Pinning it down

An evaluation of Pinterest's function in the British academic library

Catriona Ward Sell
Graduate Trainee
Leeds Beckett University Library (fomerly Leeds Metropolitan University Library)
Libraries and Leaning Innovation
catriona1@hotmail.co.uk

INTRODUCTION

University libraries have found a useful resource for themselves in many social media platforms. At Leeds Beckett University Library (formerly Leeds Metropolitan University), Twitter has proved a popular way to connect with students, other libraries and universities. Our Twitter following has exceeded 3,800, and our library Facebook had over 1,100 followers by May 2014. While we continue to develop these two sites, however, we acknowledge that we are not part of a stable environment. Social media is faddish; the favoured platforms change frequently. Facebook has largely taken custom away from Myspace, while Myspace used to tussle for users with Bebo, and Google Plus has taken their share of professional networks away from other platforms. With this in mind, any organisation using social media has to think about whether they should use – and if so, how to use – emerging virtual social networks.

PINTEREST

A website which has come increasingly under our radar for this reason is Pinterest, which gained its first 10 million users faster than any other social media website, and now sees 25 million unique visitors every month.[1] For these statistics alone, it is worth our passing attention.[2] Under closer scrutiny, its function – to create visually pleasing virtual pin-boards on specific topics – would seem instantly appealing to those with information management in mind: it presents a way to gather, pool and present resources. The ability of viewers to 'like' individual 'pins', or to re-pin the 'pins' of any other Pinterest user, would also seem useful for the proliferation of information communication networks. Zara Wilkinson, in a leading article of *Library hi tech news*, concluded that it was time that 'instead of asking IF libraries should be using Pinterest, librarians should be asking HOW TO use Pinterest to its fullest potential'.[3] At our

library, we've asked this. What have we concluded? And why do we appear to be in a minority in attempting to answer this question at all?

CURRENT USE IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES AND USER DEMOGRAPHICS

The only statistical survey of library usage of Pinterest currently in circulation pertains to law libraries. It estimates that the percentage of law libraries using Pinterest is as low as 3.3. According to the same article, around a third of law libraries are engaged in Twitter, and a further 45.9% in Facebook: so these libraries are involved with social media engagement. There is evidence that it is being used in some academic libraries. Sunderland University Library's colourful Pinterest boards appear popular amongst students,[4] Brunel's board showcases student interaction well,[5] and the Bodleian's boards have a professional, polished and considered feel, appropriately showcasing their special collections.[6] These, however, are notable examples. A search for university library Pinterest boards yields a handful of accounts. Most pins on those boards that do exist – ours included – have relatively few 'likes'. Considering that Pinterest could, in theory, be such a strong information management tool, this seems surprising.

However, a quick browse through general Pinterest boards is suggestive of why this is. The pin collections around us commonly comprise motivational gym quotes, cupcake recipes, cute animal pictures, fashion photography and shop-window displays of handicrafts and fashion-based retail items.[7] So perhaps before investing a lot of time in the library Pinterest board, we should ask: are our boards actually reaching an interested audience? If so, who? And are they useful when they do?

A statistic backed up by a quick browse of public Pinterest boards is that the demographic of Pinterest users tend to be different from that of the 'followers' of our library's Twitter or Facebook. Stephanie Chau, the lead articles writer for the San Diego School of Law, states that Pinterest board owners – and presumably viewers – are generally North American, college-educated females, between the ages of 25 and 44.[8] In a very thorough statistical analysis of Pinterest, Gilbert and Chang estimate this to be around 43% of all users.[9] It suggests that a significant majority of Pinterest users fall outside the general catchment area of UK universities like ours, whose student body largely comprises young home students. The age demographic of users also suggests that those viewing Pinterest may have already gone through higher education.

So apart from this demographic, whom do we reach? Mostly people without Pinterest boards themselves, who come across ours as promoted through Facebook and Twitter. This then begs the question: are we unnecessarily repeating ourselves, by posting similar information on all three platforms, reaching predominantly the same viewers through both media? As Ahlbrand states of law libraries, 'the irony is that when your advertisements about social media are primarily made through other social media, you are dependent on patrons paying attention to your social media in the first place!'[10] Is there a benefit in investing time in reaching the same people through a different medium?

PINTEREST AND COPYRIGHT

Relatively user-friendly as it is, Pinterest is time-consuming. For the cupcake recipe poster, perhaps it comes about through natural internet browsing habits; but this is not the case if it is to be used academically. Links have to be sourced and checked for relevance, and text has to be written. Pictures have to be organised logically, as the order isn't flexible once the pictures are uploaded. And they have to be copyright cleared… which is where many 'tune out'. Libraries, being institutions that acknowledge Pinterest, may not tune out, but copyright issues may well put them off using the platform.

