



REFLECTION ARTICLE

Harnessing Social Media to Advocate for the University Archive

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Abstract

In 2022 the Monash University Archives began using social media to advocate for and promote ourselves and our collections. This article reflects on the first 12 months of using social media, our experiences of setting up and maintaining our social media presence, the results we have seen and the lessons we have learnt. The key message conveyed in this article is that if our small team can harness social media to advocate for and promote our university archive, then any archive of any size can do the same.

Keywords: *Archives; Outreach; Social media; access; advocacy; community; university archives; building relationships.*

Background

Monash University (the University hereafter) was established in 1958 with the first cohort of students arriving in March 1961. The University began with just one campus in Clayton, but over the decades merged and amalgamated with a number of other institutions. These include the Victorian College of Pharmacy (est. 1881), Chisholm Institute of Technology (formerly Caulfield Institute of Technology, (est. 1922 as Caulfield Technical School), and State College of Victoria at Frankston, est. 1959), and Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education (est. 1968). Monash University is now the largest Australian university by student enrolment, has four Australian campuses, and a presence in five other countries including campuses in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Monash University Archives (the Archives hereafter) was established in the early 1970s. We hold records of permanent value from across the University's Australian campuses, as well as the records of our amalgamation partners and predecessor institutions. We have 2.2 linear kilometres of records in our repository, including hardcopy paper files, along with audio-visual material, photographs, and a growing collection of born-digital and digitised material.

Despite our extensive collection, the majority of what we hold is not accessible or even visible to those who are not Archives staff. This is because we are still using a Microsoft Access database first developed in the 1990s as our archives management system. There are plans to

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obtain a new system in the near future, but until this happens we needed a way to facilitate access to our collections and to expand our reach and visibility, both within and outside the Monash community. This need was highlighted in 2021 when the University celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, where the Archives were only approached in a limited capacity to assist in the celebrations. It was becoming increasingly clear that few within the University, apart from those groups we had regular contact with, even knew we existed or how we could help them.

For our desired purpose of increasing our visibility and reach, showing off our collections, and advocating for ourselves within the University community, social media seemed like the perfect starting point. Therefore, in October 2021 we followed the advice of Strategic Marketing and Communications (SMC – later renamed University Marketing, Admissions and Communications [UMAC]) and wrote a social media communications strategy and created a content calendar with a year's worth of weekly content. Finally, in February 2022 we launched our Twitter, Instagram and Facebook channels, as well as a YouTube channel for our digitised audio-visual collection.

The majority of the work undertaken to plan, prepare, launch and maintain our new social media channels was done by one person in a team of four. This person spent approximately 2 weeks' worth of time on preparation, and dedicates approximately 1 h each week to posting content and monitoring our channels. Furthermore, this person and the rest of the Archives team have neither any background in media and communications nor any experience in communications or social media use on a corporate level.

Strategy

During our first 12 months of using social media we have learnt that being strategic is key to maximising audience growth and engagement. It is arguably quite easy to set up a social media account, post some photos from your collection, and return to business as usual tasks. This will achieve a goal of sending a message that your archive exists and that you have some interesting items in your collection, but it is unlikely to facilitate ongoing growth and engagement.

Planning

Our first step in being strategic was to plan. While we did not receive feedback on our communications strategy from SMC, the act of writing it gave us the opportunity to think about why we wanted to use social media, who our target audiences were, and what our intended messages were. Through writing our strategy, we established that our target audiences included staff, students (current and future), alumni, industry and media, and external individuals and groups. Furthermore, we settled on three key messages:

1. The Archives has a diverse collection of significant interest to the University community, the public and external researchers.
2. The Archives is a valuable resource on the University and its history, and the Archives team are available to assist with enquiries.
3. The Archives is a valuable repository for the deposit of records and other materials from those who are involved or have been involved with the University.

Once we had established our target audiences and our key messages we wrote our content calendar. This simply consisted of a Google Sheet outlining dates throughout the year, any applicable event on that day, the images we wanted to post, the text to go alongside those images, and a space to indicate which platform content was to be posted on and what stage it was at (e.g. drafted, scheduled, published). An extract of our 2022 content calendar can be seen in Figure 1.

