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Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Social Media in 2017

Anderson, Katie Elson
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Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Social Media in 2017

In the past year, social networks and apps have increasingly become a major part of the daily news cycle. One is hard pressed to find a day this year that a social media network is not mentioned by major news sources. These stories include exhausting coverage of the tweets of Donald Trump, how Twitter deals with online harassment, praise for social apps that help victims of natural disasters and speculations of nefarious uses of Pokemon Go (Nieva and Hautala 2017). With almost 3 billion social media users worldwide (Williams, 2017) it is not surprising that the significance of social networking increases at an astonishing pace. Social networks have grown beyond the means with which to share family photos, artistic pictures of breakfast, and library updates and events. While those uses certainly remain a substantial part of the networks, more users are, for better or worse, sharing and receiving news and information via social media and apps. A recent report by Pew Internet shows that 67% of Americans get some news from social media (Bialik and Matsa, 2017). This statistic is especially important in light of the multitude of news stories discussing the proliferation of fake news on many social media sites which include, but are not limited to the major players: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Even though 32% of Americans say they often see made-up political news online (Bialik and Matsa, 2017), it evident that bad information is being shared quickly and easily through social networks and apps, and not everyone has the skills to determine the authority and accuracy. As information professionals it is imperative that we embrace the opportunity to understand the power of these tools so that we can use them to better inform and instruct.

Keeping up with the changes on the many social networks is a daunting task, especially given the speed in which they happen, whether in response to problems such as fake news or in attempts to continue to mimic a competitor's success. The updates and changes to the most

popular networks can often also overshadow the emergence of new networks which may never overtake the larger ones, but continue to be relevant and have value for their communities of users. While most updates will appear on technical and social media focused news sites (Wired, Techcrunch, Mashable) shortly after they are announced, in many cases the companies themselves have a dedicated platform for announcing these, though obviously filtered through their own marketing and motivations. Alternatively, users of the social networks are often the first to share the changes, and in many cases, being a consistent user allows one to become aware of changes in advance through the excitement or disappointment of the user community. Obviously, it is impossible for anyone to be a consistent user of all or any of these social networks, but knowledge about the bigger changes that affect almost 40% of the global population is important in order for libraries and librarians to engage and instruct their communities.

Listed below are some of the major changes that have happened with the most popular social networks and apps during the past year, along with a brief highlight of some lesser known apps that have been a part of the conversation.

Facebook

News regarding upcoming changes and descriptions of updates can be found directly on the Facebook News site [1]. This page includes announcement of upcoming features and updates along with Q&A's and general news. One of the most recent changes announced is an attempt to address the problems with fake news by providing more context for the posted story. The goal is to provide users with the ability to receive contextual information from Facebook and other sources without having to leave Facebook. The proposed button to press to receive this contextual content is not available to all users, but should be coming soon. This new effort

builds up a previous effort to fight the spread of false news (Mosseri, 2017). It is important to remember that these internal initiatives will have their limitations, but the recognition and attempts to address the issue should be recognized.

In a nod to the popularity of streaming video and the biggest provider of such in YouTube, Facebook Watch was announced in August and opened to all US users in early September (Constine, 2017a). Facebook Watch allows users to find and watch user created content in a designated area rather than rely on the serendipity of discovery through the newsfeed. Watch is similar to YouTube in providing suggested videos based on previously watched content, what friends are watching and what is the most popular. At this time the content is limited and clearly not at the level of YouTube, but given Facebook's number of users and the amount of original content consumed by them, a later exploration of this feature is certainly warranted, and may prove to be a place for libraries to provide content to their Facebook audience. Users wishing to explore this function can find a blue TV icon on the left side menu under the News Feed icon.

The popularity of Snapchat's facial filters did not go unnoticed by Facebook, and in June, users of the Facebook Messenger video chat function were given the ability to enhance their experience with color filters, masks, effects and animated reactions (Matney, 2017). The ability to take screenshots was also added, allowing users to capture the moments of the filter use. Other features according to the Facebook Newsroom [1] that have been updated in the past year are: trending news stories, privacy settings and statistic keeping.

