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Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Tumblin' through the visual web

Katie Elson Anderson

The old adage “a picture is worth 1,000 words” can be used to describe recent trends in social media. Even cursory users of more traditionally text-based social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, have likely noticed a rise in the number of photos, gifs and videos appearing in posts in recent years. Other platforms, which are primarily image based, such as Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr are growing, while the traditionally text-based platforms are working to develop new features to emphasize and promote the use of these images. This phenomenon of emphasis on images which is noted as early as 2012 has been described by comScore as “the rise of the visual web” (comScore, 2013). Platforms that are part of the Visual Web use images, rather than text, as the primary content of a post. Text may appear, but it is secondary to the image, essentially the opposite of a long blog post where the primary content is text with optional pictures placed for emphasis or enhancement. As described in a *Wall Street Journal* blog post (which incidentally was mostly text, with one picture), “the Visual Web represents a shift from text-heavy websites to sites that feature images as the anchor for their content” (Lewine, 2014).

According to the digital media analytics company, comScore: “Three social networks in particular – Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram – each gained more than 10 million visitors over the course of the year in part by catering to a desire for more visually appealing content” (comScore, 2013, p. 12). The attraction to visual content continues as reports indicate that Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr show the highest growth in both active users and

members of many social platforms, including Facebook and Twitter (Lunden, 2014). It is obvious that as far as social media is concerned, an image may be becoming worth more than words.

A brief, and by no means complete, review of the literature on the topic of libraries and the Visual Web gives evidence of the use of Instagram (Abbott *et al.*, 2013; Bell, 2013; Hild, 2014; Salomon, 2013; Wallis, 2014), Pinterest (Baggett and Gibbs, 2014; Gilman and Vincent, 2013; Gregory, 2013; Hansen *et al.*, 2012; McDermott, 2012; Thornton, 2012; Wilkinson, 2013) and Tumblr (Anderson, 2015; Cohen, 2007; Duffy, 2013; Keyser, 2013; Matteson, 2011; Welch, 2014). The literature indicates a trend toward the use of more image-based social media by libraries. The use of these Visual Web platforms provides libraries a quick and easy way to promote their special collections, market events, highlight physical spaces in the library and provide information and entertainment with very few words. This lack of words can be limiting to libraries and librarians seeking to connect with patrons or with other professionals. Some pictures demand more explanation than is possible in an Instagram comment or a Pinterest description. In looking at the potential of the Visual Web, the question as to how libraries and librarians can utilize it and still maintain the option of text-based information arises. One possible answer to this question is Tumblr.

Tumblr, while considered to be part of the Visual Web, is frequently categorized as a microblogging platform. Microblogging is blogging with restrictions on size and space, forcing the user to make smaller blog

posts. The most popular example of a microblogging tool is Twitter, which limits posts to 140 characters. Hashtags, which are tags or labels using the #, are often an important part of microblogging, allowing for content search and discovery. Tumblr is unique among its microblogging peers because it has few limitations on size or content. Users are able to post multiple types of content without size and space limits. Photos, however, represent the most heavily posted content on Tumblr (Chang *et al.*, 2014), thus making the platform an important part of the Visual Web.

Tumblr is an interesting hybrid of a traditional blog and a social media platform. The format allows for long blog-like posts or quick link sharing combined with the reciprocity of social networking. Individual Tumblr sites are called Tumblr blogs. Similar to Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram, Tumblr users choose who to follow and are also followed by others. Viewers of public Tumblr content do not need to have Tumblr accounts or blogs, so posts are easily discovered and shared outside of the Tumblr community. Engagement in Tumblr is straightforward, performed through comments, likes or reblogging. Reblogging is sharing another Tumblr blog's content with one's own followers and is an element that makes Tumblr stand out among similar sites. When content is reblogged, all of the information from the original post is maintained on the post, providing a timeline of events on the content which is useful when addressing copyright and ownership concerns that are often part of discussions about the Visual Web.

The Visual Web was identified in 2012-2013, but Tumblr has been around since 2007 (Kenney, 2013). The first incarnation of Tumblr was developed by David Karp at the age of 21. Early users were impressed with the simplicity, ease of use and ability to customize the blogs. The site continues to be minimalistic, streamlined and easy to use. Design modifications have included a more mobile-friendly site as well as a mobile app. Additional features, such as linking to other social media sites, spotlights on trending posts and more robust searching and discovery tools, have also been added through the years. Since Yahoo purchased the site in 2013 for 1.1 billion dollars (Bigman, 2013), there have been modifications to advertising and revenue models, as Yahoo seeks to capitalize on the site's growing popularity (Heine, 2015).

Tumblr has been called "the forgotten social network", often overlooked in social media reports and statistics and scarcely mentioned in scholarly literature (arXiv, 2014). However, recent growth has begun to bring it more attention. The information technology reporting Web site TechCrunch reports on research from the Global Web Index, indicating that Tumblr's active user base grew by 120 per cent during the end of 2014, making Tumblr the fastest-growing social platform, ahead of Instagram (Lunden, 2014). Bitly, the popular URL-shortening site, reports that Tumblr more than doubled its traffic between the last quarter of 2014 and the first quarter of 2015 with an overall growth of 128 per cent (Bitly Blog, 2015). Tumblr's "About" page shows that as of July 2015, there were 245.5 million blogs and 115.7 billion posts (www.tumblr.com/about). A recent article points out that a great deal of the Internet's viral content is originating on Tumblr and describes the site as the "pipeline to youth culture online" (Dewey, 2015). Statistics on Tumblr users support this statement, reporting that Tumblr's largest demographic is adults of age 18-34 (Duggan and Brenner, 2013).

