

# Reaching Out, Reaching In: A Preliminary Investigation into Archives' Use of Social Media in Canada



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**RÉSUMÉ** Ce texte rend compte de deux enquêtes préliminaires qui ont examiné des aspects de l'utilisation que font les archives des médias sociaux : un bilan de l'environnement des archives canadiennes et une étude d'un panel d'utilisateurs des archives. Le bilan s'est penché sur l'utilisation des médias sociaux par 648 centres d'archives et a noté le degré d'engagement des utilisateurs avec une sélection de services des médias sociaux. Les données ont été recueillies sur une période de deux mois, du 11 novembre 2011 au 10 janvier 2012. Le panel d'utilisateurs des archives comprenait cinq sessions, chacune avec quatre à sept participants, pour un total de vingt-huit participants. Les enquêtes ont révélé qu'à quelques exceptions près les centres d'archives font une utilisation minimale des médias sociaux pour attirer des utilisateurs des archives, l'engagement des utilisateurs demeure toujours relativement bas et des participants à cette étude ont un certain nombre de préoccupations par rapport à leur contribution aux médias sociaux. Cependant, les participants du panel voient aussi le potentiel des médias sociaux pour démocratiser les archives, pour contribuer au bien public, pour donner aux documents d'archives une plus grande richesse en permettant différents points de vue et ultimement, pour augmenter leur engagement avec les archives.

**ABSTRACT** This paper reports on two preliminary studies that investigated aspects of archives' use of social media: an environmental scan of Canadian archives and a focus group study of archival users. The environmental scan examined the use of social media by 648 archives and noted the degree of user engagement with a selection of social media services. The data were collected over a two-month period, from 11 November 2011 to 10 January 2012. The focus group study consisted of five sessions, each with four to seven participants, for a total of twenty-eight participants. The studies found that, with a few exceptions, archives were making minimal use of social media to attract users, user engagement was still relatively low, and the participants in the study had a number of concerns about contributing to social media. However, the participants in the focus groups also saw the potential for social media to democratize the archives, contribute to the public good, allow for a richer historical record showing different points of view, and, ultimately, increase their engagement with archives.

## Introduction

For more than a decade, many Canadian archives have been digitizing their resources and creating digital tools to improve access to their holdings. These digital resources have increased the accessibility of archival collections for all Canadians and have increased opportunities for research and learning. Social media applications, such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Google+, and blogs, have added a new dimension to the digital universe. These applications not only help users access digital resources, but also allow users to comment on the resources, share them with others, and add their own content. In the past few years, archives have begun to use social media applications and social networking sites that enable their users to engage with resources in new and innovative ways. With the latest speculation on the effects of digital resources and social media on archives, it is predicted that the relationship between archives and users will be transformed dramatically. Kate Theimer notes that archivists could use social media to invite users' contributions and participation in many archival functions: users could add their own descriptions of archival resources, share their knowledge with other users, select material for digitization, rate or rank the usefulness of material, and add their own content to archives' websites.<sup>1</sup> There has been, however, little research that has investigated either the use of social media applications by Canadian archives or users' reactions to the use of social media by archives. This study is an initial investigation into both these aspects. It involves an environmental scan of the use of social media by archives across Canada in addition to focus groups with archival users, predominantly students at a Canadian university.

## Literature Review

Recent calls for participatory archives<sup>2</sup> and archival commons<sup>3</sup> suggest that archives should move toward a more radical user orientation. Some archival researchers suggest that social media, or Archives 2.0, will fundamentally change the way users find, retrieve, and use archives; the way archivists work; and the relationships between archivists, users, and records.<sup>4</sup> Palmer suggests that Archives 2.0 is a broad "epistemological shift which concerns the very

- 1 Kate Theimer, "What is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?," *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 58–68.
- 2 Isto Huvila, "Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualisation of Records Management," *Archival Science* 8, no. 1 (March 2008): 15–36.
- 3 Scott R. Anderson and Robert B. Allen, "Envisioning the Archival Commons," *American Archivist* 72, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 383–400.
- 4 Theimer, "What is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?"

nature of the archive.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Palmer and Stevenson emphasize that the use of social media applications results in “openness, sharing and collaboration and de-privileges archival authority.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, these applications raise questions about the value of what Yakel describes as a “centralized, impenetrable and singularly accurate” archival authority since they move archives toward a “model of multiple authorities based on networks of peers.”<sup>7</sup> Dufour suggests that social media allow the user to move from being an observer to the creator of content.<sup>8</sup> McKemmish, Iacovino, Ketelaar, Castan, and Russell describe the Koorie Archiving System in Australia, which supports knowledge sharing, land claims, and regeneration of culture and communities with a goal to “set the official record straight.”<sup>9</sup> They posit that digital technologies and participatory models will lead to “the ‘decolonization’ of the archive, and the exercise of cultural rights as human rights.”<sup>10</sup>

