

Getting Acquainted with Social Networks and Apps: Snapchat and the Rise of Ephemeral Communication

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Getting Acquainted with Social Networks and Apps:

Snapchat and the Rise of Ephemeral Communication

Ephemera. The traditional library image that comes to mind upon hearing this word is of vertical files filled with newspaper clippings, photos, brochures, flyers on a popular topic or event. The modern image of ephemera however is now more nuanced and complex as the increased creation of digital ephemera provides opportunities and challenges for libraries and archives. There now need to be considerations for dealing with digital materials and artifacts that are short-lived and temporary. These digital ephemera are increasing every day; with a presence in the world that is anything but temporary. Social media sites churn out digital content at an extraordinary pace, making it difficult to capture or quantify. In 2010, The Library of Congress announced that it would be digitally archiving every public tweet since Twitter's inception in March 2006 (Raymond, 2010). As of 2013, they had archived 170 billion tweets and were receiving nearly a half billion tweets a day (Allen, 2013). However, the magnitude of the project is being grappled with and currently the project appears to be in limbo (Scola, 2015). That is just one example of the difficulty in archiving social media's digital content. The importance of digital ephemera is acknowledged, but its collection unwieldy and this is with regards to social media content that remains once it has been sent such as public Twitter, Facebook and Instagram posts.

A new set of social applications have emerged that create ephemeral content from the start, content that can only be viewed for a specific amount of time or a specific number of times. These applications allow easy and at times anonymous sharing of text, photos and videos that "disappear" once they have been read or viewed. There are ways to capture and save this content, but that is not usually the intent of the platform. The popularity of these applications is

increasing and the marketing world is noticing as is evidenced by a number of blog posts and articles addressing the growth of ephemeral marketing and Snapchat. Libraries should be aware of these applications in order to understand how patrons are using them, and explore the possibilities of leveraging these applications for outreach and marketing.

One of the most well-known and fastest growing methods of ephemeral communication is the mobile application, or mobile app, Snapchat. According to Piwek and Joinson “the rise in Snapchat use has been one of the most rapid and unprecedented in the history of instant messaging services and social networking sites” (2016: p.358). Snapchat was created in 2011 by two Stanford undergraduate students, Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy, (Colao, 2014) now in their mid-twenties, who currently serve as the CEO and CTO respectively. A third co-founder, Reggie Brown, was locked in a legal battle with Spiegel and Murphy regarding his part in the application’s creation (Shontell, 2014). Spiegel and Murphy made headlines and possibly history when they refused a \$3 billion dollar cash offer from Facebook for the purchase of Snapchat (Rusli and MacMillan, 2013). The company, now valued at over 19 billion (Nusca, 2015) continues to grow at a fast rate and has recently been dealing with several executive departures and a young CEO who has been described as a contrarian (Carr, 2015).

Snapchat was quickly embraced by teenagers seeking their own place to communicate in a more genuine way than afforded on other social media platforms. In its earliest incarnation Snapchat provided a means of sending text messages and photos (snaps) directly to friends. These snaps “disappear” after a specific number of seconds (maximum of 10) as specified by the sender. While the true disappearance of these texts and photos is not as complete as some believed, the ephemeral nature of Snapchat enticed teenagers away from other social media platforms and applications, providing them a means to communicate away from the prying eyes

of parents. Early on, Snapchat garnered a reputation of being a platform for teens to send illicit messages with sexual content and risqué pictures of themselves, an activity often labeled “sexting”. As its popularity grew, Snapchat came under scrutiny as to its claims that the pictures truly disappeared when in fact the snaps could be saved via third party applications and were being saved to a device’s memory outside the confines of the application. In May 2014, Snapchat settled charges with the FTC in regards to the misrepresentation of the ephemeral nature of the snaps as well as charges regarding its data collection practices (Young, 2014 and Federal Trade Commission, 2014). Along with the FTC charges, Snapchat dealt publically with two hacking events, one in January 2014 that involved the release of usernames and partial phones numbers (Gross, 2014) and another in October 2014 which leaked thousands of personal photos online through a third party application (Smith, 2014). Despite these public exposures of privacy and security flaws, the application has continued to thrive. Snapchat grows its product at an accelerated rate, continuously introducing new features and elements that expand beyond its perceived use of mainly flirtatious texts by 14 year olds behind their parents back. These new features have caught the attention of media and marketers looking to target Snapchat’s important demographic of 13-17 year olds.

