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Social Media

Something Old, Something New: Engaging People in Making History with Twitter

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Abstract

In a world where communication has changed dramatically and where social media channels have been dominating our lives for a few years now, educational and research institutions are increasingly making use of these social media tools in education, teaching and research activities. The paper describes a few projects dedicated to major historical events like World War One, which are using *Twitter* as a broadcasting, teaching and engaging medium.

Keywords: *Twitter, social media use in history, digital historical resources, community engagement*

Introduction

The world is moving faster every day and everyone has to establish priorities for the daily life and get the most out of the time spent for various activities. Internet users are trying to avoid many times what doesn’t produce gratification in a few seconds, because time is now very precious.

Consequently, the way we communicate with each other has changed profoundly, with social media feeds dominating our lives for a few years now.

It is a fact that social media is now simply a part of our life so that everything important to communicate to other people usually finds its way through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or other social media channels.

Less used than Facebook, WhatsApp or other social media platforms by the general public (considering the users' number), **Twitter** is instead increasingly used in the last years by institutions, researchers, teachers and all kind of communities to disseminate their projects, activities or research results.

Using *Twitter* in education, research and dissemination activities

Created in March 2006 and launched in July 2006 (with the Hashtags' debut in August 2007). **Twitter** is a microblogging service that allows users to post messages (tweets) of up to 140 characters and broadcast those messages immediately on the Web. These messages can include links to blogs, web pages, images, videos and all other material online.

With 314 million monthly active users, 500 million Tweets sent every day and a total of 1.3 billion accounts created by September 2016, **Twitter** is rated as an important player in the social media landscape.

Almost all of the National libraries, museums or other important cultural, educational and academic institutions worldwide have a Twitter account which pleads for its importance for such big institutions.

Even though it is used by institutions mainly as a quick broadcasting medium to communicate the most important events, developments or news related to their' main activity or to promote some services, Twitter is increasingly used in education, research and impact activities .

For instance, a lot of recent studies emphasise the benefits of using Twitter in educational activities, as it promotes active participation, it is engaging and interactive, a good tool to communicate and share ideas, it is innovative and an interesting learning method. Live feeds also make participation dynamic and simultaneous and enhance classroom interaction virtually. (1)

That is why, at the present time a lot of high schools and universities worldwide have developed educational and teaching programs in the field of history for example, which make use of the students' history knowledges, digital literacy skills and imagination to explore famous people and events from the past involving also the Twitter service.

History engages people easily as, Raphael Samuel was observing even from early 1990's, "history is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism contends, a historian's invention. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands". (2)

So that, in the last years, reenacting important Historical events in innovative ways and engaging students and community with their history, proved to have built very succesful projects.

Tweeting WWI and other Historical events

The question from where many Twitter projects started lately was: *What if Twitter had existed in the past?*

How is to imagine soldiers tweeting 100 years ago about their trench lives, or journalists describing the battles in Ypres or Somme in 140 signs. Or a whole peace negotiation put into two lines...

Such experiences are already in place and that is what, for instance @realtimeWW1 is doing: offering a *tweeted image* of the World War One times and events using historical photos, documents, stories and facts.

The main idea behind @RealTimeWW1 (3), a project developed by students of the Masters in European Contemporary History at the University of Luxembourg, is to offer its followers an impression of how people perceived the everyday life of war exactly 100 years ago.

Inspired by Allwin Collinson's project @RealttimeWWII (4), students created the account in 2013 as part of their Digital Humanities class and are determined to feed it with relevant images and stories by 2018 in an attempt to build a multifaceted image of WWI times.

As in the more famous *Europeana1914-1918* (5) project a certain focus is settled on individual stories and experiences that depict the WWI big image from the "people's" point of view : soldiers and nurses, prisoners but also queens, artists, teachers, children or other simply folks.

Personal diaries, letters, photos, poems and drawings are used to describe the everyday life of the people, no matter which side their' governments fought for in that war.

Official documents are also taken into consideration as many reliable sources are available now via World Wide Web.