Although archivists are beginning to make use of social media to encourage greater interaction with users, there is little evidence yet that they are willing to share control over archival processes. Yakel suggests that in most existing cases of Archives 2.0 implementation, the archivist remains a “distinct omniscient and controlling authority rather than a member of a community working toward shared goals.”<sup>11</sup> Palmer, as well as Palmer and Stevenson, note that the traditional relationship between archivists, users, and the records persists.<sup>12</sup> Many archives that have invited users to contribute content to their finding aids or add comments to their websites continue to monitor these contributions and ensure that user-contributed content is not merged with archivist-created content.<sup>13</sup> As well, an OCLC study of social metadata that were contributed to library, archives, and museum websites found that sites that were moderated tended to have fewer contributions than sites that were not moderated. The report concluded that the requirement to identify the

5 Joy Palmer, “Archives 2.0: If We Build It, Will They Come?,” *Ariadne* 60 (July 2009), <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue60/palmer> (accessed 18 September 2012).

6 Joy Palmer and Jane Stevenson, “Something Worth Sitting Still For? Some Implications of Web 2.0 for Outreach,” in *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections between Archives and Users*, ed. K. Theimer (Chicago, 2011), 2.

7 Elizabeth Yakel, “Balancing Archival Authority with Encouraging Archival Voices to Engage with Records,” in *A Different Kind of Web*, 84.

8 Christine Dufour, “Web 2.0, Organisations et archivistique,” *Archives* 40, no. 2 (2008–2009): 3–26.

9 Sue McKemmish, Livia Iacovino, Eric Ketelaar, Melissa Castan, and Lynette Russell, “Resetting Relationships: Archives and Indigenous Human Rights in Australia,” *Archives & Manuscripts* 39, no. 1 (2011): 123.

10 *Ibid.*, 123.

11 Yakel, “Balancing Archival Authority,” 89.

12 Palmer, “Archives 2.0”; Palmer and Stevenson, “Something Worth Sitting Still For?”

13 Yakel, “Balancing Archival Authority,” 75–101.

commentator might present a barrier to broad-based participation.<sup>14</sup> Whether archives will relinquish their control over user-contributed content and accept a new role as simply members of a larger community with shared goals is one of the critical questions raised by the trend to make archives more open and interactive via social media and digital resources.

Research studies have recently investigated how archives utilize social media applications. Samouelian reported on a content analysis of 213 archives' websites in the United States and eight interviews with individuals who worked at archives with social media applications on their websites. She found that of the 85 websites that had digital collections only 38 used social media applications. The interviews revealed that the primary motivation for using social media applications was to promote archival collections.<sup>15</sup> A more recent environmental scan that examined the use of social media at 76 sites relevant to archives, libraries, and museums found that commenting was the most popular feature (80%), followed by tagging (54%).<sup>16</sup> While 33% of the sites reviewed were relevant to archives (either solely or in combination with other institutions), only 1% of the sites examined were Canadian. In a study of the use of Facebook and Twitter by 27 individual archivists and 168 archival institutions, Adam Crymble found that archivists with personal accounts use these tools to disseminate information they find useful, while the institutional accounts are used to promote the archives' content.<sup>17</sup> Crymble also found that more than half (53%) of the archives (56 of the 104) had abandoned their Facebook account by the time of the study. Krause and Yakel examined the use of an archival access tool that permitted a variety of ways for users to interact with the finding aid, such as by bookmarking, tagging, and creating linked paths. The researchers found that the most heavily used social media feature was commenting.<sup>18</sup> However, Yakel, Shaw, and Reynolds note that over a six-month period, only 26 comments were contributed.<sup>19</sup> Adam Kriesberg conducted a study of the content of the Twitter accounts of 34 archives in October 2011.<sup>20</sup>

14 Karen Smith-Yoshimura and Cyndi Shein, *Social Metadata for Libraries, Archives and Museums Part 1: Site Reviews* (Dublin, OH, September 2011), 11, <http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2011/2011-02.pdf> (accessed 18 September 2012).

15 Mary E. Samouelian, "Embracing Web 2.0: Archives and the Newest Generation of Web Applications," *American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 42–71.

16 Smith-Yoshimura and Shein, *Social Metadata for Libraries, Archives and Museums*.

17 Adam Crymble, "An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use by the Archival Community," *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010): 125–151.

18 Magia G. Krause and Elizabeth Yakel, "Interaction in Virtual Archives: The Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections Next Generation Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007): 282–314.

19 Elizabeth Yakel, Seth Shaw, and Polly Reynolds, "Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aids," *D-Lib Magazine* 13, no. 5/6 (May/June 2007), <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may07/yakel/05yakel.html> (accessed 18 September 2012).

20 Adam Kriesberg, "Increasing Access in 140 Characters or Less: Or, What are Archival

The structural analysis of the 1,880 tweets revealed that 20% were retweets, 42% mentioned other Twitter followers using the @ symbol, 40% contained hashtags, and 69% contained at least one link. The content of each tweet was also coded into one of six categories: Administrative Updates (i.e., hours of operation) (4%), Links to Institutional Site Content (22%), Link Sharing from Other Sites (29%), Interacting with Twitter Users (15%), Event Promotion (28%), and alternative Social Media-Focused Tweets (i.e., links to an institutional account on YouTube or Flickr) (4%). The two top categories, links to institutions' site content and event promotion, which contained more than 50% of the tweets, were related to marketing.

