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Title: @OisinTheDeer: engagement and dialogue through a museum-based Twitter account.

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Source: Radley, J.D. (2016). @OisinTheDeer: engagement and dialogue through a museum-based Twitter account.. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, Volume 4, 40 - 45.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/2332>

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@OisinTheDeer: engagement and dialogue through a museum-based Twitter account

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Received: 15/03/2016

Accepted: 27/09/2016

Citation: Radley, J.D., 2016. @OisinTheDeer: engagement and dialogue through a museum-based Twitter account. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, 4, pp.40-45.

Abstract

The microblogging platform Twitter has enjoyed widespread uptake by museums for its ease of use and proven efficacy as a dialogic social medium. Warwickshire Museum's account @OisinTheDeer is founded upon a popular exhibit: the skeleton of an extinct Irish Elk. This is one of a growing number of accounts based on museum mascots, giving their parent museums a 'voice' to facilitate informal dialogic communication with diverse audiences. @OisinTheDeer has proved to be an effective broadcasting tool, further embedding the Warwickshire Museum within the broader arena of museums, heritage organisations, and local communities.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, museums, engagement, dialogue

Introduction

In the wake of the Web 2.0 'revolution', the open-source Twitter microblogging platform has become an established and popular element of global communication, allowing 'instant' electronic dialogue within the 140-character constraint, via desk-top and mobile devices (Bik and Goldstein, 2013; Castillo et al., 2013; Gillen and Merchant, 2013). Twitter is enjoying increasing uptake by museums and science centres as they expand their provision beyond traditional, physical media (Kidd, 2011; Padilla-Mélendez and del Águila-Obra, 2013) and engage with agendas such as the 'Participatory Museum' (Simon, 2010) and 'Happy Museum' (Thompson et al., 2011). This has been driven by a shift towards more sustainable, community-supported futures, involving publics as active participants and contributors (Kelly, 2010; Simon, 2010; Black, 2011; Holdegaard and Klastrup, 2014). In this context, Twitter affords dialogue, facilitating enhanced museum visitor experience (e.g. see Charitonos, 2011). Web-based searches

demonstrate numerous and diverse museum-based Twitter accounts globally, communicating formally and informally (e.g. see Espinós, 2014, 2015). Subject matter ranges from discipline-specific information to events, activities, and marketing (e.g. see Padilla-Mélendez and del Águila-Obra, 2013).

Twitter presents notable limitations and challenges. It requires access to digital technology and the internet, something that is by no means universal (e.g. see Office for National Statistics, 2015). Building up a following necessitates a time commitment. Twitter additionally involves vast rates of information flow (e.g. see Huang et al., 2010; Ediger et al., 2010), much of which is highly ephemeral. Through its decentralised character, Twitter messaging carries an issue of 'quality control', and the credibility of information-based tweets can be difficult to assess (Castillo et al., 2013). With special reference to museums, Twitter takes discourse, voice, and even collections into a new and largely unfamiliar public 'space' (Kidd, 2011).



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@OisinTheDeer

Twitter's capabilities and potential mesh well with developing dialogic agendas within museums, notwithstanding limitations (see above). Supporting our developing community-facing approach, we (Warwickshire Museum based at the Market Hall Museum, Warwick; now part of Heritage & Culture Warwickshire (HCW)) established our Twitter account in May 2010. By that time, uptake of Twitter by museums was quite widespread; affording us the opportunity to assess what approach might work for us. Our investigations of museum-based Twitter accounts converged upon a growing number that were voiced 'through' museum objects, artefacts, and mascots. Many of these are official accounts, tweeting variously about life in museums and other heritage venues and/or natural science or human history interest (Mortimer et al., 2016), or (in some cases) specifically on events and activities.

Museum mascots on Twitter include: skeletons (frequently fossil or sub-fossil; e.g. @SUETheTrex), taxidermy (e.g. @Chelmsford_Bear), mummies (e.g. @KVMMUMMY), and even boats (@LoggieLogboat). We found these accounts particularly engaging, as they provide 'personalities' and informal 'voices' in an active, first-person style. We decided to establish our account on this basis, to communicate information relating to our collections, natural science, and human history interest in general; news relating to other parts of our organisation, museum events and activities, and local community events and interest. In effect, we wanted to use Twitter to expand our offer beyond museum buildings and opening hours, in terms of scope, temporal and spatial reach, and audience diversities, and to further promote dialogue with our users, peers, partners, and communities.