These new features also make Snapchat an intriguing application for libraries and librarians. In October 2013 Snapchat announced Snapchat Stories (Snapchat, 2013), which are a way to compile individual snaps into a narrative that can be viewed multiple times during a 24 hour period. These Snapchat Stories were a game changer for businesses and organizations that were looking for a way to use Snapchat’s potential. Previous to the Snapchat Stories update, snaps could only be viewed once for a maximum of 10 seconds and could only be shared directly with friends. Snapchat Stories opened up the opportunities for sharing with everyone and

creating a longer narrative that could be viewed more than once. In July 2014, Snapchat released Our Story (Snapchat, 2014a) which compiles snaps from users, media outlets and Snapchat staff to create stories about specific events. These stories provide a raw, unedited first person experience for music festivals, sporting, news and political events and cultural celebrations. Spotlights on specific cities place Snapchat viewers into a “day in the life” of places like Oslo, Madrid, and Prague just to name a few.

Most recently, in January 2015, a new feature, Discover was released.

Discover is described in the official announcement as a “collaboration with world-class leaders in media to build a storytelling format that puts the narrative first” (Snapchat, 2015). The announcement on the Snapchat official blog specifically notes that “this is not social media” because “social media companies tell us what to read based on what’s most recent or most popular....we count on editors and artists...to determine what is important”. Through Discover, Snapchat has partnered with a variety of media outlets to feature content in a Snapchat-like format that appeals to the target audience. The content, like all Snapchat stories only lasts for 24 hours and appears in multiple segments that each last less than a minute. This feature opened Snapchat up to marketing opportunities and more importantly, monetization, something that social media sites often struggle with.

These opportunities and partnerships for monetization have prompted Adweek to call 2015 the year of Snapchat (Heine, 2015). The article notes that in the last few months of this year Snapchat has become “a media and marketing force to be reckoned with” as it partners with brands such as the NFL, Burberry and Goldman Sachs, making it the “go-to place for millennial marketing”. On the website, snapchat.com, in the advertising overview and FAQ, Snapchat claims to be the best way to reach 13-34 year-olds and a report from its internal data states that

there are nearly 100 million daily active Snapchatters. Outside reports estimate that there could be closer to 200 million active users (Shontell, 2015). According to comScore, a digital media analytics company, Snapchat boasts a 76% percent concentration of millennials (ages 18-34) with nearly three in every five 18-24 year old using Snapchat on their smartphones each month. (comScore, 2015: p. 45-46). The Pew Research Center reports that Snapchat is the third most popular social media platform for teens (13-17) behind Facebook and Instagram (Lenhart, 2015).

Snapchat is not highly user friendly or intuitive at first glance. There is a fairly large learning curve, especially for those outside of the target demographic or unfamiliar with a minimalist approach to social applications. The main website, snapchat.com is even less intuitive than their app, but does provide detailed instructions on its use as well as announcements of new features. Instructions from the official blog regarding new features suggest that playing with it is the best way to understand it and help within the application is non-existent. However, as the blog instructs, playing with it does help in understanding it, and after some time spent clicking on icons, swiping and holding the screen, a user will be able to successfully create and send snaps and stories. A quick google search on a problem or question reveals detailed instructions and concise answers in most cases.

Snapchat only runs as a mobile application, either IOS or Android, which can be downloaded from Apple App Store or Google Play. Installation of the app does require a phone number. This alone can be a deterrent to organizational use with individuals hesitant to tie the account to their own cell phone numbers or a lack of organizational specific mobile devices. The author used a Google Voice number that had previously been set up for work related communication to create the library's Snapchat account. Setting up an individual account rather than an organizational account will still provide users with a place to explore and, at minimum,

view the Live Stories and Discover to better understand the application's allure and how organizations such as CNN and the Huffington post are targeting the demographic.