Overall, these studies indicate that although social media applications hold great promise, to date they have had limited impact on archival practice; and that current controls placed on user-contributed content might present barriers to fuller participation.

## Research Questions

This study contributes to our understanding of the extent to which Canadian archives use social media and users' reactions to archives' use of social media so that archivists can make informed decisions on the types of social media to offer and how they should be managed. It comprises two studies. The first is an environmental scan of archives' websites to determine the types of social media applications made available. For this study, our research questions are: (1) What kinds of social media are archives using and to what extent are they using them?; and (2) To what extent are users engaging with archives through social media? The second study involves focus groups conducted among archives and social media users recruited at the University of Toronto. For this study, our research questions are: (1) What are users' impressions of archives' use of social media?; and (2) What are the users' concerns related to contributing or making use of resources through social media sites?

## Study 1: Environmental Scan

To identify the population for the environmental scan, we used the provincial/territorial council lists of archives included on the Archives Canada website.<sup>21</sup> We accessed each archives' site using the link provided on the provincial/territorial council list. If the council list did not provide a link to an archives' website, we conducted a Google search. There were 733 institutions on the lists for the ten provinces and three territories. Of these, we eliminated 85

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Institutions Doing on Twitter?" (unpublished manuscript).

21 Archives Canada, "Networks," [www.archivescanada.ca/english/networks.html](http://www.archivescanada.ca/english/networks.html).

institutions from the environmental scan because either they had no website (63 institutions); or the link to the website was broken (15 institutions); or the website was inactive (5 institutions); or the website was under construction (2 institutions). The total number of institutions included in the scan was 648. We identified the social media applications used by each archives, and for each application we noted aspects of user engagement. We collected the data over a two-month period, from 11 November 2011 to 10 January 2012.

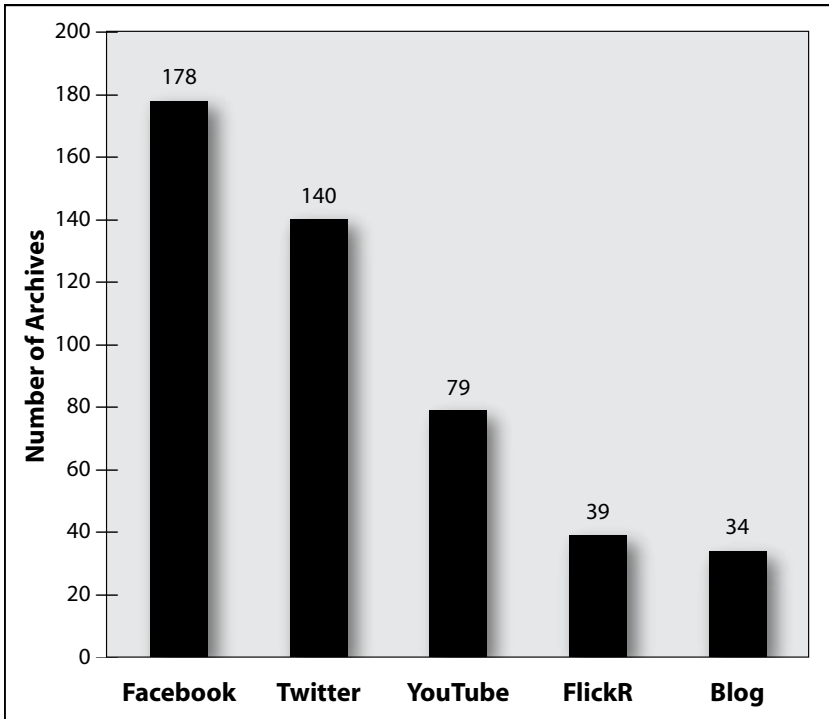
### *Archives' use of social media*

For the 648 archival institutions in the environmental scan, we recorded whether or not they were using Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, or blogs. These are the social media applications most often linked to from archives' websites. When these links were not present on the archives' websites, we went to each of these social media sites and searched for the archives' presence. One hundred and seventy-eight archives (27.5%) were using Facebook, and 140 archives (21.6%) were using Twitter. Far fewer archives used YouTube (79, or 12.2%), Flickr (39, or 6.0%), and blogs (34, or 5.2%). Figure 1 shows these data. There was no significant difference in the use of the five technologies across the provinces and territories (chi-square = 49.197,  $df = 44$ ,  $p = 0.273$ ). (No archives in the third territory, Nunavut, had a website, so it was not included in the analysis.)

We were also interested in the number of social media applications used by each archival institution. One-third of them (217 of the 648 archives in our sample) used one or more of the social media applications. As expected, most archives were using only one or two of the social media applications. Four archives, however, were using all five of these applications. Table 1 shows the number of archives using one, two, three, four, and five of the social media applications.

