. In 2013, Bond University hosted a panel session at the Australian Library and Information Association to discuss the use of Instagram in a library context and presented their success in engaging students using Instagram (Abbott *et al.*, 2013). Enis (2013) describes a project at North Carolina State University Libraries (NCSU) that encouraged students to post pictures on Instagram of the new Hunt Library using the hashtag #HuntLibrary. The pictures were harvested and rebroadcast and are being preserved in the university's archives. NCSU has shared the code they used for harvesting and moderation of the images, so that other libraries can benefit from their successful experience. UCLA Powell Library found Instagram to be the most successful social network for connecting with students. Salomon (2013) provides examples of how the UCLA Powell Library uses Instagram with suggestions on use, analytics and impact. Tekulve and Kelly (2013) describe Instagram and how to use it while detailing their experiences using Instagram in their institutions. Wallis (2014) writes about a student-guided Instagram program for first-year English composition students. The program used Instagram to help students become familiar with the library, tasking them with finding and sharing their discoveries through the platform in an effort to decrease library anxiety. Instagram is described as "a

good platform for reaching people if you want to showcase behind-the-scenes or process documentation" notes Severson (2014, p. 17) in a discussion on promoting digital collections on the platform. Hild (2014, p. 32) talks about successful strategies using Instagram in academic libraries and lessons learned from running the Herman B. Wells Library account at Indiana University, concluding that "Instagram offers a novel way to engage with users of academic libraries and receive feedback, direct or indirect, on how they are using the library spaces". Hagman and Carlton (2014) collaborated with student employees on the Instagram account of Ohio University Libraries, and Instagram is proposed as a tool for increased participatory culture in libraries by Hopkins *et al.* (2015).

Some of the literature on the topic goes beyond descriptions of using Instagram to address how libraries determined that Instagram would be a good place for student engagement. Burgert *et al.* (2014) discuss the decision to add an Instagram account to the University of San Diego's Copley Library based on the results of a survey of undergraduate students. Ramsey and Vecchio (2014) discuss the assessment and eventual implementation of Instagram at Alberstons Library. Brookbank (2015) reports on the results of a survey asking students about their social media preferences, finding that students were using Instagram and wished to see the libraries use it as well.

The studies, statistics and recent news stories point to Instagram as a recommended social network for engaging with audiences. The appeal of Instagram is its simplicity: create a photo or a video, edit and share. The options for doing this are not overwhelming, and the app is user-friendly. While there is some desktop presence available on the Web site, most of the platform is only available in its mobile form. Instagram accounts can be only created using the

Instagram app, which is currently available for the IOS, Android and Windows phone operating systems. After downloading the app, users may choose to login with their Facebook account or with an email address. Logging in with a Facebook account streamlines the integration of Instagram with its parent company's products and connections.

As a social network, Instagram shares many of the features, options and settings that are familiar to users of other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook; followers, sharing, liking and commenting. Similar to other social media platforms, the default setting for post visibility is public; posts can be viewed by anyone using the Instagram app or on the instagram.com Web site. Users may choose to set their account to private, which will allow only their followers to view the shared posts. When an account is set to private, followers must be approved by the user. Users can identify other users to follow by user name or email or by using the search function. Reciprocity exists between followers but is not required.

When opening the app, icons appear along the bottom of the screen, represented by a house, a magnifying glass, a camera, a quote bubble and a profile picture if using multiple accounts. The home button, represented by the house icon, provides the scrolling view of the posts by those being followed. The magnifying glass provides a search function for identifying users, subjects and hashtags. This search functionality presents users with a single highlighted event, such as the Oscars or Milan Fashion week, along with trending hashtags and posts related to the user's recent activity. The camera icon is in the center as the main tool for creation of content within the application. Social networks would not exist without the ability to comment or "like" a post, and this is done in Instagram by choosing the chat bubble with a heart icon. An inbox icon in the upper right-hand

corner of the screen provides access to Instagram Direct, which allows for direct messaging of other Instagram users, individually or in groups. Unlike the direct message function on Twitter, here, direct messaging does not require mutual following; anyone can direct message another Instagram users, regardless of whether they follow or are being followed.

Once a user has chosen other Instagram accounts to follow, that content will appear in the scrolling feed. Users may like a post by clicking on the heart icon. Comments can be made by clicking on the chat bubble. Other Instagram users can be tagged in the comments field using the @ sign before the user name. A post can be sent directly to specific users via Instagram Direct by clicking on the forwarding arrow. Additional options to report an inappropriate post or copy the URL appear when clicking on the three dots on the right-hand side of the screen. Unlike other social media platforms like Facebook and Tumblr, a user may not share or repost another user's content from within the app.

Posting content to Instagram is a streamlined process. Clicking on the camera icon allows a user to choose whether to post existing content from the phone's library or create a new photo or video. Once content is selected or created, the content can be edited using filters and tools. It is these filters that gained Instagram its early fame, providing users with easy ways to manipulate their photos in artistic ways with very little effort. These filters have proven so popular with Instagram users that parents are naming their children after them (Sola, 2015). In addition to the filters, various tools for editing are available by clicking on the wrench icon. These editing tools allow a user to perform standard photo editing techniques: crop, adjust, brightness, contrast, etc. After an item is edited, it is ready to be shared with followers. A caption can be added, and this is where hashtags are added. Hashtags are an important part of Instagram, allowing

for search and discovery, and unlike Twitter, whose character limitations limit the number and length of hashtags, Instagram hashtags are numerous and varied in a single post. There is also an option to add a location and tag other Instagram users. In addition to sharing with Instagram followers, users may share their content with other linked social media sites: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Swarm and Flickr.

The simplicity of Instagram has prompted work-arounds to its perceived limitations. There is no way to easily repost or share another user's content, which, in the case of Tumblr, is what brings a post its popularity. Third-party applications such as Repost and InstaRepost have been developed to allow users to re-share other users content. In a nod to privacy, Instagram does not allow another user to download or save a user's post, though screenshots and the individual posts' URL (if public) on the Web site do allow the image to be disseminated. The ability to make a collage of pictures or post pictures of different size and orientation were not original to the app. After third-party applications were developed to help users work around this limitation, Instagram now offers these options within the app. Many social media managers are interested in statistics and assessment, but Instagram's own are not robust unless you are a business. However, there are some third-party tools, both paid and free, such as Iconosquare (formerly Statigram) and Simply Measured. The Web site Wordlcam (<http://worldc.am/>) makes finding photos tagged in a specific location easier than when attempted from within the app. These are just a few of the many tools outside of the app that are recommended on sites and in articles; however, it should be noted that they may not all be around in the future. There is evidence that Instagram is starting to limit third-party applications, as they make changes to the guidelines on using the

application program interface (API) (Bell, 2015).

Instagram is in period of growth and change, providing enhancements on a regular basis. While many of Instagram's recent changes were targeted toward businesses to gain ad revenue, everyone who uses it for engagement can benefit. A recent change that allows the switching back and forth between different accounts on a single device has been applauded by librarians using the platform. Before this change, it was cumbersome to manage a personal and institutional account or multiple institutional accounts on a single device. These and future enhancements continue to make Instagram an appealing platform for libraries to consider adding to their social media palette.

NOTES

1. www.polaroid.com/products/onestep-sx70-instant-camera
2. www.instagram.com/press/, "Our Story"
3. www.instagram.com/about/faq/
4. www.instagram.com/press/?hl=en
5. www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/19/mobile-messaging-and-social-media-2015/2015-08-19_social-media-update_02/
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