Pinterest as a Tool: Applications in Academic Libraries and Higher Education

Kirsten Hansen
Program Coordinator, Lifelong Learning Centre
University of Regina
kirsten.hansen@uregina.ca

Gillian Nowlan
Liaison Librarian
University of Regina
gillian.nowlan@uregina.ca

Christina Winter
Copyright Officer
University of Regina
christina.winter@uregina.ca

Abstract

Pinterest, a pinboard-style social photo-sharing website, has become a popular site for many individuals who collect images that help them plan, organize, and explore any topic of interest. Launched in March 2010, Pinterest now has over 11 million users and is continuing to grow. Librarians and educators are starting to explore this new type of social media and how it can be used to connect with and inspire their patrons and students.

This article will look at how the University of Regina Library is currently using Pinterest to engage and interact with the university community. This social tool has appealed not only to librarians but also to educators. Pinterest is starting to have an impact on the way educators teach and present information and ideas to their students.

This article will look at the process that the University of Regina Library underwent in creating a Pinterest account: beginning with copyright considerations and questions used to determine whether content can be added; moving to the launch of the account and adjustment of how it is used, including a list of best practices coming from the research; and ending with potential usage in terms of teaching by both librarians and faculty.

Keywords

Pinterest; academic libraries; higher education; copyright; social media technologies

Introduction

With the development of various social media tools, more and more libraries are experimenting to determine how these tools might support and augment their services to better assist their clients. Pinterest is one of the newer tools that has rapidly become popular among casual users, meaning that there is an existing user base. Meeting library clients on familiar social media sites offers a different way of interacting and serving the needs of those clients. It also provides new ways to engage in outreach and educational practices within the library and within the wider realm of (higher) education. With this in mind, the University of Regina Library decided to undertake a pilot test of Pinterest to see how it could be used to enhance our current services and interaction with users as well as investigate future uses that could add to the Library's support of the research, teaching and community building happening on campus.

What is Pinterest?

What is Pinterest and why has it become so popular? There are many new and upcoming social media sites; some have rapidly gained popularity while others have faded. Pinterest is becoming a social media powerhouse and is being adopted by the private and public sector, gaining popularity at lightning speed. Pinterest launched as a beta site in March 2010 and today has more than 25 million unique visitors per month (Site Analytics) and drives more traffic than Google+, LinkedIn, and YouTube combined (The user base consists primarily of people in the age bracket of 25-44 (Notess)).

Pinterest functions as a digital pinboard. It lets users post images and videos from the internet — either while viewing a website or by using a URL — and add user-created photos, both of which are referred to as pinning. Pinterest provides a bookmarklet script (a downloadable "pin this" button users can add to their browsers) that allows users to pin virtually any image or video found on the Internet. An image or video is referred to as a pin and is organized onto categorized user-created boards. Users can add a description of up to 500 characters to a pin. Already existing pins can be added to a user's board, referred to as repinning. One can also use a heart icon to like a pin and can add comments below the description.

With its growing popularity, Pinterest has also found ways to allow content creators to make it easier to pin their content or share their boards with anyone visiting their site. Content creators can add a "Pin It" or "Follow Me" button to their website, signalling that pinning is encouraged and/or they are active on Pinterest themselves.

The most common application of Pinterest is personal use: for example, collecting recipes from a variety of sources or compiling inspirational images and relevant articles to help when planning a wedding. The site is becoming more and more popular for business and educational use; libraries are quickly leveraging this new tool to help display and promote new books and collections, share "good reads," and promote library events.

Background

Before creating a Pinterest account for the University of Regina Library, we developed documentation that would help us track the implementation and usefulness of this tool. We previously generated similar documentation for our other social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) and found it useful to help determine desired outcomes, assign responsibility for updating the account and articulating the goals of the account. The document is also used to track the number of people following the account, comments, likes and repins. We plan to analyze these statistics semi-annually and submit these findings to Library Administration.

Five library staff were recruited to contribute to and organize the [Library Pinterest account](#). Having multiple staff using the account reduces the time commitment that each is required to devote to Pinterest. Our goal is to pin new items daily in order to have an active account that draws in our community and keeps them engaged, as inactive social media accounts quickly lose participants and followers. Staff from specific units such as Archives & Special Collections and the Centre for Teaching and Learning focus on adding content to specialized boards on topics relevant to their areas. Lastly, we have one administrator who manages the account by weeding out spam, following other users including both libraries and individuals, ensuring that there is sufficient activity on the boards, and tracking statistics.