### *Facebook and Twitter*

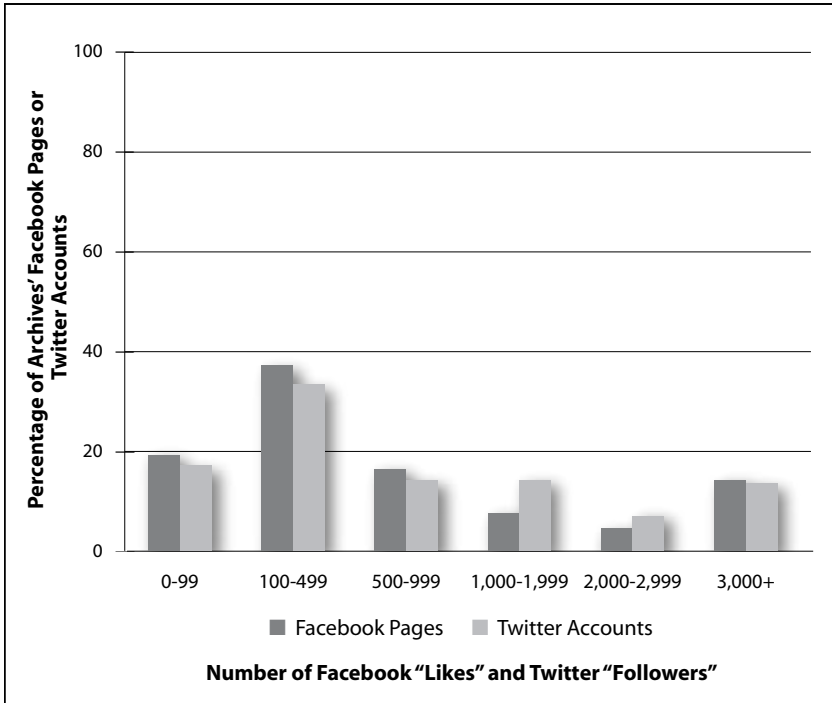
The most popular social networking applications were Facebook and Twitter, with many more archives using these than the other three applications. We compared the number of "likes" for Facebook with the number of "followers" for Twitter across the archives to get a sense of the degree that people looked at the archives' Facebook pages and followed their Twitter accounts. Figure 2 shows the comparison. The majority of archives' Facebook pages (57%) had received fewer than 500 likes. Similarly, 50% of archives' Twitter accounts had fewer than 500 followers. A chi-square test showed that there was no significant difference between the distribution of Facebook likes and Twitter followers (chi-square = 4.69,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = 0.45$ ).



**Figure 1: Social Media Use by Archives**

**Table 1: Number of Social Media Applications Used by Archives**

Number of Social Media Applications Used	Number of Archives
1	78
2	62
3	47
4	26
5	4
Total	217

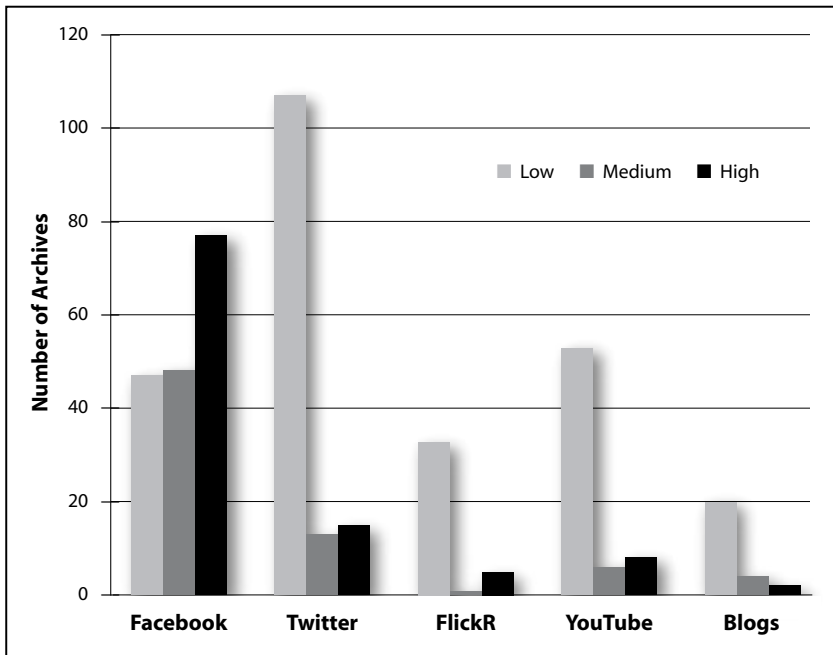


**Figure 2. Facebook “Likes” and Twitter “Followers”**

### *User engagement*

One of the metrics considered important in assessing the success of an organization’s use of social media is user engagement. In this study, we categorized user engagement as low, medium, or high based on the ratio of contributed content by users (through posts, comments on posts, or material shared) to all content (user content plus content contributed by the institution) for each of the social media applications (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, blogs). We recognize that archivists from other institutions could be among the users who contributed content. User-contributed content of roughly 0–14% was categorized as low; user-contributed content of roughly 15–34% was categorized as medium; and user-contributed content of roughly 35% or more was categorized as high. Figure 3 shows the number of archives for which user engagement was low, medium, or high for Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and blogs. As shown in Figure 3, Facebook has a higher level of user engagement than any of the other social media sites.