Once installed, be prepared for a very minimalist, and, at times confusing experience. The main snapchat screen immediately throws the user into camera mode. Pressing the large button will take a picture, holding the button will record video. A zig zag icon in the upper left turns the camera flash on or off and the camera icon in the upper right turns the camera to and from selfie mode. A small ghost icon appears in the center. Clicking on this brings up a user's profile page. Here the user can change settings, view trophies, add friends, view friends and see who has recently added them as a friend. Settings include the standard profile information such as username, mobile number, email, password, notifications and privacy settings. The privacy settings allow a user to determine who can send those snaps and who can view their Stories. The options are friends or everyone. Trophies are earned for different actions such as sending a video snap or sending a snap with the temperature when the temperature is over 100 degrees. Friends can be added by username, from the phone's address book, by locating people nearby or by Snapcode. The Snapcode is the ghost icon that appears on this screen, holding one's own phone over a photo of another Snapcode will automatically add the friend. While this seems to be intended to make it easier, it does seem more time consuming to have to take the picture and add it than just adding by username. A recent trend of companies using Snapcodes as profile pictures on Facebook and Twitter demonstrates how Snapcodes are being used to promote a presence on Snapchat. Swiping up from the profile screen brings the user back to the main screen.

Looking at the main screen, on the left and right side of the action button in the lower corners are two squares. The square on the right will either be three vertical lines or a colored square with a number in it. The number indicates the number of new stories waiting to be

viewed. The square on the left will fill in with a color and number when individual snaps are received from friends. Clicking on the number on the left or swiping right brings the user to a page to view the snap that is being received as well as indicators of snaps that have been sent. A new snap appears with a square, sent snaps appear with a triangle. The shapes are filled in if the snap is unread and become outlines when read. If a user takes a screenshot of a snap, a star appears to alert the sender. Double tapping on a snap allows a reply, swiping right brings up the chat functionality. Search functionality allows one to look for snaps by username and the option to simply chat is available on this screen. Swiping left returns to the main screen.

Clicking on the right hand box, whether it is the vertical lines or a number brings the user to the Stories page. Here one will find all the stories shared by their friends along with the Discover channels and any Live Stories being broadcast, usually a global event such as political debates, sporting events, cultural celebrations etc. Also on this page is one's own story, or My Story, that is created by combining individual snaps. Holding down on the My Story circle will start the story. Once the story is started there is no way to end it without watching it all the way through, though it can be sped up by clicking on the individual snaps. Stories from friends appear in a disappearing pie chart indicating how much longer of the 24 hour period the story will be available. Another swipe right or clicking on the globe in the upper right reveals all of the Discover partners, as only a few show on the first story screen. A magnifying glass in the upper right provides a search function for adding user names.

Taking a snap involves either clicking the action button for a picture or holding it down for a video. Once the picture or video is taken, several options appear on the screen and with swiping. Swiping either way brings in filters for enhancing the snap. These filters include a timestamp, a temperature stamp, oddly, a miles per hour stamp, different color filters and geo-

locational information and graphics. The upper right corner presents three icons for further editing the snap. The first icon allows a user to add emoji's, the second one presents a text box that can be sized by double tapping and the third one is a drawing application. Snapchat often releases new features that are only found through discovery or word of mouth. The most recent feature is activated when holding one's face while in selfie mode; a group of facial filters appears allowing users to further manipulate their image. Once any edits to the snap have been made, the user must determine how the snap should last. A clock icon in the lower left hand side of the screen presents choices from 1-10 seconds. The down arrow icon next to the clock will save the snap to your photo gallery. A box with a plus sign can be pressed to add the snap to My Story and a right arrow icon is for sending the snap, presenting a list of usernames to receive the snap. My story is also included in the list of options, so there is an additional option for sending the snap to a story.