Instagram

Instagram's blog [2] announces new features, promotes accounts and hashtags, encourages engagement and provides weekly summaries that include news articles about the app. Since Instagram was last featured in this column there have been several features and enhancements added. Instagram stories were announced in August 2016 [3]. Stories are similar to Snapchat in that you can add to your story as the day progresses, but they will disappear after 24 hours. The addition of this feature has proven to be quite successful for Instagram (and parent company Facebook) as a year later it was reported that Instagram Stories' daily use surpassed that of Snapchat with close to one million more daily users which even caused Snapchat's share price to sink (Constine, 2017b). The features are almost identical to Snapchat; silly facial filters, emoji stamps, adding text, and writing on the screen. The stories can be shared with all followers or sent directly to specific individuals. Unlike with regular Instagram posts there are no likes or public comments, but followers can respond directly to the stories. Instagram stories are available on the desktop version of Instagram as well as within the mobile app. The newest feature of Instagram Stories is polls released at the beginning of October [4]. Those watching the story can tap on the selection, and the creator of the story can view who voted along with the total number of votes. This poll feature could be an interesting way for libraries to gain feedback from their users, thought the lack of anonymity may be a deterrent. In May, Instagram expanded the Explore (search) functionality to include stories that are tagged with the current location of the device being used in order to view targeted view local stories. Additionally, a search on a hashtag may result in stories that were tagged with the hashtag alongside regular posts [5]. Stories appear along the top of all the screens, distinguishing them from the regular posts. Instagram posts have gotten an upgrade this year as well; users can now share multiple images or videos that have multiple formats to a single post, resulting in the ability to create a slideshow

post of up to 10 images or videos (Pierce, 2017). All of these new features and upgrades have helped push Instagram's growth to 500 million daily active users (Etherington, 2017).

Twitter

Twitter also has a blog that provides updates and information on the service while also promoting events and hashtags [6]. Twitter has certainly had its share of news stories in 2017, becoming a focal point in political communication. Even those who do not use Twitter are made aware of the tweets by President Donald Trump whose tweetstorms are shared and discussed by news and entertainment resources. The use of social media in this way by a world leader and his cabinet is unprecedented and has brought up many questions and concerns. Additionally, larger numbers of both US and world politicians have a Twitter presence, opening up communication while also blurring the lines between official policies and statements with personal opinions. The entire world watches the conversations that take place on this very open and public forum. As with any very large and open forum there is plenty of room for bad behavior. Much of 2017 has found Twitter dealing with issues of online harassment, largely in part because of the anonymous nature of the platform. Early in the year Twitter released updates in order to combat the rampant abuse. Changes were made in an attempt to make it harder to continuously create accounts for the purpose of harassment. Twitter began offering users a way to filter out potentially sensitive content, keeping it discoverable but not forcing it on the user (Perez, 2017a). Additionally, the service began to implement temporary "time-outs" on abusive accounts which hides the abusive tweets from everyone except the user's followers (Perez, 2017b). Twitter continues to work to improve the ability to report abusive treats and help users experiencing online abuse [7], but tends to fall back on asking the users to block or mute the offensive accounts, essentially making them invisible to a user. This is an effective way to not see the content but puts the onus on the

user to be exposed to the abuse at least once in order to block or mute. Users have been asking for improved reporting and monitoring and after a recent incident where actress Rose McGowen's account was suspended under what some would call inconsistent enforcement of Twitter rules resulted in a boycott of the services. Twitter's response to the incident is a pledge to take a "more aggressive stance" in enforcing their own rules (Liptak, 2017).

Twitter has not been untouched by the scourge of fake news and a recent report from Oxford details the spread of fake news during the week of the US election (O'Sullivan, 2017). The ease in which anonymous accounts and bots (software application running automated scripts) can be created provides an even stronger platform for those with the specific intention to misinform. (Crowell, 2017). Unlike Facebook, Twitter is not taking a proactive approach to this and remains on the fence (Gunter, 2017).