Whilst we were happy with the image of our service as a brand, we felt that an animated 'voice' would afford us greater opportunity for engagement than a more conventional, 'corporate' organisational account. Museums and other public-facing institutions with life science interests, collections, and exhibits have long utilised the positive emotional appeal of 'cute' and/or large and impressive animals, notably mammals, to engage with publics (e.g. see Driscoll, 1995; Gunnsthorsdottir, 2001; Small, 2012; Roberge, 2014; Mortimer et al., 2016). Capitalising upon the so-called 'Bambi effect' (Bach, 2015), we decided to base our Twitter account on one of our most iconic exhibits: the composite sub-fossil skeleton of an extinct Irish Elk (*Megaloceros giganteus* (Blumenbach)), collected from a peat bog in Limerick, Ireland in 1866, and acquired by the Warwickshire Natural History and Archaeological Society (Warwickshire Museum

specimen WARMS-G12970). The skeleton, mounted on an iron frame (Figure 1), has been displayed at the Market Hall Museum, Warwick, for at least 100 years. In the mid-1970s, re-display of the Market Hall Museum's ground floor gallery involved installation of a low suspended ceiling and repositioning of the skeleton facing into the gallery, close to a blacked-out external window (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Irish Elk skeleton (*Megaloceros giganteus* (Blumenbach)). Warwickshire Museum specimen WARMS-G12970. This photograph was taken before 2010, showing the earlier configuration of the mounted skeleton, facing into the museum gallery.

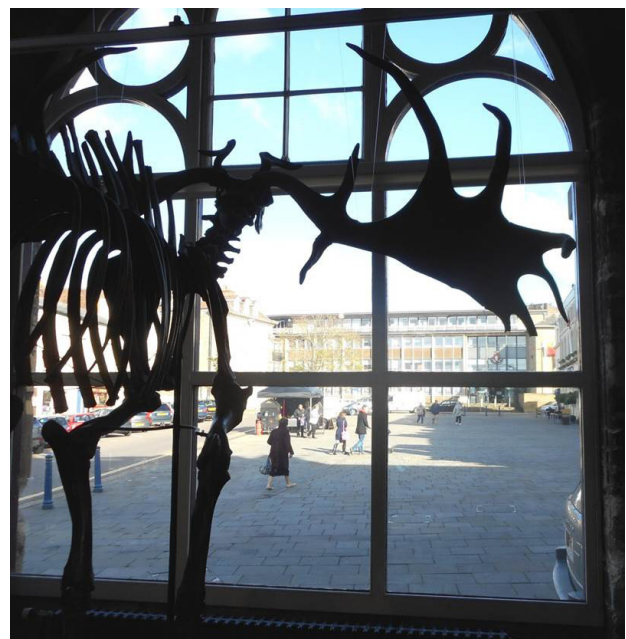


Figure 2. Irish Elk skeleton 'looking out' over Warwick's market square from the Market Hall Museum, 2015.

In 2010, driven by our developing community-focused agenda, we removed the suspended ceiling, re-glazed the windows with clear glass, and rotated the mounted skeleton to 'look out' of the Market Hall Museum across Warwick's busy, public market

square (Figure 2). For our Twitter account, an in-house designer and volunteer were given a free hand in 'reinventing' the skeleton as a 'living' Irish Elk. They designed an appealing graphical illustration (Figure 3), representing the 'tweeting' public persona of our skeleton. This was met with universal approval and enthusiasm by museum staff, and was adopted. Digital copies were generated at several resolutions, allowing us to variously use them for web- and paper-based publicity.



Figure 3. Graphical representation of Irish Elk skeleton as @OisinTheDeer.

Our account is named @OisinTheDeer, and went live in May 2010. His name (Oisin, pronounced 'o-sheen') was selected through a public vote, and means 'young deer' in Gaelic. Thus established and animated, Oisin The Deer started tweeting. Twitter is highly adaptable, allowing broadcasting and re-broadcasting ('re-tweeting') of short texts, photos, and hyperlinks, targeted tweeting (embedding usernames within tweets), and direct messaging (e.g. see Kirilenko and Stepchenkova, 2014). Additionally, insertion of hashtags allows users to follow and remotely contribute to 'hash-tagged' events such as conferences and other mass-dialogues (e.g. see Desai et al., 2012; Shiffman, 2012; Mortimer et al., 2016).

As the principal 'voice' of Oisin, it took me a while to find my way around this new medium, gain confidence, and establish the tone. After a period of approximately 4 - 8 weeks, I felt that I had established a 'personality', setting a tweeting style that remains to this day. This voice was largely defined by me personally, commenting on day-to-day work and

events within the Warwickshire Museum, and adding light-hearted, enthusiastic, and sometimes humorous commentary to linked stories, facts, and photos. Colleagues gave valuable feedback in the initial weeks and months, concerning voice, tone, and the nature and content of tweets. A follower-base soon started to grow, founded upon frequent tweets (very roughly 5 - 15 per day), retweets, and 'follows'.