Copyright Considerations

Before launching our Pinterest account, it was important to investigate any potential copyright issues. In early 2012, considerable media attention was given to copyright concerns related to the pinning and repinning of online content on Pinterest (Masnick, Hasham, Crosby, Tsukayama). One of the issues raised was in regard to how Pinterest grabs content from third party websites and social media sites. As Nancy Sims explains, "Pinterest makes copies of the images people 'pin.' It does not simply create a link to the source image, it actually makes a new copy of the image. (The new copy does link to the source from which the image was pinned, although that is not always the original source of the image)." Copyright holders are granted a series of exclusive rights, including the right of reproduction: meaning that the pinning of content by a user may be an infringement of copyright. Pinterest has responded to these concerns by creating a "nopin" script that content creators can add to their website or blogs to prevent users from pinning images from their sites (Yung-Hui). Sites such as Flickr, SlideShare, Etsy, Kickstarter, and SoundCloud have created a script which automatically adds attribution that cannot be changed or removed. Another issue raised was over Pinterest's terms of service. The initial terms of service were heavily criticized because of their purported ownership of content pinned to the site. These terms of service have since been changed and are consistent with other social media sites (Bennett, Simms).

Copyright Questions

With this concern about reproduction of content as well as other more general copyright considerations in mind, we developed a series of questions before launching our account to help us determine whether we should pin or repin content.

Is the work protected by copyright?

The first step is to determine whether the work is copyrightable. In Canada, copyright protects "every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work" that is fixed in some material form (Copyright Act). This means that digital images, including those publicly available on the Internet, may be protected by copyright. Copyright protection is automatic upon the creation of a work. There is no requirement to register copyright or to mark the work with a copyright symbol © or the copyright statement "All Rights Reserved." Because most material found online does not have an identification mark stating its copyright status, we assume that a work is copyrighted until proven otherwise. The decision to pin is informed by analyzing the series of questions below.

Do we own the copyright of the work?

The Library uses Pinterest to share profile pictures of staff and document our newly renovated library spaces. We pin our own images, for which we are the copyright holder, on Pinterest to share them with our followers.

Is the work in the public domain?

In Canada, copyright generally lasts for the life of the creator plus fifty years.¹ Determining who the creator is can also prove to be quite challenging, especially for photographs, since the creator is often not listed. After the term of copyright expires, a work enters what is known as the public domain. Works in the public domain can be used without permission or the need for royalty payments. Works in the public domain can be freely pinned.

Is the image available under a Creative Commons license?

Creative Commons provides freely available copyright licenses. It provides choice to creators in how they will share their content with others. For example, creators can license their work with "some rights reserved." The intent is to protect the creator's interests while allowing others to use the work in specified ways (Creative Commons). One way to find copyright-friendly images for Pinterest is to use the Creative Commons Search for Creative Commons licensed content. There are several different types of Creative Commons licenses, all requiring attribution, which refers to recognizing the original creator of the content in a specified manner. Material published under Creative

¹ See *Copyright Act*, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42 for terms of copyright.

Commons licenses can be pinned as long as attribution is given.

Is the use covered by one of the Library's licenses?

Many Canadian academic libraries have licenses with digital image databases. While these licenses may provide the University community with unprecedented access to a variety of materials, their use is limited to defined users groups. This means that content from these collections cannot be displayed or posted to publicly available websites such as Pinterest without the copyright holder's permission.

The Library wanted to use Pinterest as a new way of marketing our electronic books to the University community. We contacted several vendors and discovered that we were permitted to use cover images of e-book titles we have already purchased in a promotional manner on our Library website and on third-party sites such as Pinterest.

If the work is protected by copyright, does the use fall under the fair dealing exception in the Copyright Act?

Fair dealing is an exception in the *Copyright Act* that allows individuals to use a copyrighted work for the purpose of research, private study, criticism, review or news reporting provided that the use is "fair" (As of October 2012 the recent amendments to the *Copyright Act* are not in force. Bill C-11 expands the fair dealing exception to include three new purposes: education, parody or satire). In determining whether the use is "fair" the courts will analyze the following six factors: (1) the purpose of the dealing; (2) the character of the dealing; (3) the amount of the dealing; (4) alternatives to the dealing; (5) the nature of the work; and (6) the effect of the dealing on the original work (CCH). If the use can be supported by a balance of the six factors, then it is more likely to be fair. It is important to note that fair dealing for the purpose of criticism or review requires attribution to the source and author.

