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PIN-POINTING COMMUNITIES: THE NSW STATE LIBRARY'S INNOVATION PROJECT

The Innovation Project at the State Library of NSW pilots use of specific social media tools to deliver library services, promote collections, and engage with online communities. The SLNSW already has accounts with Facebook, Twitter, Flickr Commons, and Vimeo, but this project aims to experiment with other social media tools and explore their potential.

The project takes a 'launch to learn' approach. Working groups are formed with a range of staff members from across the library. They look at how others use the tools and research best practice. Group members are given training and support, including online engagement and risk management. Copyright and brand management are frequent subjects at working group meetings. Critically, working group members are also given time to explore and permission to be creative. The results have been surprising and extraordinary – and it's not over yet!

The Historypin working group formed in August 2012. Developed by We Are What We Do in partnership with Google, Historypin brings together history enthusiasts across the globe. Users 'pin' historic images to the world map, create tours and collections of those images, and take photos ("repeats") based on historic images to show the 'then' and 'now'.

Historypin users may be a relatively small community in Australia, but usage is growing. Historypin's global community and English origins had a practical impact for the working group, as images pinned late in the day (Australian time) seem more likely to be chosen as "pin of the day" and promoted by Historypin.

We learned through this working group that the engagement we found looked different to what we had first anticipated. We expected to get comments ("stories"), but found instead that engagement came in the form of views (over 14 000 at the end of January and still growing, even though the working group is no longer active). It seems stories are not commonly contributed across Historypin as a whole.

The working group reached out to the NSW Public Library network, with an enthusiatic response as public libraries and hospital libraries posted historical images of local hospitals and medical staff. Historypin proved to be a wonderful way for the SLNSW to showcase its collection of historic images. The group was encouraged to be creative and think laterally about selecting content and themes, such as an image pinned to Macquarie Island in Antarctica, and images assembled into tours of Sydney's historic theatres and pubs.

The second working group started in October 2012, using Pinterest. Pinterest is an online pinboard, allowing users to collect ("pin") images, and copy content from other users ("repin") onto their boards. Pinterest is a significantly larger community than Historypin and is growing rapidly, with over 600 000 Australian users in November 2012.

This community's size makes the library only one of several million voices. It is a global community, with its largest user base in the United States. Pinterest appeals to broad markets. Beyond the stereotypical images of weddings, renovations, and food are an abundance of niche communities interested in a broad range of topics from book art to buildings, desks to Downton Abbey.

This range allowed our working group to be creative and come up with different ways to use Pinterest. As well as boards of images from our collections, we designed boards showing research tools and guides available on our website and other sources, brought together fan photos taken by clients of our spaces, and made reading lists of books in NSW and those shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary and History Awards.

We found communities ready to engage with us – but what did that mean? We found that engagement on Pinterest primarily means repinning – followers and non-followers alike, repinning images pinned by us onto their own boards. Even after we stopped actively pinning images, repins and other engagement continued to increase. This is a different sort of community engagement, where users want to follow our content, but also curate their own collections (pulling together content from a vast array of sources). They do this independently of the meaning and construct we had applied.

Through the NSW State Library's Innovation Project we learned many things about online engagement. The world of online social media is an ever-changing space – there are always new tools and new communities to reach. These communities aren't necessarily who we think they are, and they don't always want to interact with library collections and services the way we expect. Our online communities are disparate and sometimes elusive, but through tools like Historypin and Pinterest we know they are there and they are engaging.

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Historypin: www.historypin.com/channels/view/id/11686538/