

“140 Characters in Search of an Author, or All A-twitter in the NU Archives.”

Nearly a year after the Northwestern University Archives established a Twitter feed, we conclude that this new venture into social media has been less successful than expected in achieving interactivity with its audience. However, twitter.com/NUArchives is definitely a success story in terms of outreach and exposure: as of August 26, with 348 tweets, NU Archives “followed” 295 twitter feeds and had 483 followers. This despite the fact that the Archives set two unique limitations on this project: first, its targeted audience—those whose feeds it follows, and thus most of those who follow it—is limited to Northwestern student and alumni groups, and administrative and academic units. Second, its content is limited to a daily “On This Day in NU History” item (repurposed from a defunct blog). These tweets cover a range of Northwestern-centric events and factoids that appeal to many different affiliations and interests within the NU community, and often include links to the Archives’ online finding aids, virtual exhibits, and Facebook page. And entries are posted on the Archives’ home page so they can be read by people without Twitter feeds. Unfortunately, because a retweet or reply would appear as an anomalous entry on the web page, early expectations of using Twitter as a free-flowing, two-way communication method are so far unrealized. But the number of followers, and of “re-tweets,” indicates that the Archives is producing a popular product. In addition, numerous “mentions” do not refer to tweets, but to other Archives activities, such as Facebook entries or comments on staff and collections. In the future NU Archives hopes to use Twitter more effectively to establish contacts and perhaps to offer advice on collecting and preserving tweets.