**Figure 3: Level of User Engagement**

### Study 2: Focus Groups

For the focus groups, we posted flyers on the main campus of the University of Toronto to recruit participants who had experience using both archives and social media. We also asked two professors to distribute flyers to their classes: one was a course in the history of social work and the other was a first-year general arts course that included an assignment requiring the use of archival material. We used a focus group script and background questionnaire developed by the Archival Metrics Project.<sup>22</sup> We conducted five focus group sessions with four to seven participants in each, for a total of twenty-eight participants. Two researchers were present during each focus group session, all of which were audio recorded. The sessions lasted approximately two hours each. At the beginning of each session, participants completed a consent

<sup>22</sup> The Archival Metrics Project, a joint project of the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and the University of Toronto, is aimed at fostering a culture of assessment among archival repositories. It developed eight user-based toolkits to help archives gather feedback from their users. For more information on this project and access to the instruments, see [www.archivalmetrics.org](http://www.archivalmetrics.org) (accessed 18 September 2012).

form and provided demographic information. They also completed a questionnaire that gathered information about their use of the Internet, archives, and social media applications. For the social media applications, we presented the participants with a list of popular sites and asked them to indicate if they had consulted and/or contributed to them. They could also add other sites that they used. One person did not indicate that she had used any social media applications. Table 2 indicates the social media applications used by participants.

**Table 2: Use of Social Media**

Social Media Site	Consulted	Contributed
Wikipedia	27	8
Facebook	25	16
Blog or Twitter	9	6
Ancestry.com	6	1
LinkedIn	5	1
Flickr	4	1
Reddit	3	
FamilySearch.org	1	

For the first half of the session, one of the researchers, Wendy Duff, led a structured discussion about the participants' use of archives, their use of social media, and their thoughts on archives' use of social media. At the conclusion of the first part of the focus group, which lasted approximately one hour, participants were given a form and asked to rank archival applications in order of importance. During the second half of the session, Wendy Duff used the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management website to demonstrate how archives employ social media applications.<sup>23</sup>

### *Participants*

The focus groups included twenty-eight participants over five sessions. The participants included nineteen undergraduates, two master's students, three PhD students, and four recent graduates. Fourteen of the participants were

23 We provided the demonstration to help participants better understand the ways some archives were using social media. However, we have not reported the participants' comments on the site as they may be biased. Participants were generally very positive about the archives' use of social media, but the demonstrator was very enthusiastic, which may have influenced their comments.

between the ages of 18 and 25, seven were between 26 and 39, and five were over 40 years old. Two people did not indicate their age. There were sixteen females and eleven males, and one person did not indicate his/her gender. We asked the participants how many hours a week they spent on the Internet outside of work or class obligations. Three spent less than 5 hours per week on the Internet, five spent between 6 and 10 hours, fifteen spent between 11 and 20 hours, and five said they spent more than 21 hours. Twenty-four participants had used online archival resources, while four indicated that they had not used them.

### *Participants' use of social media*

As Table 2 illustrates, the most commonly used social media sites were Facebook and Wikipedia, both for consulting and for contributing information. Participants were far more likely to contribute to Facebook, which corroborates our finding for user engagement (Figure 3). We investigated this further in the focus group discussions and asked the participants about their use of social media and whether they would contribute to it. In the focus group discussions, they volunteered which social media applications they used, but their responses may have been influenced by the questionnaire they completed at the beginning of the session. Many indicated they use social media to connect with friends or family, to share photographs, to collaborate with colleagues at a distance, and to communicate with many people at the same time. Some worked for organizations that used social media to market services or products. Most, however, indicated that their use was primarily for personal reasons. They raised several concerns related to the use of social media, including questions about privacy and corporate use of their information, the authority and accuracy of the information contributed, and the ability to use sources such as Wikipedia in course assignments. Several people also felt that they wasted too much time using social media, and some even mentioned that they were addicted to it. For instance, one person said that she had Facebook on in the background all the time, while another said that she deliberately limited the time to five minutes. A few felt that social media added to the "clutter" of the Internet and that Twitter, in particular, was like "shouting in a crowded room."

Although participants expressed an ease with contributing to Facebook, when it came to contributing to Wikipedia some mentioned they were reluctant, except to make grammatical changes, because of a feeling that they lacked the expertise to contribute anything more substantial. As one student explained, when a professor asked her to correct a Wikipedia entry that she knew to be incorrect, she would not "because I think there's no way I'll be taken seriously. I'm just like a first-year student" (Session 1). Participants who were more willing to contribute to social media explained the types of

contributions they had made: one person had attempted to include the sexual orientation of a historical figure in his Wikipedia entry but that information kept being deleted by others; another person used Facebook to promote a health program directed at youth; and another, a student in nuclear medicine, contributed information to Wikipedia about “what I’ve learned in school” (Session 3).