Is the content creator using Pinterest?

Many companies, including book publishers such as Random House, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, and Penguin, have Pinterest accounts and are encouraging others to pin and repin their book covers. For example, [Random House](#) has a board listing Booker Prize winners, making their covers easily accessible to other Pinterest users and inviting sharing. A Pinterest-using content creator is unlikely to object to the repinning of their content because of their own investment in the site.

While this list is not exhaustive, it helps to guide our decisions when selecting images for our Pinterest account.

Ready to Launch!

We launched our [Pinterest](#) account in April 2012. As of October 2012 we have over 160 followers and have pinned close to 500 items on 40 unique boards. Examples of our

current boards include new books by subject, staff favourites, photos of newly renovated library spaces, and "meet our librarians/staff." Our most popular boards include "What are you Reading?" and "Libraries We Love." Pinterest has provided us with a great opportunity to visually display new book titles along with clickable links to the library catalogue.

Another feature of Pinterest is the option for followers to collaborate on a board by sharing pins (Dudenhoffer). We used this feature to create the "What are you Reading?" board. Followers can post the covers of books they are currently reading. This provides an opportunity for community-run readers' advisory (Dunn). Followers have added titles they are reading along with their comments about the books. This has proven to be a great way to engage and draw in the community with this particular social media outlet.

Promotion

The Library was up and running on Pinterest, but marketing and promotion was needed to inform the University community about our account. This information was included in the Library's monthly newsletter, *@Archer*, which is distributed to all faculty and students. A Pinterest icon linking to the Library's account was placed on the Library homepage and mobile website, and the icon is also displayed on television monitors that are mounted throughout the Library. The Pinterest account is also mentioned at Library sessions, events, and meetings.

Best Practices

In order to use Pinterest to its full potential, it is helpful to have a set of best practices to follow. This is especially useful when multiple people are contributing to a site in which you want to maintain some consistency:

- **Give Credit:** When pinning images, try to pin (link back) to the original source. This gives credit to the owner of the photo. You can also add the owner's name in the description box of a particular image.
- **Describe and/or Explain:** When you pin, make sure to describe the pin and provide a link if possible. Followers enjoy looking through the images but also like to know what it is they are looking at.
- **Add Content:** Try to add content to items you pin or repin. Add some information about the image or video and how it relates to your library, programs, events, etc.
- **Manage Visual Appeal:** Pinterest is an image based social media site, so try to upload high quality images.
- **Protect Privacy:** This is especially important when creating boards and posting images to those boards. For example, if you are pinning photos of a

public event, you will want to ask permission from featured individuals before you pin.

- **Be Engaged:** Don't set up the account and forget about it. Make sure you are keeping an up-to-date and fresh social media account.
- **Don't be Afraid to Try New Things:** Trying out new things in Pinterest is the best way to find out what your patrons might like!

Problems Encountered

During our pilot of Pinterest, we discovered some issues with the Pinterest platform and with our initial intended uses:

- **Software Conflicts:** Initially we encountered a problem with pinning from and linking to records in our online catalogue when trying to share items from our collection. We would upload the book cover and then attempt to use the URL for the bibliographic record from the navigation bar to create the pin but quickly found that Pinterest was actually deleting a portion of the link for an unknown reason. We eventually found an alternate way to do this using a Pinterest bookmarklet within each bibliographic record to pin the item and function as the link.
- **Individual Boards Are Not Searchable:** With our "New Books" board, which at one point had over 500 pins, it became clear that the usability was reduced because it was not possible to limit a keyword search to a single board. We overcame this issue by dividing the pins onto new boards for popular subject areas.

Teaching with Pinterest

One area of interest in higher education is exploring the use of Pinterest in teaching and instruction. A 2006 study found that 40% of college students were visual learners (Clarke, Flaherty, Yankey). Pinterest is a tool that has great potential to enable educators to capitalize on the visual aspect of teaching. As a social medium, its main focus is the ability to share an image and link quickly and easily, while providing an opportunity for conversation and commentary. Those two aspects alone have been leveraged to varying degrees of success by numerous teachers at all levels of education (Bruff, Crumpler, Pinterest). Pinterest's addition of a visual aspect to bookmarking adds another level above the social bookmarking already available on sites such as Delicious and Diigo, if done following best practices. The ability to organize pins onto boards means that the images themselves can be just as meaningful as the linked content. The images can be used to provide an example, give visual clues or offer contrast. In fact, the images *should* be meaningful, otherwise there is no reason to be using Pinterest over any other social bookmarking service.