At Leeds Beckett University we are lucky to have an excellent and knowledgeable specialist copyright officer. Any picture that we haven't taken ourselves, or which might infringe copyright in some way, is vetted by our resident copyright expert before publication. This is important even though most individual Pinterest board owners brush these issues aside and continue to pin regardless, probably assuming that media freely accessible on the internet is free for use, or thinking that, as they are one needle in a haystack of copyright infringers, the courts are surely not going to bother entertaining an infringement by one individual. Libraries, however, are not individuals. We are part of institutions that hold significant influence and financial power – and we should be expected to abide by the law. Our pins have the potential to reach many more people, increasing the visibility of illegally reposted pictures. So not infringing copyright laws on social media, for libraries, is important. Taking the copyright issues of Pinterest seriously is a part

of taking our engagement with Pinterest on the whole seriously.

The easiest way to avoid infringing copyright would be to create all content ourselves, which would be hugely time-consuming. It is better practice to maintain a confident knowledge of what copyright allows. Guidelines exist regarding the copyright of images and text, the most basic model being that the copyright of an image, text or film expires seventy years after the death of its artist, writer or composer. However, this model will not apply to all countries. What if we want to use an image from a country that has a different law? What if we cannot establish the date of the maker's death? Though various websites have stock photographs available to use free of charge, these can be limited and restricting – and using only images that are copyright-free because they are over seventy years old is even more so.

Here, however, the primary commercial use of Pinterest is worth considering. The platform is commercially exploited by companies who can present attractive pictures of their products to a large audience. Often, companies really like their content being re-pinned on to a board with a wide audience. Here, it is to our advantage that we don't have a stereotypical Pinterest audience, but rather, we attract a British-based demographic through promotion on other forms of social media. For an external business, it makes being re-pinned on a university library Pinterest board an attractive proposition. In a similar fashion, local events, resource companies and publishers want their aims, objectives and products to be promoted positively by external parties. The best way to get permission to use images and links? Ask.

Many companies respond quickly and positively if their public relations or social media team receives a polite email. Through this method of asking for re-pin permissions, we've strengthened our own external networks and built up a bank of permissions that can be drawn upon for future Pinterest boards. Copyright problem solved. But this adds time to the whole pinning process – which leads us back to the original question: Why are our efforts, which offer a valuable new audience for external businesses, worth it for us?

Pinterest and user behaviour

To answer this, it is worth considering the amount of time generally spent engaged with Pinterest, as opposed to Facebook and Twitter – even if it is with a 'recycled' audience. People generally spend longer on Pinterest – an average of sixteen minutes per view – as opposed to the average twelve-minute look at Facebook, or couple-of-minutes glance at Twitter.[11] On Twitter and Facebook, users look for quick snippets of real-time, brand new social information. On Pinterest, users come to browse information that is not presented as a 'real time', regularly updated newsfeed, but as a stable and whole entity. This agenda supports the way that people like to view academic information. With unlimited and stable text and links, users may browse the 'pins' to compare and avail themselves of information from different sources – as they would compare, say, recipes or advice on crafts. As in the case of recipes, an attractive visual clue beside each promoted item, rather than just instructional text, makes links more attractive, gives a 'feel' for the information being presented and encourages use.

The fact that we connect with the same demographic in a different way, then, and not the fact that we connect with a new demographic – which we probably largely don't – should be the aspect of Pinterest that libraries capitalise on. If a useful 'side-effect' of this engagement is increasing the global footprint of our institution, that's welcome. However, we should look at Pinterest as a stable way to present information attractively to the audience we already have, capitalising on having people's attention for that sixteen minutes.

It is also relevant that users' attention is active. Users are not expected to be mere browsers, but are invited to 're-pin' what they see, visit external websites promoted through pins, and connect with similar boards. This is why Pinterest has been such a useful business tool: a 2012 study about social shopping found that 59% of Pinterest users had purchased an item that they found through Pinterest.[12] The type of interactivity promoted on Pinterest encourages the purchase of what is seen. The process of buying items is, if handled correctly, readily translatable into buying into information sources.