### *Participants’ impressions of archives’ use of social media*

When asked about whether archives should use social media, the participants had many opinions. For the most part, the participants initially did not perceive a strong connection between archives and social media. Some felt that social media and archives were two different realms: use of archives was related to research, and social media use was for their leisure time. One person explained that he likes to “switch between the two, like, my academic side goes to the archives” and “I then have a bit of relief or whatever in going to social media” (Session 3). As one person said, “my association with things like YouTube is that I purely use it for pleasurable reasons” (Session 5). Those who saw archives’ use of social media as a productive development felt that user-contributed content would add different perspectives and could allow ordinary people to include their own stories or provide multiple views on their experiences with significant events or people. Some participants thought a good use of social media by archives was to promote their resources. One person explained how the City of Toronto had just released “like tons and tons of pictures. I only know this through Facebook actually” (Session 5). An equal number, however, were concerned about archivists becoming too involved in social media because it would be a waste of their time: “I think that ... that’s adding something to the role of an archivist that would take away from, from things, from institutions that are already undervalued, underresourced, underworked”<sup>24</sup> (Session 4). The participants seemed to be in favour of the use of social media by archival institutions to promote their resources if it increased awareness of the archives and its collection, but many were also doubtful about how useful it was for archivists to spend their time on this activity.

Several felt that archives’ use of social media would help improve access to archival resources. Searching, for instance, would be much easier through a content-sharing site such as YouTube that, as one participant said, did not require the searcher to figure out “OK, where could it be? Which archive could it be in? And then find out the archive and then go on the archive page and then hope that they have it, have the same docs on it. It’s just a much

24 We assume in this case the participant meant to say “overworked.”

longer way than just going on YouTube and typing it in" (Session 3). This participant explained further that he had recently found an audio file of German chancellor Otto von Bismarck speaking, and "these things are fantastic to hear on YouTube, and this is my prime resource to get this, to get these kinds of either videos or just audio files, and that's been amazing" (Session 3). Some felt that tagging would also enable easier access to resources because users could describe the content of collections at a more granular level than a single archivist can provide. As one participant explained, "It would be like indexing except you have a giant workforce of people indexing, and it'd be people who ... Everybody would index like the one thing they've read. It would save people a lot of work and it'd be done faster" (Session 2). Some also felt that tags created by people for resources related to their own communities would be "useful for people in that language community or people using [tags] in that community" (Session 5).

Some participants felt that the ability of users to contribute knowledge would have a democratizing effect on archives. They made the point that users' knowledge would provide a broader perspective on events and was at least as valuable as that contributed by archivists or authoritative figures since archivists often privileged institutional or dominant perspectives. For instance, one participant commented:

And this idea that there's like one historical narrative and we just have to find it using the right sources I think is actually really problematic and really misleading. And it's much more productive to recognize that people engage with the events that surround them in very different ways and perceive the events that surround them in very different ways. And those perspectives are all kind of, even if they don't necessarily match up with this one line of history that we're trying to access, they're still valid and valuable (Session 1).

Another person expressed the view that the more people there are contributing information about a certain event or person, the greater the likelihood that a more accurate picture will emerge. As this participant commented, "I feel like if you have a bunch of people doing a narrative then ... some kind of a common truth will come through with it" (Session 1). On the other hand, many were also concerned about people contributing information without archivists playing some sort of validating role by monitoring it or keeping user-contributed content in a separate location. One person felt that without this involvement the "quality of the source would degenerate to the point where it wouldn't be considered a legitimate source anymore" (Session 2).

Although the participants did not explicitly talk about trust in relation to user-contributed content, it was behind statements about the need for the archivist to play a vetting role or the need to know the authority of the information contributed to the archives. One person declared that she was "certainly skeptical of user-contributed content" (Session 4). As she explained,

“if there was any sense that a random user was contributing information that I would detect having an ulterior motive would prop [up] that review or prop [up] that contribution, I would be more skeptical” (Session 4). However, an archivist’s contribution would not necessarily carry more weight than that of a user if the user contributed content that “is merely descriptive or identifying a space or a place” (Session 4). Another participant asked, for instance, when veterans are permitted to contribute their stories: “Do people have vested interests and do they lie when they do these things?” Ultimately, this person believed that it was part of the historian’s skill set to judge the validity of documents – “the historian has to use their gut instinct” to verify these contributions (Session 1). Many participants echoed this statement and felt that trust in user-contributed content was really a personal judgment call: “I just have to judge on what I think about what they’re saying” (Session 4). Since the participants were mostly students who used archives to conduct research for their course papers, there was also a concern that content had to be citable. The source had to be authoritative, and any content contributed to third-party sites such as Facebook or YouTube had to link back to the original source or the location of the original source had to be clearly stated.

Despite the potential of social media to reduce the need for archivists to interact directly with users,<sup>25</sup> many of the participants mentioned the importance of having contact with an archivist either in person or online to help with choosing the right keywords when searching online, orienting inexperienced users to the archives, and ensuring that sources the researcher needed would be available when they visited the physical archives. Some expressed a need to keep the human element in the online archives experience. For instance, one participant explained, “If I can’t find something on archives, usually I’ll go to Google to try and drill down the search, and sometimes that won’t really help either. So it would be wonderful to have somebody live” (Session 3). Another person exclaimed, “I think we need the archivists more than Google!” (Session 3).

