

# Being SOCIAL

A lifeline for museums during the COVID lockdown, social media is becoming even more essential to reaching new audiences now.

BY BARBARA KLEIN

**T**ucked away on the backside of Carnegie Museum of Natural History is the office of Tim Pearce, aka the “Mollusks Guy.”

It’s a cluttered and unglamorous space for a big social media star like Pearce. Caution-tape-yellow cabinets flank the walls in a back room, exposed ductwork hovers overhead, and a lone window offers a snail’s-eye view of the parking lot. In the next room, rows of 7-foot-tall gray storage cabinets containing gastropods and bivalves are arranged tightly enough so as to house the nearly 2 million specimens in the museum’s impressive mollusk collection.

But on this typically dreary Pittsburgh morning, Pearce’s office is being transformed into a video studio to record new content for the museum’s TikTok and Instagram accounts.

The room feels even more snug as museum videographer Matt Unger positions a boom microphone at one end and the camera at the other. As Unger makes a few minor adjustments, Pearce breaks into song. “Put a little slug in your life,” he serenades, “and the world will be a better place. For you. And me ...”

“Rolling!” Unger shouts.

Without missing a beat, Pearce takes center stage. Dressed in typical dad-like attire—a blue-plaid shirt and khakis—and with his name badge still prominently clipped to his collar, he exclaims: “Here’s a snail joke for you!

“What do you call a snail wearing an anti-COVID mask?” Wait for it ...

“Mask-cargot!”

You can almost hear the collective groan across the internet.

Instead, the comments online are joyous: “sNailed it.” “Tim please adopt me.” “Tim is my sunshine on a cloudy day.” “I luv u tim pearce.” His posts garner hundreds of thousands of views, some even surpassing the million-plus mark—extending the museum’s reach far beyond Pittsburgh to an audience around the globe.

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## SNAIL JOKES AND POP CULTURE

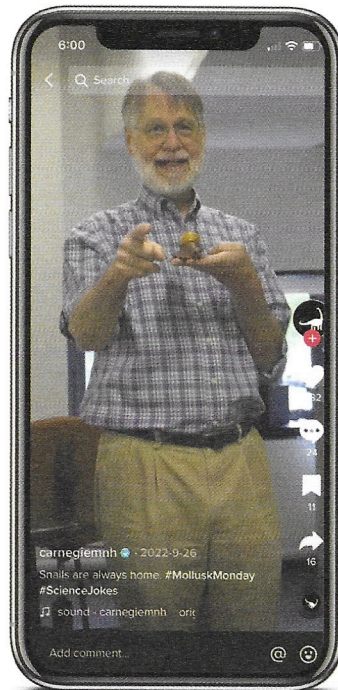
It's been said that when one door closes another opens. So, what happens when just about every door on the planet not only closes but is locked tight for months? If you're a public-facing space, that's when you expand your social media presence and invite the world to follow.

Of course, most major museums—including the Carnegie Museums—were already tweeting and posting prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. But during lockdown, social media became a tether for cultural institutions seeking to maintain a connection to their community; and a lifeline for people looking to escape the day-to-day monotony of attending Zoom meetings and wearing sweatpants (or no pants).

"We answered the call," says Megan McKenzie, Carnegie Science Center's senior manager of marketing, public relations, and social media. "We came up with a three-step approach that involved providing something to read, something to watch, and something to do. We saw huge increases in all accounts [Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube]."

The Science Center wasn't alone. In its June 2020 survey of U.S. museums, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) found that the vast majority of institutions offered virtual educational resources for children, parents, and teachers as well as different forms of digital entertainment.

"Some of these efforts received considerable press," AAM noted in its report, "and a few museums increased their followers on social media by orders of magnitude when their content went viral."



Enter the Mollusks Guy. Although Pearce has since become a luminary in the social media stratosphere, his ascent came at a snail's pace. (He was recently lauded as one of the top 50 museum influencers of 2022 by Blooloo, an online resource for professionals working at visitor-attraction sites.)

Pearce has been compiling jokes for years as head of the museum's Section of Mollusks, where he conducts malacological research on land snails and oversees the collection of 1.8 million snails and clams. And just about everyone—at the museum, on the bus, in the grocery store—has enjoyed a Tim Pearce original. That's right, he pens his own material, often modifying turtle jokes to suit his specific genre. To date, he's amassed 400 gags, many of which he admits are "really bad."

The museum's director of marketing, Sloan MacRae, was intrigued enough to approach Pearce back in 2019—pre-COVID—with a crazy idea: #MolluskMondays. The concept was pretty basic: Capture the man and his jokes on video and release a new one every Monday.