Pinterest in academic libraries: suggested ways forward

To handle it correctly, then, we have to maintain this level of interactivity through mimicking the lighter content that people generally go to Pinterest for, capitalising on having a captive audience lured in by the informal and trendy feel of social media. However, we have to be careful. It's tempting to fall into the trap of being as cute, quaint or flippant as the Pinterest boards around us. Under the face of pictures and minimal text, we should

present useful, relevant and copyright-correct information. We should capitalise on the fact that information can be made to look cutting-edge with the addition of a modern picture. A link that contains information of longstanding value may look staid if viewed multiple times, or with an old-fashioned graphic; Pinterest's ability to change the graphic associated with a link, yet leave the link behind it unchanged, allows us to present practical information in a trendy fashion.

It is important for us to make information visually appealing, because libraries are no longer solely information centres, but centres of learning. Universities are traditionally seen as places where the book-learner thrives; likewise, libraries are traditionally seen as places that benefit the text-based learner. (Irene McDermott goes as far as to say that the majority of librarians favour and advocate this learning style. [13]) However, a student body is not made up solely of text-based learners. Studies in the USA have found that about 40% of college level students are visual learners.[14] Social media, with its emphasis on imagery and short snippets of text, particularly appeals to the visual learner. Pinterest can thus become a way for a learning centre to reach out to those students who may otherwise feel put off by the traditional stereotype of a library. Rather than increasing our global circle, we can make the circle we already have more inclusive.

Pinterest can thus be used as a way to bridge the gap between the informality associated with social media, and the formality of presenting useful academic information. One way for libraries to look at Pinterest is as a means of making important information accessible by informal means. Rather than being a means of expanding into a North American market, it enables us to become more inclusive towards the diverse audience we already have. Pinterest builds on an established culture of being engaged with visual consumerism, not of skimming over breaking, real-time information with the tendency to gossip. If done effectively, it can be useful for the dissemination of information and the expansion of information-sharing communities.

Unlike boards which pin cute pictures or recipe links, however, if treated as an information management tool and learning resource, Pinterest needs time and thought to make it relevant, to keep it aesthetically up to date and to strike the correct balance of resourcefulness and visual interest. The answer to *how* Pinterest *should* be

used by libraries is likely also the answer to *why* more libraries aren't (yet) using it.

This doesn't mean they shouldn't, or indeed won't in the near future, though. As information is added and the small network which is establishing itself grows, other interested parties will notice and take part. The functionality of Pinterest means that these parties are encouraged to feed back into the network, and become active participants of it. As the first libraries to use Pinterest take on the task of answering how we should use it, those that follow will have that question already answered, and have a small but ready-made visual culture of information proliferation to pin in to. The more libraries to do so, the more valuable the network will become. Hopefully, by starting out now we've given ourselves a good head start into this new and useful social media sphere.

Find us on Pinterest at http://uk.pinterest.com/beckettlibrary/ (accessed 22 May 2014)

References

1   Green. J., 2012. Is Pinterest making any money? *The Telegraph* (04 April), p.1

2   Hansen, K., 2012. Pinterest as a tool: applications in academic libraries and higher education. Partnership: *The Canadian journal of library and information practice and research*, 7 (2), p. 2

3   Wilkinson, Z., 2013. Oh, how Pinteresting! An introduction to Pinterest. *Library hi tech news*, 30 (1), p. 2

4   Sunderland University Library, 2014. Pinterest Board [Online] Available at: http://www.pinterest.com/UniOfSunLib/ [accessed 22 May 2014]

5   Brunel University Library, 2014. Pinterest Board [Online] Available at: http://gb.pinterest.com/brunellibrary/ [accessed 22 May 2014]

6   The Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford, 2014. Pinterest Board [Online]. Available at: http://gb.pinterest.com/bodleian-libs/ [accessed 22 May 2014]

7   For a discussion of ecommerce use of Pinter-
    est, see Bercovici, J, 2013. Study find pins on
    Pinterest drive sales and have legs [online]
    Available at: http://www.forbes.com/sites/
    jeffbercovici/2013/11/15/study-finds-pins-
    on-pinterest-drive-sales-and-have-legs/
    [accessed 22 May 2014].

8   Chau, S., 2013. A 'Pinteresting' question: is
    Pinterest here to stay? A study on how IP can
    help Pinterest lead a revolution. *Richmond
    Journal of Law and Technology*, 24 (1) p.4

9   Gilbert, E., & Chang, S., (2013) 'I need to
    try this!: a Statistical overview of Pinterest'.
    *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human
    factors in computing systems*. New York: ACM,
    p. 2431

10 Ahlbrand, A., 2013. p.13

11 Chau, S., 2013. p. 10

12 Wilkinson, Z., 2013. p. 1

13 McDermott, L., 2012. Pinterest for libraries.
    Business Source Premier, 20 (4), p. 8

14 Hansen, K., 2012. p. 7