The purpose of our account has stayed fundamentally constant over the six years of its existence, to date. It is normally active on a daily basis, tweeting about items of interest in the news and/or locally, museum-related issues, and our public activities and events in and beyond the museum buildings. @OisinTheDeer participates in hash-tagged events, which facilitate user-searching for specific events or topics. These include the annual #museummascot day when tweeting museum and heritage site mascots from around the world 'meet up', converse, and take questions from followers. Natural history collections-based tweets are promoted by currently popular weekly hash-tagged events including #MolluscMonday, #WormWednesday, and #FossilFriday (Mortimer et al., 2016). There is considerable interaction with other HCW accounts, notably @RuairiTheFawn (see below) and @OurWarwickshire; the latter represents HCW's new community website, 'Our Warwickshire'. Additionally, @OisinTheDeer has provided an additional 'voice' outside of the museum, augmenting the communication work of staff members attending conferences, other museums, heritage sites, and local community events.

@OisinTheDeer has currently (January 2017) attracted over 4000 followers. Follower numbers have started to level out, after initial rapid growth. We now log Twitter analytical data on a regular basis, and the success of the account has been underlined by follower numbers and volume of interaction, as indicated by 'profile visits' (number of times the profile page has been visited), 'impressions' (the number of people who have seen an individual tweet), 'mentions' (number of times the username has been mentioned in tweets) and other parameters presented on the Twitter analytics database (Figure 4). @OisinTheDeer has received several awards, not least 'Best Museum Mascot' in the annual Shorty Awards (Wikipedia contributors, 2017), 2013.

Among HCW's other Twitter accounts, @RuairiTheFawn (launched January 2014) is closely linked to @OisinTheDeer, and is managed by HCW's Learning and Community Engagement team to promote public events and activities. Ruairi

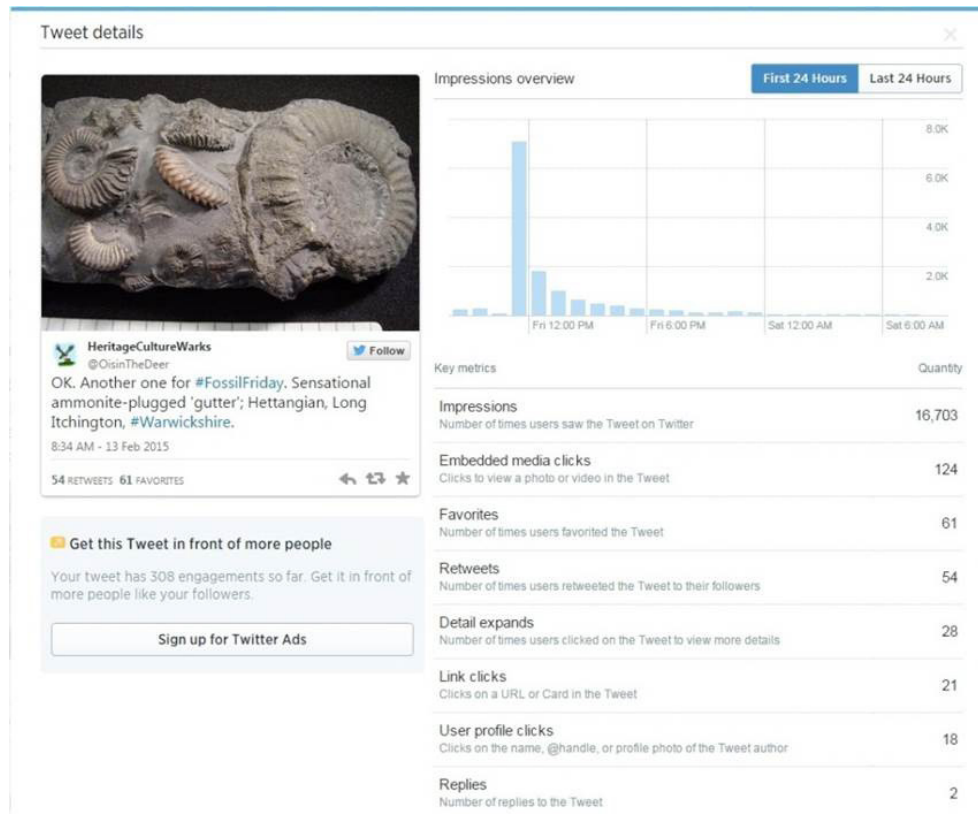


Figure 4. Twitter Analytics (screenshot): data relating to a single tweet from @OisinTheDeer.