Other changes in the past year have been made in order to streamline the experience of using Twitter. The @username no longer counts towards the 140 characters, freeing up that space to reply to other users and allowing for replies to multiple users (intentional or unintentional). The explore screen has been enhanced for better discovery, the look and feel of both the desktop and mobile app have changed with new typography and iconography and there are real time counts for likes, replies and retweets (Anderson, 2017). The most recent change of doubling the character count from 140 to 280 is still being rolled out and tested (Newton, 2017b). The announcement and subsequent rollout has been met with creative and witty Tweets as well as commentary on why or why not this is a good idea. Stay tuned for whether this test becomes a permanent change.

While the larger social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram continue to add enhancements and make updates in order to keep and grow their user base, newer social

networks continue to place themselves as additions or alternatives to these services. Many of these are known only to users and the specific communities they serve and were developed in response to complaints and concerns about the larger and more commercial sites. Below are brief descriptions of some recommended networks and apps to be aware of.

Ello

In 2014 everyone was talking about Ello [8] which was presented as an ad-free alternative to Facebook (Profis, 2014). The minimized interface and the need for an invite made the promise of an anti-Facebook alluring and many, including myself eagerly sought out an invitation. The large number of people flocking to the site led to some technical problems and the need for dedicated time to learn a new interface prevented myself and likely others from really embracing this new service. After its initial surge its profile has remained low. While the profile has remained low, the activity and levels of community engagement have not. Ello is a robust community of artists sharing, collaborating and commentating. It is a way for artists to "present their digital portfolio to a like-minded, supportive community-one with remarkably few trolls" (Locke, 2016). It is described as a cross between Tumblr and Twitter, which is correct but it also includes elements of Etsy, Kickstarter and LinkedIn; art is bought and sold, artists can request and receive monetary support and find opportunities for collaboration with brands, agencies and publishers. This social network may be of interest to libraries and librarians as a place to find artists to collaborate with, an opportunity for outreach and promotion of library events and as a place to refer users who may have a need or interest.

Mastodon.social

The response to Twitter's attempts to better monitor and control the rampant abuse and harassment has been met with different reactions. Some feel that Twitter has not done enough to protect its users and seek a place where the content and behavior is better controlled. Others feel that Twitter's censors and does not allow for free speech and seek a place where there is less monitoring and content is unrestricted. Mastodon was a reaction to the need for a place where users could have better control of their exposure to specific types of content (Rhodes, 2017). It is a decentralized open source microblogging platform where users can customize their experience, or instance. A user may join an existing instance or create their own. When starting, the user is presented with questions regarding how they want their instance to look and act. The questions asked include the size of community wished for, (less than 100 to less than 100,000 or doesn't matter). A series of customization questions allows the user to allow or forbid the content that may have drawn them away from Twitter such as NSFW (not safe for work) content, advertising, spam, hate speech and spoilers. Instead of joining a giant open community like Twitter, Mastodon is made up of separate instances that focus on topics and interests, and content can be restricted by the creator of the instance. The instances can be searched and in some cases a user must request permission to join. A 500-character limit gives members more space for communication with their chosen community. In April of this year the site grew 73% in 48 hours, largely in part to the buzz that was created about it on Twitter (Newton, 2017a). According to the About page [9], it currently has over 90,000 users which is double of that reported in April of this year. Despite the fact that the news about it has fizzled, it is still experiencing some growth. At this time there did not appear to be instances dedicated to libraries or librarians, but many other interests and topics are available that may be useful and interesting to library professionals and library users.

Gab

The response to Twitter's attempts to address hate speech, harassment, bullying and online abuse has been met by those who feel it infringes on their freedom of speech.

