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# A year on Facebook: liking and learning

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# A Year on Facebook

## *Liking and Learning*

**Nadia Nasr, with contributions from Felicity Knox, Special Collections and Archives, Albert S. Cook Library, Towson University**

### **There was a lot to like about our First Facebook Year.**

In March 2011, Special Collections and Archives (SCA) at Towson University launched a departmental Facebook page in conjunction with a modest redesign of our webpages. Housed in the Albert S. Cook Library, SCA was established in 1970 and primarily contains records of the university that date back to its opening in January 1866 as the Maryland State Normal School. Because our webpages are relatively static and part of the library's website, Facebook is used as a storefront, if you will, for communicating dynamic and engaging content.

And there's plenty of content to choose from because our collections include photographs, student newspapers, course catalogs, and records of principals, presidents, colleges, and departments documenting the almost 150-year evolution of Towson University from a teacher training school into a full-fledged liberal arts university.

### **Engaging Our Fans**

Engagement statistics, known as Facebook Insights, are available to page administrators and are useful for discerning any observable trends. For 28 days after content is posted, Insights collects data regarding the number of unique users who saw the posts and engaged with the content by "liking" it, posting a comment about it, or re-sharing it on their own Facebook profiles. When SCA fans share our content on their profiles, we enjoy the benefit of increased visibility as well as the opportunity to reach a new audience. Insights also provides a percent value to reflect the relative "virality" of each post based on the number of times a post was shared on someone else's page.

As keepers of collective memory, we engage our audience with SCA's archival collections by making connections to generate meaningful dialogue. Facebook can be an effective tool for starting that conversation. We can measure our effectiveness using this tool if we are able to achieve what I refer to as the George Takei Standard of Engagement. Since March 2011, Takei has gained in excess of 2 million fans, many of them between 25 and 34 years old. Initially known for his role as Hikaru Sulu on the original *Star Trek* television series, fans regularly "like," comment on, and re-share his Facebook posts.

Takei engages his fans with humor when he posts funny photographs captioned with puns, which are occasionally targeted toward his *Star Trek* fan base. He also uses his Facebook page to promote respectful civic discourse about issues that are important to him, such as advocating for gay rights. He doesn't just start conversations, he also participates in them. George Takei's Facebook page engagement serves as a model to illustrate what we hoped to achieve with SCA's Facebook page.

### **What We Threw at the Wall**

In our First Facebook Year, we gained nearly one hundred fans, not including ourselves (two professional staff and a rotating pool of student labor). Admittedly some of these fans are friends and colleagues within or external to the Cook Library and Towson University. Others are current students and staff as well as recent alumni.

We created approximately 128 posts containing both planned and serendipitous content, including scans of photographs or documents, links to items of interest, and two sets of trivia questions and their

answers. For planned posts, we tried to choose photographs or information that was timely.

For example, during final exam weeks in May and December, we posted scans of exam questions from the 1870–71 course catalog and asked our fans if they thought they would be able to answer them. In August, when students were moving into their dorms, we posted a series of photographs juxtaposing images of historic and modern dorm life on campus. For homecoming, we posted a series of photographic images of homecomings past, selected from yearbooks of alumni classes who would be celebrating significant reunions.

Content for serendipitous posts ran the gamut. Posts included an interesting headline from a newly digitized student newspaper, a photograph and announcement of the receipt of a new collection, announcements that new departmental blog entries were posted, and a photograph of a beautiful woodcut from a rare book.

### **What Stuck to the Wall**

So what did our fans seem to enjoy the most?

- The most clicked-on post featured the final exam questions from 1870–71.
- The second-most clicked-on post was one containing photographs of dormitories past and present.
- A post documenting the acquisition of the cast-iron clapper used to ring the campus clock tower bell when the bell was removed for refurbishing followed in third place.

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- Finally, fourth place was an almost three-way tie among several videos highlighting life and world events that may have influenced the outlook of students during certain periods of Towson's 150-year history. (The videos were inspired by the famous "Beloit College Mindset," a list put together every year since 1998 by the Wisconsin school to reflect the worldview of entering first-year students.)

Posts they clicked on the least include those about events and the answers to our trivia questions.

### Rules to Live By

In considering our First Facebook Year, a few useful rules of thumb have effervesced amid my musings. To construct and maintain a successful Facebook page, here are some things to keep in mind.

1. **Don't be yourself!** Yes, you read that correctly. Administrators of a Facebook page have the option of posting as themselves under their personal accounts or as the administrators of the page. Insights data are collected only when administrators post as the page.

For some of our posts, I have no way of knowing how engaging the content was because I posted as myself instead of as our Facebook page.

2. **Quality vs. quantity.** In some months we posted content almost every day and in other months we posted as seldom as twice a month. Regardless of how often we posted, we found that the quality and timeliness of the content of the post seemed to be as important, if not more important, as how consistently we posted.
3. **Use the network.** SCA's Facebook page was connected to other Towson University Facebook pages, including those for the alumni association and class of 2015. We also "liked" professional Facebook pages of recognizable alumni such as *Dirty Jobs* host Mike Rowe and Elmo puppeteer Kevin Clash. By making these connections, we increase our visibility and boost our potential for engaging new fans.
4. **Prime the pump.** After posting content as a page administrator, consider sharing the post on affiliated Facebook pages, or switch back to your personal account and share your post on your own profile. This is a great way to jumpstart conversations.
5. **Automate when you can.** We have been using third-party tools such as

RSS Graffiti and Hootsuite to facilitate Facebook posting. RSS Graffiti posts to Facebook when new items are added to our digital collections and Hootsuite allows us to schedule multiple posts for planned content in advance.

### Parting Thoughts

Looking back over our First Facebook Year, it is clear that we created posts with engaging content, as evidenced by a high number of post clicks. We also succeeded in pointing users to more robust content, such as new departmental blog entries or new collection guides.

Going forward, we plan to continue creating timely and engaging content and to move beyond clicks toward meaningful dialogue about our collections via Facebook comments, and also through more traditional communication channels such as email, phone, and in-person conversations. It may be unrealistic to achieve the wild success of the "George Takei Standard of Engagement," but by shooting for this celebrity moon we may still land among the stars (\*face palm\*).

*The TU Special Collections and Archives Facebook page can be found at [www.facebook.com/tuspcoll](http://www.facebook.com/tuspcoll).* ■



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