### ***Participants’ attitudes about contributing to archives using social media***

When discussing whether they would contribute to archives through social media sites, the participants saw both the positive benefits of this activity and the negative consequences that might result. In terms of benefits, they saw people’s willingness to add to archives’ websites as contributing to the public good. In expressing this view, a participant explained that adding her content

25 Library and Archives Canada, “What’s New” (archived content), “LAC begins implementation of new approach to service delivery,” <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/whats-new/013-560-e.html> (accessed 18 September 2012).

to archives' websites would be like "adding to the great communal brain" (Session 3). In the same vein, another participant said:

I mean if it's [contributing to an archives] something like Wikipedia, like you're contributing to something that's a source of knowledge that's free and open to anyone who has a computer .... Like that sort of thing I find really great to be a part of and contribute to, but when it comes to Twitter and basically make myself a billboard, no I don't feel comfortable doing that, and I don't want to in any way. I don't really want to help companies make money at all (Session 4).

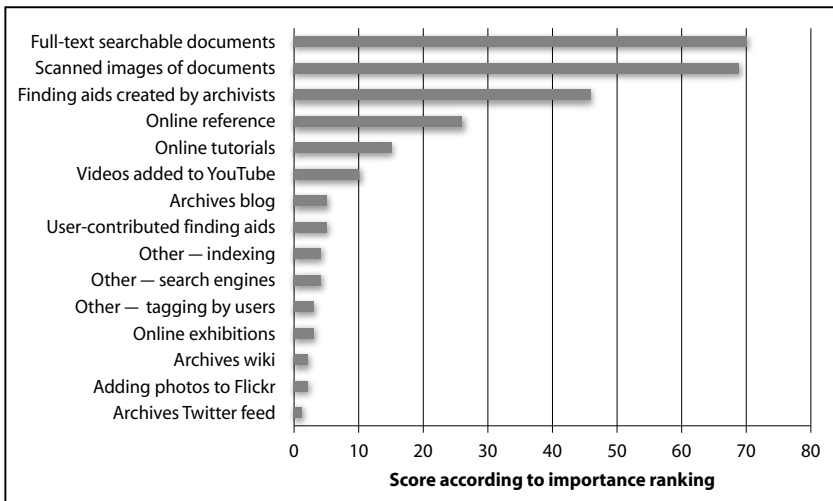
This participant emphasized the importance of the archives being open and free for all users and that contributing to an archives would therefore add to general knowledge for everyone, not just be a benefit to a for-profit organization. Others also expressed concern about corporate control over their information, which could result when their material is added to third-party sites such as YouTube and Facebook. As one person explained, contributing to a public archives is "not something that is designed to create money or to create or to harvest information that can then be turned around and sold" (Session 4). However, one participant made the point that people who contribute to an archives should get some kind of compensation: "Why would you give it away for free and not get anything for either money or credit?" (Session 1). Another person said he would be happy to work for a small honorarium or a "Kinder Surprise" (Session 2)<sup>26</sup> or even for "immortality" by being able to add one's name to the contribution (Session 2).

The participants' attitudes about contributing to archives was mixed: some said they would be reluctant to contribute, whereas others were more willing. Those who were reluctant explained that they did not have the confidence in their own knowledge to make a credible contribution. One person commented that if she "felt confident in my knowledge then I might ... It's a big responsibility" (Session 1). She went on to say that before she would contribute her own paper to the archives where she was researching a person for a class project, "it would have to be already corrected if I give it to them ... I don't really feel like a lot of people take first-year students seriously" (Session 1). This lack of confidence may be attributed to the participants' lack of experience with archives, whereas some of the more experienced archives users expressed little hesitation about contributing. One participant who was involved in a project for an ethnic community explained how he had digitized material and donated it to a university online archive and had "developed a small online exhibit using some of the materials as well" (Session 4). Those with less expertise, however, were open to contributing their own stories or descriptions of photographs of people or places with which they were familiar. It is apparent from

26 A Kinder Surprise is a chocolate egg that contains a small toy inside.

these comments that contributing to an archives' website through social media would be done with the same kind of circumspection as when contributing to Wikipedia.

At the conclusion of the first half of the focus group session, we asked the participants to rank archival online services by indicating the four most important ones. We gave the participants a list of online services offered by archives and left space for them to add other services. Figure 4 depicts the order and magnitude of importance of each service included in the top four.<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 4: Importance of Archival Online Services**

The top four services selected by participants were full-text searchable documents, scanned images of documents, finding aids created by archivists, and online reference services. Social media applications such as YouTube videos, user-contributed finding aids, archives blogs, and tagging services were ranked lower, with only two or three people including tagging, wikis, Twitter, or Flickr in the top four services. This suggests that at the time this research was conducted these participants, at least, were not particularly interested in whether archives offered social media applications but were very interested in archives improving access to digital documents.

