How the Open University library uses Facebook Live to reach, engage and support students

Amanda Closier Learning and Teaching Librarian

The Open University's Library Services (http://www.open.ac.uk/library/) has a specialist team of 7 librarians, the Live Engagement team, who design and deliver real-time online teaching using Adobe Connect. There is a programme of generic library and module-specific sessions. Whilst we reach a lot of students through these sessions, we like to try out new ways of engaging with students and hope to reach those who don't attend formal library training.

What is Facebook Live?

Facebook Live is a tool which allows to you broadcast live to followers on Facebook using little more than a smartphone, laptop or tablet.

Why Facebook Live?

The Live Engagement team are frequent contributors to a university livestream event called Student Hub Live (http://studenthublive.open.ac.uk/) and have been engaging with it from its launch as a way of reaching students. The team have also run Facebook chats where students are invited to send their questions on particular topics. Trying out Facebook Live was a natural progression for us. We decided to build on our live broadcasting experience and try using Facebook Live to connect with students.

Facebook Live is easy to setup and at a basic level, all you need is a reasonably good smart phone, tablet or laptop with a web cam. You can enhance the experience by using a tripod and microphone but it isn't necessary.

Facebook Live has the benefit of helping to reach students who don't always know about or want to attend library training or who may have not visited the online library before. Using Facebook Live, librarians teach library skills, talk about library resources and services and engage with students in an environment many students are already familiar with.

What have we done with Facebook Live?

The first session we ran was a question and answer session in Dec 2016. It was billed as 'all you ever wanted to know about the OU Library' and it lasted 30 minutes. The session was delivered from the library's Facebook page by two librarians, one in front and one behind the camera. This was a low-budget endeavour using a smartphone, a tripod and a lapel mic which plugged into the phone to broadcast. One librarian behind the camera with a laptop, relayed questions to the presenter.

 The event was heavily promoted via social media and students were encouraged to submit questions before and during the session.

Thirty minutes is quite long for a live event and there were both advantages and disadvantages to this. Viewers had time to pop in, ask a question, have it answered then listen to a couple more questions and then leave if they wished. It meant there was a continuous stream of people during the session and not necessarily the same people from beginning to end.

Something we did more recently was a series of 'Fake News Fridays' events during May 2017 to coincide with the UK General Election. Each Friday lunchtime in May, a librarian broadcast for up to

five minutes about different ways to understand and detect Fake News. The videos were also made available on YouTube and we have a 'Fake News Friday' playlist (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL20X7gnosgTI1Z-tCV34AXAUTqSZytept) .

Promotion of Facebook Live events

If you are going to be broadcasting with Facebook Live you need to think about promotion. Let students know where and when to turn up a reasonable time in advance. The events were advertised on social media, the Library Services news page, the Open University Student Association website and on the university's virtual learning environment.

'Events' were created on Facebook, which is another way to alert the audience and also give them the chance to engage, by 'liking' the event, sharing the event or indicating interest. Any time you add something to the event, Facebook notifies anyone who has shown interest or says they want to attend and this reminds them that it's happening. For the question & answer session we created a short teaser trailer (https://tinyurl.com/y7k2kesc) which we shared widely. It attracted a lot of 'likes' and was an engaging way to promote the event.

Captioning

To help with accessibility we download and caption the videos created during our live sessions. We scheduled in time directly after the broadcasts to add captions using Amara, a freely available tool. These caption files can be added to the recordings on Facebook. This was a quick and easy way to make our recordings accessible to disabled students. It's also quite useful for people whose first language is not English or those who prefer to watch videos on Facebook without the sound.

What did we learn?

Test the technology before you use it and run the session in a quiet environment. We did a lot of testing in a private group on Facebook before we broadcast live. We discovered that the sound could be quite poor without a mic so we bought a cheap microphone to plug into smartphones and this helped enormously.

There is a lot of historical information about Facebook Live and it has dated very quickly. Features have been released over time and across different platforms. If you're not sure if something will work with your setup, the best thing you can do is try it yourself. Be prepared for the fact that changes and improvements to the tool may happen quite quickly.

Facebook Live sessions should be quite short – this is a completely different type of engagement whilst you may want to share a lot with people it's probably better to broadcast for shorter periods but more often than for one long session.

Choose content carefully and consider if you can link it to something quite topical. We ran the Fake news Friday sessions in the run-up to the General Election and the recordings for each session were watched over 1000 times! There has been a lot of interest in these recordings from academic colleagues who would like to use them as standalone learning objects.

The Future

We would like to experiment with different tools. For example, we are on the lookout for different tools for creating captions. We are considering other tools for captioning which may provide automatic live captioning via the browser.

The library now has a green screen which enables us to create interesting backgrounds for creating videos. Using this we can put a librarian on the moon! The team has already experimented with using a gimbal to broadcast on the move. We streamed a tour of the Open University Archive, using Georama and we'd like to see if we could do something similar with Facebook Live.

We are considering running Facebook Live sessions in December, with a Christmas theme. Facebook Live offers us another great channel to connect with students and we are hoping we will be able to do even more with it in the future.

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