The Fawn is promoted as Oisin's nephew; Ruairi similarly tweets in an animated, first-person fashion, engendering informal dialogue. His follower-base is rapidly growing; currently (January 2017) he has more than 1900 followers. Whereas the 'real' @OisinTheDeer is a skeleton of an extinct Irish Elk, his nephew, @RuairiTheFawn (see above) is represented by a plush toy moose. The 'real Ruairi' has proved extremely effective as a 'prop' for live-tweeting of photographs via mobile devices, from museum-based events and activities.

Our experience: what works

We (HCW) are part of Warwickshire County Council (WCC). Our Twitter accounts were founded upon formal application to WCC's social media board, which assesses the potential viability of proposed corporate accounts against criteria such as perceived popularity, and whether applicants might be better served by more traditional publicity methods. Once authorised, we were afforded a good degree of autonomy, framed by corporate guidelines, our experience of working in local authority and heritage environments, professionalism, and common sense.

From the outset, we envisaged our follower-base growing through combined provision of our own tweets, 'follows', and re-tweets. Advice from other

account holders indicated that, ideally, we should be tweeting several times daily. @OisinTheDeer tweets in an active, positive, first-person voice, fostering engagement with followers and facilitating dialogue (e.g. see Marks, 2013). 'Cute' avatars clearly work well (Figure 3), potentially giving appeal to objects and specimens (e.g. skeletal remains and taxidermy) that might not be otherwise appreciated. Humour also assists in engagement, and we feel that it is important to occasionally tweet about quirky items and events that are relatively trivial, to keep our messages varied. Photographs are equally important, as are shortened links to external websites, for further information. Above all, we have found that short, eye-catching tweets are the most successful in terms of promoting potential re-tweets. From time to time, Oisin's standard graphical representation (Figure 3) is temporarily replaced by others in which he wears costumes, linked to specific events and anniversaries (Figure 5).

Initially, we tended to follow museums, museum mascots, heritage organisations and groups, and other organisations concerned with museum-based disciplines, natural science interests, and conservation. We have avoided following accounts with overtly political agendas; similarly, we apply a good degree of self-censorship (Marwick and Boyd,



Figure 5. Graphical representation: @OisinTheDeer, commemorating the 2012 London Olympics and Olympic torch procession through the town of Warwick.

2011) and have avoided tweeting items with any political slant or content, or anything that could be construed as 'bad taste'. In recent years, our community-focused agenda has led us to forge stronger links with local businesses and community organisations within the town of Warwick and the county of Warwickshire. Twitter has proved a highly effective medium for this aim, and @OisinTheDeer has contributed significantly to embedding HCW (and specifically the Market Hall Museum) within a thriving and communicative network of local businesses, influential organisations, and individuals. Through informal rapport with local business owners, @OisinTheDeer has afforded the museum an approachable and accessible 'face', promoting trust, integration, and dialogue concerning local commerce, events, and other issues.

The future

Since its inception, @OisinTheDeer has afforded the Warwickshire Museum a continuous public profile, broadcasting/dialogic medium and identity, through a period of profound change in terms of organisation and mission. We aim to continue tweeting for as long as the account remains effective, with reference to followers, tangible impact, and positive feedback from users.

HCW received financial backing from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2015 to re-develop the Market Hall Museum, Warwick, and further develop the community website 'Our Warwickshire'. Currently

(January 2017), the Market Hall Museum is closed to the public, whilst the building is refurbished and new displays planned, designed and installed. Once again, @OisinTheDeer is providing vital continuity during this process, tweeting from his protective crate with progress updates and other news. Additionally, we are planning to move his skeleton to a new position close to the Market Hall Museum's public entrance, affording more opportunities to capitalise upon the popularity of our Twitter account.

Social media are increasingly playing a powerful role in global communication, augmenting traditional broadcasting and dialogic methodologies, and available through a range of widely available mobile technologies. Museums, with their educational agendas, budgetary pressures, and digitised collections are ideally placed to use platforms such as Twitter to communicate and interact beyond what is possible through physical displays, outreach, and conventional websites. @OisinTheDeer is now embedded within HCW's organisation as a vital tool in all areas of public-facing provision.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks NatSCA for funding his attendance at the NatSCA Conference & AGM 2015, where an earlier version of this paper was presented. Anonymous reviewers are acknowledged for their useful comments on the submitted manuscript.

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