27 We assigned a score of 4 each time an archival online service was ranked first, a score of 3 each time an archival online service was ranked second, a score of 2 each time an archival online service was ranked third, and a score of 1 each time a service was ranked fourth.



## Discussion

At the time of our environmental scan (November 2011 to January 2012), we found that 217 archives in Canada were using one or more of the following social media applications: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, or blogs. The most popular was Facebook, followed closely by Twitter. YouTube, Flickr, and blogs were used by far fewer archives. These social media services provide different kinds of possibilities for archives to engage with the public. For instance, Facebook and Twitter are primarily networking and communication sites, while Flickr and YouTube provide a space to upload content. It appears, then, that archives have invested more heavily in communicating and networking sites than in sites that are predominantly content based. This is in contrast to the interests of the participants in the focus groups, who indicated through their ranking of archives services that they were more interested in archives providing access to digital documents than in their using social media applications in general. The focus group participants also expressed enthusiasm about gaining access to moving images and photographs through content-sharing sites and indicated their desire to be able to look in one place for archival content rather than having to search individual archival websites.

As previously noted, social media sites increase the possibility of interactions between users and archives. However, our data show that this potential is not being realized by most Canadian archives. The majority of archives' Facebook pages and Twitter accounts had fewer than 500 likes or followers (see Figure 2), and user engagement overall was low (see Figure 3). This confirms the findings of Kriesberg's study.<sup>28</sup> The views of participants in our focus groups on the value of user-contributed content were mixed. They indicated several reasons why they would be reluctant to contribute to social media: they were not domain experts, they were concerned about corporate use (e.g., Facebook) of their contributions, and they had a general concern about a site's use of their personal information. On the other hand, they saw a potential for social media to democratize the archives, contribute to the public good, and allow for a richer historical record by showing different points of view. These ideas are in line with speculations by Yakel<sup>29</sup> and Palmer and Stevenson<sup>30</sup> about the effect of user-contributed content on archives. Participants were also concerned about the credibility of contributions by users who are not familiar with the source, and they stated that archivists should monitor contributions to ensure accuracy. Yakel<sup>31</sup> suggests that most archivists have yet to give up control; they continue to monitor contributions and ensure that user-contributed

28 Kriesberg, "Increasing Access in 140 Characters or Less."

29 Yakel, "Balancing Archival Authority."

30 Palmer and Stevenson, "Something Worth Sitting Still For?"

31 Yakel, "Balancing Archival Authority."

uted content is not merged with archivists' contributed content. Many of the participants in the focus groups would welcome this filter. We note, however, that Smith-Yoshimura and Shein's study found that monitored sites had less user-contributed content.<sup>32</sup>

Previous research studies suggest that the main use of social media by archives is to promote archival events and resources.<sup>33</sup> While some of our participants indicated that use of social media as a marketing tool was important when it was used to increase awareness of archival resources and improve accessibility, a few also suggested that the archivists should not be wasting their time doing this. Despite the great deal of interest in social media generally and the potential it has for archives to open up their collections to the public, it appears that the study participants were more interested in the theoretical possibilities offered by social media and were not ready to become actively involved with using archives' social media applications. As the discussion continued and participants began to contemplate how social media might change their archival searching experience and access to material, there seemed to be a greater appreciation of the potential of social media to have a largely positive effect on their engagement with Canadian archives. This was borne out in the second half of the focus group sessions by the mostly positive and enthusiastic reactions to the demonstration of the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management website, which includes a large number of social media applications.

### **Limitations**

We conducted the environmental scan over a period of two months, from 11 November 2011 to 10 January 2012, and thus it is a snapshot of what archives were doing at that time. We acknowledge that institutions' use of social media may change rapidly and that this picture might be quite different if taken at a later date. Furthermore, we used the provincial and territorial council lists available on the website of Archives Canada to identify institutions. These lists are not comprehensive and also include some institutions that would not meet a strict definition of an archives. Another limitation of the study was the specialized interests of the participants of the focus groups, who were mostly undergraduate or graduate students recruited at the university. While every participant had used archival material, they did not represent all archives users, and most of their experience with archives was related to coursework.

32 Smith-Yoshimura and Shein, *Social Metadata for Libraries, Archives and Museums*.

33 Samouelian, "Embracing Web 2.0"; Crymble, "An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use"; and Kriesberg, "Increasing Access in 140 Characters or Less."

## Future Research

This study provides a glimpse of what archives were doing in relation to social media at a particular point in time. Since these applications are rapidly evolving, more research is necessary to track how archives' use of social media is changing over time. Future research is also needed to understand the archives' choice of and motivations for using social media, and what they hope to gain from their use of social media. In addition, a study involving a content analysis might provide insight into the types of content being added by archives and users; this might also identify the ways in which archives are increasing user engagement. Because our focus groups consisted predominantly of university students, studies of different user groups are needed to gain a fuller picture of archival users' engagement with social media applications. This is particularly important because the participants voiced various views on the value of social media use by archives.

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