Everyday tweets offer links to reliable source documents and also links to the Master's own homepage where more information on certain personalities and events can be found.

Of course, it is impossible to cover all the major events that happened everywhere in the world during WWI time. The limitative Twitter format does not allow also deep analysis, interpretations or contextualization. But the main aim of the project was to draw attention to some events, to attract the interest of large audiences on the topic, one with a huge importance in the context of marking the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War. In this sense, the project offered a balanced representation of fronts, countries, groups of people and a mixture of life aspects: military, economical political, cultural, medical, religious a.s.o.

In the everyday tweets one can find images from the trenches, short describing of



Fig. 1. Fights between Romanian Troops and Bulgarian Cavalry, Dobrudja

some battles, reports on living expenses, medical advices, a weeks' menu schedule for New Yorkers, some diary pages of Queen Marie of Romania, newspaper pages and all kind of other aspects reflecting the everyday life of the people in WWI times.

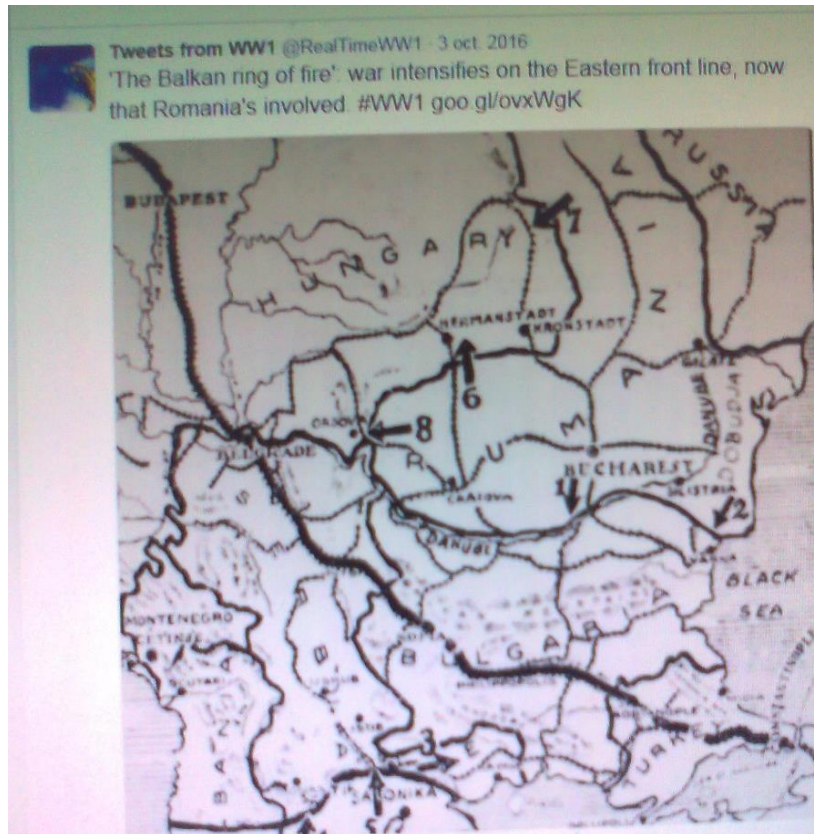


Fig. 2. The Balkan Ring of Fire on the Eastern Front

Using multilingual source documents (English, French, German, Luxembourgish, Spanish, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian, Romanian, Greek, Italian) in the tweets was possible due to different national backgrounds of the students involved in the project, adding in this way extra value to it.

With more than 4000 tweets, 11 800 followers and 547 likes towards the end of 2016, one can say that @realtimeWW1 is a very succesful project, reaching a wide audience as it has been planned when it started.

A huge number of WWI related projects on Twitter

The interest in World War One topic is huge, with more than 531 Twitter accounts related to this subject indicated only on Christoph Hilgert's List (6).