8th August 2022	Open Day over the weekend	Pick a photo for main post and then do some stories with throwback open day photos like how I did with o-week	Monpix 2852	Twitter	Over the weekend thousands of people visited @MonashUni's campuses for our annual Open Day with an enormous range of activities, information sessions and displays. But we bet there wasn't a re-enactment of Ned Kelly's last stand by members of @MonashHistory like on Open Day 1981!	Published
				Instagram		Published
				Facebook		Published
16th August 2022	Old student records focus	MONG77 Caulfield exam registers dating back to 1933		Twitter	Here at the Archives we have student records dating back to long before we started recording information in digital systems. For example, these exam results registers from Caulfield go all the way back to 1933! With results for courses in blacksmithing, shorthand, welding & more!	Published
				Instagram		Published
				Facebook		Published
24th August 2022	45 years ago... Alexander Theatre	Monpix M5226 - Alexander Theatre poster for 'Thunderbolt Rides Again'		Twitter	Thunderbolt Rides Again! Performed at Alexander Theatre in August 1977. Described as a 'bushranging musical for children from 5 to 85'. One of hundreds of Alexander Theatre photos held in the Archives (tag @monashpac)	Published
				Instagram		Published
				Facebook		Published
31st August 2022		Gryphon 1948		Twitter	Did you know that 100 years ago in 1922, what is now the Monash Caulfield campus opened as the Caulfield Technical School? After some name changes and amalgamations it joined Monash University in 1990 to become the Caulfield Campus. Take a look at the 1948 edition of Gryphon, the first edition of the school's annual student magazine, which features a lovely old ad for Repco. You can read all Gryphons on our website (link in bio)	Published

Figure 1. Screenshot of content calendar.

Evolving strategy

As the year went on, our strategy evolved according to actual versus desired performance. For our first year on social media, one of our main goals was to grow our audience and subsequently create visibility and awareness of the existence of the Archives. However, in July, our audience growth on Instagram had come to a standstill. After a quick Google search on how to increase followers on Instagram, it became clear that we needed to utilise more of Instagram's features, specifically Instagram Stories. We therefore began to post regular Instagram Stories throughout July and August, including throwback Open Day and Orientation Week photos coinciding with 2022 Open Day and semester two Orientation Week; throwback clubs and societies photos; and quizzes and polls about lost Monash buildings and what was on campus before it became Monash University. All these stories were shared by the accounts we tagged, including the official University Instagram and resulted in a growth of over 70 followers (78%) in those 2 months. We saw this experiment with Instagram Stories as a major success, and subsequently evolved our strategy and planning to include this feature going forward.

Collaboration

Using social media does not just have to be about your own channels, but rather the channels of other groups can also be harnessed to promote your archive. We have done this through collaborations with other divisions within the University, in particular UMAC who run the official University social media channels.

Our relationship with the UMAC social media team came about serendipitously. Once established, we created a content calendar similar to our own with weekly Archives content for UMAC to share on the official University social media channels. Much of this content was published to LinkedIn where we could not use it to our advantage or gain followers from it due to our lack of presence on the platform. Despite this, the content performed extremely well and proved to be UMAC's best performing social media content for 2022. Throughout the year, Archives content on the University's LinkedIn received 7,140 likes, 480 comments, and was reposted 150 times. The most successful of these had 1,252 reactions alone, 24 shares and 159 comments. We only began to see results for ourselves from our collaboration with UMAC in the form of audience growth in the latter half of 2022 when they started tagging us in content, thus sending their followers to our profile.

Results

Statistics

For the purpose of this article we are only going to focus on our results from Twitter and Instagram, as these are the two platforms where we actually engage with people. YouTube, on the other hand, has just been a platform for us to make our digitised audio-visual material accessible, while we created our Facebook account as a safety net when having trouble with Instagram as they are owned by the same company.

On Twitter, our tweets were seen 84,500 times, and we received 122 retweets and 948 likes. Our profile was visited 15,671 times and we gained 181 followers. This is on top of the following we already built during brief use of Twitter during World Digital Preservation Day in 2020. On Instagram we built our following to 240 followers, reached an average of 237 accounts with our posts per month, and had 791 post likes.