Gab [10] was founded in August 2016 and according to the community guidelines [11] it has a mission "to put people and free speech first" with the belief that "the only valid form of censorship is an individual's own choice to opt-out". The guidelines also state the minimal prohibitions on posts; illegal pornography, threats of violence of terrorism and confidential information of users without their consent. The social network is presented as ad-free social media for all, but has been more closely identified with conservative voices and the self-identified "alt-right" (Ellis, 2017). Beginning as an invitation only network it opened to all in May of 2017 and is said to be 100% funded by the community [12]. A brief look into the 300-character limit public facing posts does indeed show a tolerance for hate speech. The tolerance, and thus the presence of hate speech prompted Google to remove the app from the Google Play Store (Glaser, 2017) and also prevents it from being offered in the Apple Store. It is important to be aware of the different places where people are connecting through social networks and apps, especially in the current climate of extreme polarization. Being aware of the variety of voices that may or may not include hate speech and where they are sharing information is essential in order for informational professionals to better inform and assist users in finding facts and solid resources.

Discord

Discord is a social network that has primarily been used by gamers to communicate while playing the games. It is heavily used by the live-streaming gamers of YouTube and Twitch TV [13] to engage with other gamers and fans. It is also a decentralized social network parsed into

channels that are created by the community of users. This community was made up of more than 45 million registered users in July 2017 (Chaykowski, 2017b). Launched in May 2015, Discord has been called "the Slack for gamers". Discord is as an all-in-one voice and text chat or gamers. It is described as free and secure and can be used on both desktops and mobile devices. There is a similarity to Slack in its format, layout and functionality. Users create servers and the channels that exist on those servers, similar to the groups and channels in Slack. Most of the channels and servers on Discord are dedicated to games and gaming, but not limited to that topic. There are servers dedicated to books, archives and libraries along with many other topics and interests. A search functionality allows users to find those public groups that may be of interest. Users of Discord can create their own private servers in order to create customized groups that are available by invitation only. These private servers can only be accessed by the provided link and are thus exclusive conversations and communities that cannot be searched or indexed. Avoidance of controversial and NSFW content is not the norm with Discord's general communities and like Gab, it has been embraced by the so called "alt-right" as a place to engage in hate speech and plan events. Discord became more newsworthy early in the year when it was identified as one of the places where plans were made for the trolling, harassment, and abuse of the participants of the He Will Not Divide Us [14] performance art by LaBeouf, Rönkkö and Turner (Bernstein, 2017).   It was further thrust into the knowledge of the general public when it was identified as the home to the planning for the violent actions in Charlottesville, VA in August 2017 (Tiku, 2017). Unlike Gab which flaunts its lack of tolerance, Discord shutdown the server and related accounts that were identified with the violence and attacks and unequivocally condemned the groups and their use of the platform promising to "continue to take action against white supremacy, Nazi ideology and all forms of hate" (Hester, 2017). Discord is a vivid example of

how information professionals should be aware of the different and sometimes sinister ways information is shared through social networks and apps. It is a time where the intended purpose of a tool can easily be co-opted for nefarious purposes and knowing and understanding this is key to our ability to instruct and inform about these tools.

2017 has proven to be a pivotal year for social networks and apps. The events of the year have brought their impact and importance to the forefront of the daily experience. Social networks are vital tools for connection, conversation and community. They also have the potential for tremendous impact on information gathering and sharing. Despite the efforts of many of the platforms, social networks and apps continue to be places where misinformation is widely spread. Categorically false information was spread broadly after the recent tragedy in Las Vegas, and Facebook, YouTube, Google and Twitter were all used to spread speculation and rumors as facts (Chaykowski, 2017a). There has been a significant shift in the type of information being shared on social media and librarians need to take notice. The importance of engaging with audiences using social media as described in past library literature has not changed, though the emergence of decentralized social networks presents even more challenges to determine where and how to engage. Knowledge and use of these networks has been identified as useful for building virtual connections with users, but new reasons for librarian use of social media has emerged. There is now an increasing need for libraries and librarians to look for opportunities to inform users, helping them understand the impact and importance of information they share and receive through these social platforms.

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