@140 Characters: The Opportunities for 'Bottom Up' Creation Afforded by Social Media

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Introduction

It's September 1st, 2011 and I've logged onto twitter to see what's happening in the Twitterverse:

My brother stayed up all night tweeting nonstop about his beloved Canadiens.

The cheese store is offering new varieties of Brie.

A politician said something rash and is now apologizing.

Germany has invaded Poland.

What? I read it again. I pull up my 'go to' news website and scan the headlines for some confirmation that this is true. None. I re-read the tweet and think to myself how silly of Germany to try that move again. And in this time of recession you'd think they would refrain from such rash military maneuvers. I re-read the tweet once more, this time looking at the name on the twitter account: *RealTimeWWII*. Slowly but surely I begin to understand what's going on – someone in 2011 is real-time tweeting the events of World War II starting with the events of September 1st, 1939.

What a neat idea. Over the next few months as a graduate student at Carleton University I begin to explore the use of technology in the memorialization of war. Then I stumble upon a few other real time tweeting endeavours, all through workplace projects in archives and universities across the country. These projects are tweeting about events like the Halifax Explosion and the Battle of Ortona from the offices of librarians and academics. But what about private citizens? With the advent of the Internet and the popularity of social media an era of self-publishing is upon us and there are fewer and fewer censors controlling what is said in realms such as the Twitterverse.

The Internet is a gateway for sharing information whether through emails, blogs, websites or social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook. Listserves connect people from across the country in common conversation and group projects no longer have to be done in a study room at the library. The heritage community has done a fantastic job of taking advantage of these, and other, tools in order to spread the word about what's going on in the field and strengthen its ability to connect with people from all walks of life, in turn strengthening the field itself.

But what happens when the message isn't coming from a government institution or other so-called reputable source? Anyone can sign up for Twitter and tweet away to their heart's content. And what happens when users self-publish without the ability, or the motivation, to do a thorough fact check imposed either by their boss or by their conscience? So as a graduate student at Carleton University I decided to try this on for size. Could I, as a private citizen, plan a real time tweeting event, pull it off and actually get people interested? And could I do it outside of my school work?

This paper follows my quest from the moment of my inspiration, through the planning stage, the tweeting itself and, of course, and the conclusions I eventually drew as a result of my experience and the feedback I received from others. Each section will emphasize specific challenges and opportunities I confronted as well as some musings as to how I might proceed with this type of project in the future. My final conclusion sums up some of the biggest lessons learned from the project as well as a few comments on the potential impact on the messages and messengers of heritage.

@inspiration

Step one was to figure out what exactly to tweet about. My main interest is 20th century military history but upon a closer examination of the history books I realized that relatively little happens during the winter months in the history of any major international conflict that might interest those who are a part of the Twitterverse. I then turned to events in Canada and came across the fire at the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa on February 3rd, 1916. Just my luck that this year February 3rd was a Friday so this made it even more attractive. And as I, and a lot of my contacts are in Ottawa, this seemed like a natural choice.

Although the other conclusions of the project are more relevant to the challenges and opportunities facing the heritage field, it's worth noting that I did choose the subject of my project based on my own personal schedule. When we're talking about private citizens who are doing these types of projects purely on an extra curricular basis, we will pick and choose our topics based on personal preferences rather than workplace objectives or academic assignments. This has to be expected and must be recognized as a determining factor in this type of engagement.

The next hurdle was to try to connect with some of the other users who tweet historic events in real time to try to understand their motivations and any roadblocks they have faced throughout their projects. The idea being that I could then maneuver around these obstacles in my own project. This was an ongoing endeavour throughout the few months that the project spanned. Even upon a closer examination of their respective feeds it was clear that each user was doing their project slightly differently than the others. Some users would connect their tweets to a blog where a full explanation of the specific fact rather than the limited 140-character version was available. Others used photos directly in their tweets or provided links to external websites with photos and further explanation. I decided fairly early on that I would strive to contain my project to 140 characters and no fancy add-ons like photos or links. The style chosen by a private citizen versus that chosen by an organization reflects the challenges of such a project and the potential limits.