These statistics are compelling and provide a good argument for libraries and librarians to consider a presence on Tumblr in their social media strategy. The author's quantitative analysis of Libraries and Tumblr explores how public libraries, academic libraries and special collections are using Tumblr to connect with different communities and finds evidence of growth in the presence of libraries on the site (Anderson, 2015). Given Tumblr's growth and user-friendly nature, it is well worth exploring.

The site's ease of use and ability to connect with other social media platforms makes it simple to either add a Tumblr blog to an existing social media strategy or to use it as a tool for an initial foray into social networking. Creating a Tumblr blog only requires an email and a name for the blog. Once the name is selected, a description can be added. Tumblr offers a variety of formats and designs to choose from, and customization is possible with some programming knowledge. Posting to Tumblr is as simple as clicking on the icon for the type of post to be shared: text, quote, links, chat, photo and audio. The user will be prompted for relevant details depending on the selected post type. For example, when link is selected, the user is prompted for the URL, Title and description. The content can be posted immediately or scheduled for a later date and time. Posts can be queued and released on a regular schedule, providing the ability to build up content when there is time and post it consistently. Consistent posting is an important part of a successful social media strategy. Like many social media sites, especially microblogging sites, hashtags are used frequently on Tumblr. Each post may be assigned up to five hashtags. A setting also allows for automatic or selected sharing of the content to Facebook and/or Twitter.

The value of social media platforms is the reciprocal nature that creates community and spreads information; following and being followed, sharing and discovering content. Once a

Tumblr blog has been created, the user can choose others to follow through searching, discovery and suggestion. The posts of those Tumblr blogs will then appear in the user's dashboard or home page. Engaging with these posts is simple, there are three main icons for interaction: a quote bubble for commenting, a heart for liking and circular arrows for reblogging. Actions performed on the post already appear as notes. It is easy to track the original post as well as assess the popularity of the content by looking at the notes. These actions on a post and the tracking of followers appear under Activity (lightening bolt icon) on the dashboard. The dashboard also includes a search box for searching all of Tumblr (magnifying glass); the Explore button (compass icon) which provides recommended content; an inbox (mail icon) where questions, fan mail and submission from users appear; and account settings for modifying profile information, scheduling posts and connecting with other social media sites (person icon).

Followers can send private fan mail to the inbox and, if enabled, ask questions and submit content. Enabling the Ask feature allows a blogs followers, or anyone (anonymously), even those without Tumblr accounts, to ask a question. Questions from followers can be answered publicly or privately, whereas anonymous questions will always appear publicly. Submissions can also be solicited by turning the submit feature. Settings on this feature allow for acceptance of specific types of posts and there is space for communicating guidelines for submissions. Submissions will appear in the inbox for approval and acceptance. It is recommended that libraries enable Ask, providing another service point to connect with users.

Connecting and communicating are essential elements of any social networking site, and Tumblr provides an excellent platform for both. The ease in which one can find, follow and interact with other Tumblr users provides avenues for creating strong

communities. Tumblr is a place where people can share and discover their specific interests and passions, however varied they may be. Librarians are often early adopters of new social media platforms, so it should be no surprise that there is a robust community of librarians using Tumblr or Tumbliarians (McCardle, 2013). Many of these librarians can be found on a list developed by Kate Tkacik, thelifeguardlibrarian as she is known on Tumblr. The tumbliarians list (<http://thelifeguardlibrarian.tumblr.com/tumbliarians>) also includes libraries with a presence on Tumblr. There is also a list of archives and archivists, created and maintained by Rebecca Hopman, who is Tumblr user extabulis (<http://extabulis.tumblr.com/archivists>).

A good way to become familiar with Tumblr is to see how other libraries and librarians are using it. Popular hashtags for library-related content include: #librarians, #libraries, #library, #tumbliarian, #archives and of course #books. The explore function on the dashboard provides suggestions based on the posts, followers and those being followed, providing a means for discovery. Following the libraries, librarians, archives and archivists on the previously mentioned lists is an excellent way to jump right into the community and begin asking questions, observing and experimenting.

There is a growing population of users whose day-to-day experience is saturated with the Visual Web. These users have grown to expect images as a major part of the content they view. The visual component of social media is increasing and companies and brands are taking notice; news stories are now more often anchored by pictures, Twitter allows for easier posting of images and companies are promoting their products via Pinterest. Facebook purchased Instagram in 2012 and boosted its visual components and has recently begun to promote its video capabilities (Snyder, 2015). The need for an image to capture a viewer's attention is not likely to decrease. Tumblr provides libraries with a place to engage with their users, a place that

makes it easy to post the photos, gifs and video that they expect. A library's presence on Tumblr can reach beyond their user base as those outside the local community discover and engage with the content; it provides new spaces for connection and conversation. It is well worth getting acquainted with Tumblr not only for the instant community of librarians that can be found and the potential for reaching beyond the libraries walls, but also for finding information and inspiration on Tumblr blogs, such as Awesome People Reading (<http://awesomepeoplereading.tumblr.com>), Today's Document (<http://todaysdocument.tumblr.com>) or NPR Books (<http://nprbooks.tumblr.com>).

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