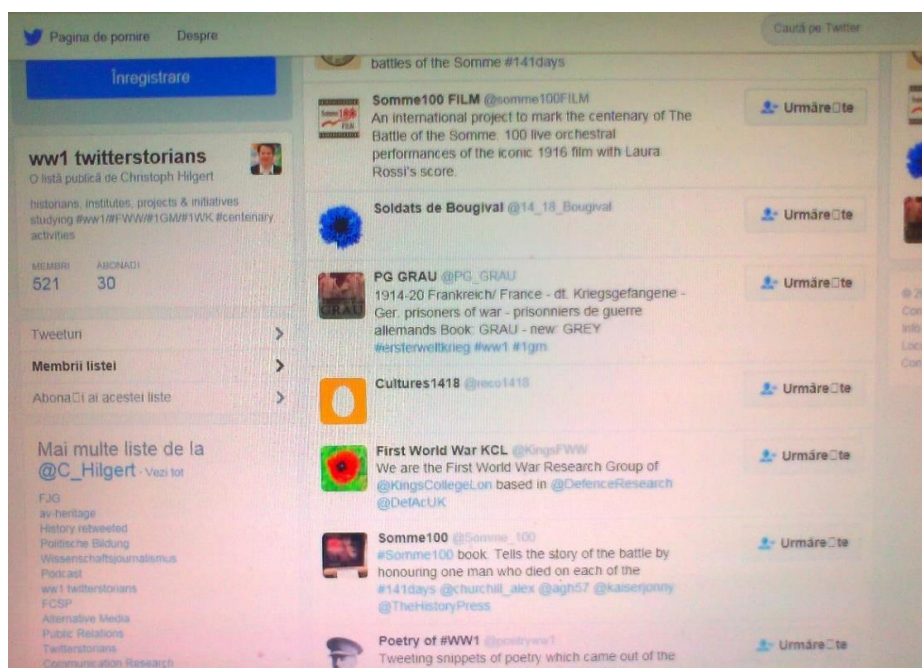


Fig. 3. A few WWI related Twitter Accounts on Christoph Hilgert's List

Among them one can find projects developed by famous institutions and associations (like Europeana, Imperial War Museum, Kings College London, Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon, Bundes -Archiv Deutschland, University of Birmingham etc.) but also projects developed by small associations or private persons around some battles, some persons or some particular activities (History of Worcester Regiment, The Aisne Battles, Somme 100, The Gallipoli Diary of an Australian soldier, Poetry of WWI etc).

An interesting project, developed also by the students of the Masters in European Contemporary History at the University of Luxembourg is the *Twitted Diary and correspondence of Queen Maria of Romania* (7), where some interesting letters addressed to her cousin, The Russian Tsar Nicholas II can be found.

The Twitter account associated with the major project *Europeana1914-1918* (@Europeana1914) (8) is also a remarkable one, considering that *Europeana 1914-1918* is one of the biggest digital archive in the world dedicated to World War One.

As I collaborated occasionally with feeds at the maintaining of this account I have noticed the interest of the users (some of them took part in the Romanian E14-18 campaigns) users who asked for clarifications, posted additional information, made comparisons with the actual situation or even some corrections.

Conclusions

Such projects related to WWI using Twitter as a broadcasting medium and tool, proved to be extremely interesting for the public, engaging diverse communities with their history.

Using Twitter format in such projects is an asset as it obliges students or the project's initiators to focus on the most important aspects of the events, to find the quintessence of the facts and to be able to illustrate them in the most adequate way.

Usually, the presence of big, suggestive photos, pictures and multimedia items draws the users' attention from the first sight.

On the other hand, Twitter's accessibility, brevity and immediacy are very attractive to the people, especially to non-academics.

Historians find also very quickly relevant documentary resources or links to such reliable informational resources.

Considering the benefits of using this social media channel, libraries and other knowledge institutions as well as universities, being important social hubs of the community should consider more and more using Twitter in their' projects and activities.

Because, after all, everything is about *building communities* around an important idea, project or (research) activity, it is about *networking* and *engaging people*.

And Twitter helps a lot in doing this in the most appropriate way for our times, because "*it gives everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers.*" (9)

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