Having the opportunity to be able to do something so incredibly new and exciting was really encouraging. I would continually discuss the project with people and build various ideas into my plan and this was a great process and really indicative of the opportunity for collaboration that bottom-up creation both allows for and needs. It was also a great opportunity to try to get people to think outside the box in terms of how we share history and this was one of the biggest rewards for me throughout this process. For example, to be able to show my parents that something as new as Twitter could connect them so easily to something as old, and perhaps even forgotten, as the fire at the Parliament Buildings in 1916 was huge. The fact that they ended up 'following' the event on my dad's iPhone was even bigger news.

@gameplan

The biggest challenge throughout the entire process was undoubtedly time. As a private citizen doing this project as an extracurricular venture, time was of the essence and as February 3rd drew nearer I felt pulled in many different directions for school, work and in my personal life. This is such a realistic situation and it really influenced how I carried out the event.

For example, I decided, based on time and availability of sources, to rely on only one source for the event. As a student I know this is probably not the best way to go, but it was unrealistic to think that I could read numerous newspapers as well as other sources and decipher the 'actual' order of events and align the various stories of those involved. Using one source simplified in the project but it also constrained it and I would definitely carry out my research differently in the future if I were to embark on this sort of project again.

This was also a great opportunity to learn more about how to engage with those already in the Twitterverse. Although I may be labeled by others as part of the 'twitter' generation my first experience with social media was through Facebook and it will, for the foreseeable future, be the social media outlet that I understand best

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and rely on most. Learning the content was not the only hurdle for the event as there are different ways to engage with people through Twitter and it's important to understand them to succeed. For example, through the use of hashtags I was able to connect my tweets about the fire at Parliament to other stories about Ottawa. The above explanation of the different styles of existing or past real time tweeting projects also proved to potentially push me in different directions from the usual 140-character limit.

@thenightof

The main challenge of carrying out the event was, much to my embarrassment, my ability to stay up until almost 2 in the morning. Having my fiancé sit up with me certainly helped but it is very easy to understand how someone carrying out this type of project by themselves without any work or academic motivation might have given up when the clock struck eleven. As it was, I went to bed before the fire was completely extinguished.

Connecting people with Twitter was also a bigger challenge than I anticipated. I had included instructions on signing up for a Twitter account as well as instructions on finding the proper account to follow. For those already on Twitter this didn't seem to be an issue and numerous friends and contacts as well as others I did not personally know were following me within hours of the promotional email having been sent. For those not already tweeting this was a bit harder and it took time and patience to guide people through the steps. As someone who was not, and is still not, a daily user of Twitter I hadn't realized how many people weren't connected with the medium and this was a really interesting realization. I also realized that many of my peers, whom I consider to be of the 'Facebook' generation, have private twitter feeds so that only people they approve may follow them.

Perhaps the biggest 'academic' challenge I encountered on February 3rd, 2012 after 20h30 was the issue of dead space. The project was sitting on a fence between entertainment and historical fact and I had branded it that way through email and promotional tweets. As my fiancé so kindly pointed out, an hour between

tweets after 21h30 probably wasn't a good idea. So we made up a few tweets about the weather and the crowds of people drawn to the hill by the burning building. This wasn't difficult, it was actually easier than writing tweets that were historically accurate, but it felt wrong. This goes to show that inserting non-sourced information or facts into one's real time tweeting event can make for a 'better' show, but it may not make for the most accurate representation of an actual event. This is where the goals of the creator will come into play and influence the outcome.