What content is the most successful?

Twitter

Determining which content has been most successful differs based on the metric used. Are the most successful tweets those that have the most impressions (have been seen the most times across Twitter)? Or are the most successful tweets those with the most likes? We consider both metrics to be as important as each other. In order for the tweet to be liked, it needs to be seen. Therefore, when first looking at what content is successful we look at impressions. This tells us which content is most likely to have the largest reach, which is generally as a result of the content being picked up by the official University Twitter and others for retweets. We then look at the amount of likes to see which posts are getting the most engagements (e.g. likes, comments, retweets) from the people who are seeing them. As Tables 1 and 2 show, the top 10 tweets do differ slightly depending on whether we are looking at impressions or likes. However, the tweets included in the top 10 are largely the same (with the exception of two), with only the order changing.

Tables 1 and 2 also show us that the most successful tweets during our first 12 months on social media are predominantly throwback photos. While these did make up the majority of our content for the year, we also posted a number of excerpts from publications, links to videos on our YouTube channel, links to Monash University posts of Archives content on LinkedIn, and current photos of items in our collection. Only two posts in the ‘by impressions’ table and three posts in the ‘by likes’ table are not throwback photos.

We believe there are a number of reasons why throwback photos dating from the 1960s to 1990s are the most successful. Firstly, there is a significant nostalgic element for people who may have been at the University, either as a student or staff member, during the time the photos depict. This is particularly the case on the Monash University LinkedIn where alumni and current and past staff are strongly concentrated and where these people tell their stories of their time at the University in the comments. In addition, these photos give a visual touchstone for current students and staff who can recognise a place and feel connected to the history of our institution. Secondly, the majority of these photos are black and white which visually contrasts with much of the modern content people will be seeing on their feeds. This means they may be more likely to stop scrolling, look at and engage with the content than with current colour photos of items in our collection, which may blend in with all the other content

Table 1. Top 10 tweets by impressions

Tweet	Content type	Impressions	Likes	Retweets
Aerial comparison of main campus	Throwback photo	4,441	45	8
Menzies Building LinkedIn post	Link	4,154	21	3
Forum now and then comparison	Throwback photo	3,524	29	4
International Dance Day	Throwback photo	2,829	19	5
International Day of Universal Access to Information	Current photo	2,702	37	9
Sir John Monash's birthday	Throwback photo	2,543	33	1
Monash Reporter Week 1 Semester 1	Publication	2,468	16	4
Graduations – fun outfit	Throwback photo	2,412	22	2
Dalai Lama visit	Throwback photo	2,331	23	1
Interim Council Minutes book	Current photo	2,110	7	1

Table 2. Top 10 tweets by likes

Tweet	Content type	Impressions	Likes	Retweets
Aerial comparison of main campus	Throwback photo	4,441	45	8
International Day of Universal Access to Information	Current photo	2,702	37	9
Sir John Monash's birthday	Throwback photo	2,543	33	1
Forum now and then comparison	Throwback photo	3,524	29	4
Dalai Lama visit	Throwback photo	2,331	23	1
Graduations – fun outfit	Throwback photo	2,412	22	2
Menzies Building LinkedIn post	Link	4,154	21	3
International Dance Day	Throwback photo	2,829	19	5
International Cat Day	Current photo	555	19	1
National Recycling Week	Throwback photo	1,910	18	0

on their feed. We are also not surprised that excerpts from publications do not perform so well, as they are largely text-based and significantly less visually appealing and engaging than photographs. We suspected this while putting together our content calendar for our first year, however it still felt important to share the Monash publications we hold which have online accessibility.

Instagram

On Instagram we focus primarily on the amount of likes a post receives to determine what content is most successful, as impressions for each post does not seem to differ much. Furthermore, it is difficult to compare posts across the year to determine which has been the most successful, because the number of likes on our posts has increased as our followers have increased. Unlike Twitter, posts on Instagram cannot be shared, except for on Instagram Stories, and content is only likely to extend beyond your audience if it is in the form of an Instagram Reel. However, on the most part, throwback photos generally receive the most likes on Instagram, just as they are the most successful type of content on Twitter.