"It landed with a thud on Facebook," MacRae recalls. "Nobody liked it. Facebook is an echo chamber; it incentivizes outrage. Tim's magic is his wholesome energy, and those posts don't get boosted on Facebook."

A few short months later, the world was in full pandemic mode and TikTok was rapidly becoming the social media platform of choice. Its appeal was global (the app is available in 155 countries and in 75 languages) and its cool factor was high (Gen Zs, the 25 and younger crowd, were quick to get on board).

Those early days of TikTok were filled with short clips of people dancing, not exactly Pearce's forte. But that didn't dissuade Erin Southerland, communications and social media manager for the Museum of Natural History, from hitting the upload button.

"I thought, why not just put them on the platform and see how it goes," she says. "And it went really well."

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A team of social media content creators film video inside a studio at The Andy Warhol Museum's Pop District headquarters.

PHOTO: JOSHUA FRANZOS

Pearce's success has inspired his colleagues across the museum to become more active on social media. Posts by invertebrate zoologist Ainsley Seago, botanists Mason Heberling and Bonnie Isaac, and herpetologist Jennifer Sheridan have collected hundreds of thousands of views.

The Andy Warhol Museum is also embracing TikTok, but in a very different way. In the midst of COVID and with its 30th anniversary fast approaching in 2024, the museum wanted to start something new, something bold.

Last spring, after years of planning, dreaming, and gathering funding and support, The Warhol introduced The Pop District, an ambitious new venture that calls for a physical, creative, and economic expansion of its mission.

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One of the foundational components of the initiative includes reaching out to—and actually employing—area high school students to run the museum's social media channels, most notably TikTok and Instagram Reels. They've already had significant success.

In 2021, The Warhol didn't have a TikTok account, Martinez says. Now it has around 14,000 followers. The museum has also increased its Instagram following by 30 percent.

"It's been a fusion of the practical and the spectacular," Martinez notes.

Here's the practical side: When those high school kids go to college or enter the workforce full-time, they'll arrive with 21st-century skills. They'll have acquired

an understanding of the language, mechanisms, and algorithms of social media, as well as the ability to create specific content for specific channels.

Now to the spectacular: These high schoolers are not only interpreting TikTok for The Warhol; they're interpreting The Warhol for TikTok.

Martinez thinks that Andy Warhol would surely approve. "It's his ethos shining through," she says. "Warhol was such an entrepreneur, such an inventor, always thinking about what was next."

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## NOW WHAT?

The ever-changing social media landscape is an inescapable reality of the virtual world. Today it might be different leadership; tomorrow it could be reconfigured algorithms, updated best practices, or the next big trend or platform no one sees coming. And frankly, says Jordan Bohannon, Carnegie Museum of Art's digital content manager, that constant reinvention is part of the fun.

"Whenever there's a new way to think about video or the functions on social media channels," he says, "it offers us a new opportunity to expand the imaginative capacity of the museum."

In other words, it's about consistently delivering meaningful content—content that educates, informs, entertains, and provides value to museum followers. Bohannon points to a recent YouTube video about the Carnegie International as an example.

Clocking in at a robust 7 minutes and 16 seconds, the video speaks to the origins of the exhibition as the longest-running survey of international art in North America. Viewers learn about how past iterations and former museum directors have helped shape the present-day version.

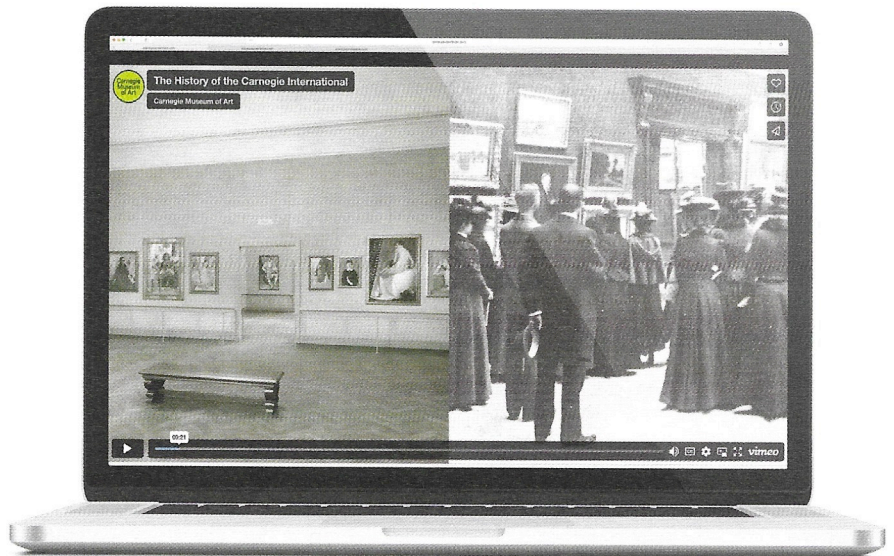
"Storytelling is at the heart of all of our socials," Bohannon says. "This work in particular is really a dynamic piece of content that uses voices from all over the museum as well as archival photos and clips."