A similar issue had come up during the planning stages but was most evident in the actual tweeting. This was the issue of approximating what time certain events had taken place. For example, two Members of Parliament were in the men's bathroom when the fire broke out. Based solely on the one source, we don't know what time they went in or any other details except for what transpired after 20h37 when the fire began. I supposed that they had entered around 20h33 or 20h34. This is different than simply filling dead space, as it is somewhat informed approximating but it is still not confirmed as to when the actions actually happened. And as my father so cheekily pointed out – *just what were they doing in the bathroom together in the first place?*

Of the facts-turned-tweets of the evening, the two facts most often debated among sources, were the time that the fire broke out and the time that the Victoria Tower fell to the ground. As I decided to rely on one source rather than multiple sources it was easy to 'ignore' the various interpretations of what happened when. That said, it nagged at me the entire time and it felt wrong picking and choosing what worked best for my type-A brain.

@engagement

It's all well and fine to prepare this kind of project and sit up until two in the morning tweeting with friends and food by your side, but if no one is out there following you, no pun intended, then what's the point? One of my biggest challenges in drawing conclusions from my project is that I didn't ask for any specific feedback. In explaining my motives I hoped that some followers might respond after having read the tweets but most comments were limited to 'it was cool' or 'I didn't know that.' Although this

was somewhat disappointing there were signs that people had stayed awake on Friday February 3rd and had connected with my project in some way.

Throughout the evening there were several retweets – the repeating of a post by another user on their own account – but most were from users I had already connected with – either in person or online. I didn't want to push people to respond, as part of the project was to gauge the organic response. It was heartening though in the days prior to and following the event, to have new followers on Twitter – ranging from people I knew personally to people I've never met and organizations of which I'm not a part.

The challenge here is that for a private citizen there is perhaps no better reward for a job well done than a few retweets, some new followers and hopefully some specific comments from readers. I was really hoping to get a few comments challenging the facts I had shared through my project – which would have given me once again the opportunity to explain my project and its limits. I received no such comments except for one on style from my father who felt as though a more journalistic approach may have made a difference in how the story was read. Duly noted.

Overall, feedback was largely non-existent and definitely unorganized, especially when compared to similar projects in workplaces or academic settings where the tweets might be followed closely by colleagues or as a part of a student's homework. To this end I may call on my mother's grade nine social studies class in Nova Scotia the next time I do a tweeting project like this one. I wonder if her students might be more motivated to do their homework if it involved going on Twitter. I'll keep you posted on that one.

There are always opportunities for engagement, and when using a medium like Twitter it can be impossible to tell just how many users read which posts as this is not recorded for me as the messenger. This is one of the challenges with Twitter that in a way is also an opportunity. There is a brand of Twitter user who does not 'follow' or 'retweet' but who instead reads and leaves no mark of their own. This would be what I've recently been introduced to as the

difference between audience and participation. We can know our audience, but not always our participants and for the sake of the later we have to keep on tweeting in the hopes that someday they may click the 'follow' button.

@messagesmessengers

In conclusion, I must admit that perhaps not all messages are best spread through the 'most popular' means of communication. This of course depends on the goals of one's message and the audience and/or participants that one endeavours to reach. Although I, as a young emerging professional in the heritage conservation field, recognize the importance of sharing our messages through as many media as possible, it's also important to remember that our message needs to get to our audience and we can't ignore them in favour of potential participants.

In terms of messengers, and in particular private citizens as messengers, in order to do this sort of project we need to be given every level of support possible within our households or communities to do such projects with a measure of success. Although my project was based largely on printed facts that I could consult without speaking to anyone else, other messengers may choose to include oral testimony. Imagine a real time tweeting project done by a private citizen based only on oral testimony! That would certainly be one to sit up and pay attention to. Bottom up creation is so strong and needs continued support and recognition from those at 'the top' to continue and flourish.

In terms of how to tackle a project like this again, numerous conclusions have been drawn throughout the paper but among the most important to this messenger in particular would be the ability to consult a wider range of sources and to have more time to devote to the project as a whole. In addition, learning more about how to use Twitter and how people interact with the medium would be really interesting and help the project. I would also really like to be able to tweet about an event that is not over the course of several hours but instead over several days with lead and follow up included. The potential for attracting a wider audience and in turn more feedback also attracts me to this format.