Relationships

While the above information is interesting, it is not the only measure of success we have chosen to focus on. Along with audience growth and engagements, we have found that using social media strategically has allowed us to build relationships (aside from our relationship with UMAC) with other parts of the University, which we may not otherwise have had the opportunity to do.

One such relationship is with Monash Sport. On Instagram we posted an excerpt from a publication detailing the preparations for the opening of a new swimming pool in 1982. The post performed reasonably well for that point in time, but it also achieved two things. Firstly, we gained a follower out of Monash Sport because we tagged them in the post. Secondly, it encouraged Monash Sport to contact us via direct message to ask if they could have the photo used in the publication so they could use it for their own social media. Since this initial interaction, we have had a strong relationship with Monash Sport on social media. They like all our posts and have shared all Instagram Stories in which we have tagged them. They have almost 3,000 more followers than we do, so when they share our content, our reach is substantially increased.

Using social media has also given us the opportunity to develop the beginnings of a relationship with various University clubs and societies. More importantly, it has given us better

oversight and understanding of the diverse range of student organisations that exist on campus and the activities they undertake. In late July and early August we began finding and following clubs and societies and various divisions of student unions on Instagram. Many followed us back, which increased our audience and our presence within the University community, particularly at the student level. Soon afterwards we created a set of Instagram Stories with throwback photos of student activities, tagging the clubs and societies that still exist and have a presence on Instagram. The Stories were shared by the tagged clubs and societies, who also subsequently followed us, and one group reached out to us about one of the photos used.

What comes next?

In 2023 we primarily want to continue growing our audiences across our platforms and continue to publish content that is exciting and engaging. To facilitate this, we put together a content calendar for 2023 at the end of 2022 based on the analytics on 2022's content. For example, we quickly learned in 2022 that photographs perform much better than snippets from publications, so we have ensured to limit the amount of content from publications in 2023. Additionally, we published polls on both Twitter and Instagram, which asked our audience what they wanted to see from us. These polls showed that our audiences are most interested in throwback photos and now and then photos. We have therefore ensured that old and nostalgic photos of the University are central to our social media campaigns. We have also included a monthly Now vs Then content stream where we try to recreate photos we have in our collection and post them as a side-by-side comparison to show how much the University has changed.

Moving beyond our first year on social media we are also continuing to foster our relationship and collaboration with UMAC, and we have already seen some exciting results from this in 2023. Thanks to the relationship we had developed during 2022, the social media team at UMAC asked if they could have a tour of the Archives. From this tour, they created a video for Instagram Reels which was viewed 10,000 times in its first 24 h, providing significant exposure for the Archives to the wider University community. This, as well as our success on Instagram Stories, has inspired us to explore making our own content for Instagram Reels in an attempt to get our content out to a larger audience.

Furthermore, our success on social media in 2022 has inspired us to explore other avenues for outreach and engagement in 2023 and beyond. For example, we are looking at how to utilise formal University internal and outgoing communications channels. We are also in the process of working with the Records Management team to take presentations out to faculties to talk about recordkeeping best practice, including communications about the Archives. Finally, we are wanting to offer more tours of the Archives and our collections, like the one given to the UMAC social media team, to more groups within the University. However, all these strategies are more resource and time intensive for a small team than using social media is. Therefore, social media will continue to be central to our communications and outreach activities.

The takeaway

Starting the journey of using social media to promote your archives and your collections can be intimidating. This is particularly true for small archives and small teams who may only see big state or national archives' use of social media as examples. But we have learnt that it does not have to be this way. Over 12 months of using social media, the team at the Monash University Archives have learnt that it can be a fun and exciting way to share our collections with the community when we currently do not have any other way to do so. The process does not have to be complicated and can take up as much or as little time as desired. Nobody in the

Monash University Archives team has experience in media and communications, but we have been willing and eager to learn and experiment. However, the key thing we have learnt is that being strategic is the most important factor in maximising audience growth and engagement.

Ultimately, the key message we have tried to demonstrate through this case study is that if our small team can harness social media to advocate for and promote our university archive, then any archive of any size can do the same.