The potential for creating thematic boards means that an educator could group images and articles around a topic in one place which can then be shared with students for their research and commentary. The visual element adds more depth to a discussion like this as it also allows for commentary about how the subject is presented. It creates an interesting space for interaction that is not frequently found among librarians, students and faculty, where there can be open dialogue about sources and a sharing of information in a more public way. Not only would all students be privy to any comment or interaction that might otherwise only be heard by a limited number of students or be between an instructor and a librarian, but also faculty and instructors could see the discussions happening among students in the comments. It would also allow librarians to be part of ongoing interactions within a class, helping guide students to alternate sources or aiding in the evaluation of what is shared.

Another feature that offers many possibilities is the ability to create group boards. The possibility of having a group board that has librarians and faculty as contributors could have great potential in terms of collaboration for creating and sharing resources. This can, of course, also be done specifically by an instructor. An example of this is the board created by the FILM240 students of Sidneyeve Matrix at Queen's University, "[FILM240 Digital Media Trends](#)". With this board, the instructor created a collaborative space for her students to share articles and comment on them, creating a publicly accessible collection of relevant articles that can contribute to the wider conversation about digital media trends. As an assignment tool, it is reminiscent of collages and display posters but with significantly more depth and immediacy. A visual board can be used to link content together, and the short description can be used to highlight the links. Students are able to learn about presentation (selecting an appropriate image, organizing information into boards, creating thoughtful comments) while they are also curating information and presenting an argument. These resources can also be useful for building something to be shared with a wider audience than just the class. This sharing with those beyond the class provides a chance for students to contribute more than just a paper to fulfill the requirements of an assignment; rather, they are actually adding to conversations and sharing information with anyone who might happen across their board.

This is an engaging way for students to participate in peer instruction by sharing easily with their colleagues. It would also facilitate a conversation as opposed to all information coming from the instructor. There would still be the option for moderating content, but it also opens up a new space for discussion and exploration. The possibility of adding a librarian to a group board would be another way to help students understand how to gather and organize information. It could also be a way for students to access the knowledge and skills of librarians in a way that may be less intimidating to them than making a formal face-to-face appointment.

Learnist

Pinterest has also inspired other social media sites. Most notable in terms of teaching is [Learnist](#). It is specifically geared toward education with the aim of allowing the creation

of boards on topics with which the user is familiar. It allows others to access those boards and mark which items they have "learned." It is currently in beta, and users must request an invitation. It also allows the option for Facebook integration, which means additional sharing outside the limits of the Learnist site. The ability to mark items as "learned" suggests some potential for tracking what has been accessed and read, although it is not possible to determine if an item was actually read or just marked off.

Pinterest and Learnist are intriguing forms of social media still in their early stages. It is hard to predict the impact of future changes on their use within educational settings. The fact that the user base is growing and more educators are experimenting suggests that they have clear potential. It also indicates that there is a lot of room for users to influence future developments.

Conclusion

Our pilot account has determined that Pinterest has been a useful tool. As of October, 2012 we are now using Pinterest primarily to alert patrons to new book purchases, upcoming events, and for displaying interesting content from the Archives. The "What Are You Reading" board has had consistent activity and participation, proving to be a valuable community and outreach tool — especially through the interaction in the comments on the pins. Our "New Books" board became so popular as a way of notifying patrons of additions to the collection that we have since divided it into separate boards for major subject areas.

Although the Library has established a Pinterest presence, we consider our account to be a work in progress. Word-of-mouth feedback has been positive, and the account is continuing to attract new followers. The Library's participation in Pinterest provides a different way of sharing information and interacting with the University community. As the Pinterest user community develops, we hope to find new ways to improve users' engagement with our Pinterest account. In this vein, we currently collect statistics on usage, but in the future we plan to run a survey via our Library website to collect more qualitative data on response from patrons to our social media tools, including Pinterest.

It is impossible to know what direction Pinterest will take and whether its popularity will last. Copyright will continue to present challenges for both content creators and content users. The *Copyright Act* was recently "modernized" in part to reflect the "digital economy", yet it is nearly impossible for the law to keep pace with technological innovation, as highlighted by the dialogues that have arisen around Pinterest. Social media tools like Pinterest will continue to change, but at this time they offer useful ways for libraries to engage in outreach and education.

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