My Story, as mentioned previously was a true game changer in the usefulness of Snapchat for organizations such as libraries. Before Stories, communicating was limited to a group of friends and required a reciprocal one to one relationship, not always practical or even advisable for libraries and librarians. The appearance of Stories now provides organizations with the ability to create and broadcast their stories to everyone, making it another option for marketing and outreach. Creation of a story is as simple as sending multiple snaps to one place in order to create a narrative that is available to viewers for 24 hours. Clicking on one's My Story and swiping up provides information on who has seen the story and whether screenshots of the story have been taken. snaps can easily be removed from a story, but the sequence of snaps cannot be changed. My Story can be saved to the gallery, which saves it to the device for use on other applications. With this feature and newer features being announced every day, the original

ephemeral, one-to-one communication of Snapchat has grown into a tool for more robust storytelling and outreach.

New features and updates to Snapchat appear at an astonishing rate. During the last few days that this was column being written, the selfie-filters were released and Snapchat announced the upcoming release of a feature that allows for video manipulation. This announcement by TechCrunch points out that “with a business model focused around ads, Snapchat has to keep people coming back to watch as much content as possible” (Constine, 2015).

So why should libraries consider taking advantage of an application where the users keep coming back? There are a number of reasons to at least be aware of this new breed of ephemeral applications. Snapchat may be the fastest growing and most popular but it is not the only one. Applications such as YikYak, Wickr, Glimpse and many more appeal to those wishing to use social media in the present and not be tied to a past timeline and in some cases an identity. Ephemeral communication is on the rise and it is important to understand its uses and applications.

At this time there does not appear to be many libraries using Snapchat, though discovery of users is difficult with Snapchat. Unlike with social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr etc., one cannot search on hashtags or keyword search usernames in order to identify library users. There are a few lists of Snapchat users available; the most comprehensive of these was compiled by Chris Snider, an assistant professor of multimedia at Drake University in Des Moines, IA (Snider, 2015). The list includes brands, celebrities, sports teams, media organizations and Universities using Snapchat. An informal poll on Facebook groups of librarians interested in social media and outreach reveal that few have taken the plunge into their own Snapchat, but the Roesch Library at the University of Dayton did take over their

Universities Snapchat for a day during National Library Week (roeschlibrary, 2015). In an article addressing Snapchat use for universities, Joly notes that Snapchat “has the makings of a useful social media tool for higher ed” and provides examples of universities who are currently using SnapChat to engage with students which are: University of Houston, University of New Hampshire, University of Michigan, Miami University, West Virginia University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Eastern Kentucky University (Joly, 2015).

Snapchat also recognizes that college students are heavy users of their app and in October 2014 introduced “Our Campus Story” (Snapchat, 2014b). This feature is available to select campuses at select times. Users who have turned on their location services on a campus who is being featured on the Campus Stories will be able to post to and view that story. The support page (<https://support.snapchat.com/a/campus-story>) describes Campus Stories as a “special place to share and see what is happening on your campus”. College and University Libraries can use these stories to see if students are posting about libraries and just get a general feel for what the students are sharing while they create their Campus Story. Brian Mathews, Associate Dean for Learning & Outreach at Virginia Tech provides a great example of how Snapchat is being used on campus, with several Snapchat Stories featured in his photo essay on digital ephemera during finals (Mathews, 2015).

Marketing and outreach via social media can often be described as a form of digital storytelling, weaving together the organization’s narrative in order to connect with buyers and users. Snapchat provides a way to connect with users in a unique and genuine way which demands their complete attention, if only for a few seconds. Libraries can consider adding Snapchat to their outreach plan in order to tell their story and connect with the patrons who are familiar with the platform. The supposed ephemeral nature of the content should not be a

deterrent as the images and videos can be saved and even used on other forms of social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr. Like any social media platform, Snapchat requires time and effort and, due to the daily added features and large learning curve, it requires some commitment. Also, as with other social media outreach, it is challenging to assess the success and return on the commitment. What is evident is that the 13-17 demographic is using it and appears undeterred by the marketing strategies being used. Whether they will be receptive to organizational use is still undetermined and the only way to find out is for libraries to make their presence on Snapchat known. The best way to understand Snapchat really is to use it, so go ahead, download the app, create a user and start telling your library's story. You can see the author's library's stories by adding robesonlibrary as your friend and as Team Snapchat would say, "Happy Snapping!"

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