The ultimate goal is that such content will actually prompt someone to stand up, walk outside, and find their way to the real deal—the museum itself.

"Your organization needs to use social media to successfully create connections, communicate impact, and engage people," says Colleen Dilenschneider, founder and managing member of IMPACTS Experience, a market research firm for visitor service groups. "Potential guests are

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on social media, and these platforms play an important role in how people connect with institutions, ideas, and one another."

The bottom line is this, she adds: "Social media followers reported a 36 percent greater intent to visit within a year than non-followers, and a 42 percent greater intent to visit within two years."

Intent in the digital realm can truly be the starting point for a family adventure, a date night, or a group outing in the real world. Just ask MacRae. He'll tell you that, as 2022 came to a close, the Museum of Natural History was on pace to set new record highs for web traffic and general admission ticket sales. "Social media is key to that success," he adds, "because we're very top of mind; we're part of the conversation."

All four Carnegie Museums are seeking to engage their online constituents in conversation, although each has its own unique personality and approach.

## STAY TUNED

"In 2023," predicts the social media management platform Hootsuite, "successful social marketers will take the time and effort to carefully assess their opportunities, use a scalpel rather than a cleaver, and think about the long-term impact of their short-term actions. After more than a decade of growing pains, social media marketing has finally matured as a profession."

Right now, Carnegie Museum of Art's primary platforms are Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn. "Every post on every platform ladders up to one of our goals," Bohannon explains, "whether that's to get people to an event, into the museum, or to raise awareness for an exhibition."

And that requires planning. At Carnegie Science Center, for example, posts are scheduled months in advance. "We have so many things happening at the Science Center—programs, exhibits,

events, and experiences,” McKenzie says. “We want our social media to reflect that and speak to different audiences.”

That’s a smart approach, Dilenschneider says. “Organizations benefit by meeting people where they are in terms of platforms and content relevance.”

McKenzie breaks it down like this: “Twenty-five- to 34-year-olds who are on Facebook are typically looking for something to do,” she continues, “Twitter is about sharing news, and Instagram is the place to showcase the glamour shots.”

This type of planning requires time. The Museum of Natural History’s Southerland estimates that at least one-third, if not half, of her workload now revolves around social media. “It’s important to work with our researchers to make sure the facts are correct in our educational posts, respond to followers’ questions, and read every comment.”

Not to mention responding to trends—or maybe even starting them.

For The Pop District, an important next step involved forming a partnership with Built Different, a local creative agency, to coordinate the museum’s social media strategies. The collaboration has also netted one other client: Dell Technologies.

Working with its young staff of teens and 20-somethings, Built Different has emphasized a multifaceted approach to TikTok. There are “Did You Know” shorts—some featuring Museum Director Patrick Moore, like the one that asks, “Did you know that Andy Warhol made wall paper?” There are news segments—one highlights *The Collaboration*, a recent Broadway production about Warhol and artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s creative partnership. And there are fun facts—the museum has 610 Warhol time capsules—as well as behind-the-scenes previews and staff interviews.

Then there are the TikTok trends. The objective here is to connect Warhol content to the sounds, dances, aesthetics, or filters that are blowing up social media at any given moment.



PHOTO: JOSHUA FRANZOS

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To that end, a small crew arrives at the museum every Tuesday when the building is closed to the public during winter to shoot video. (FYI: The aspect ratio is always vertical, like your phone, rather than horizontal, like your flat-screen television.)

Equal parts analytics, creativity, good timing, and maybe a little magic, social media remains more of an art than a science.

After all, it took four tries before Pearce went viral. Here’s the abridged version of that particular post: “Barack Obama went to a costume party. He was giving his wife a piggy back ride, and someone asks, ‘What are you dressed as?’ He answers, ‘I’m a snail, that’s Michelle on my back.’”

Get it? Well, nearly 2 million views later, Pearce himself isn’t quite sure what

all the fuss is about. (Rumor has it he still hasn’t given up his flip phone.)

“I don’t follow social media, so I really don’t understand it as a phenomenon,” Pearce says. “But one of my secret agendas is to increase the popularity of snails. I look at football and wonder how people can be interested in sports when science is so fascinating. This is my one-person effort to make snails more popular than football, and it seems to be working!” ■