

## AIRC GOES DIGITAL

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### Resumen:

The American Institute for Roman Culture (AIRC) es una organización de no Beneficio que fue creada el 21 de abril de 2002. Se encarga de preservar el patrimonio cultural de Roma a través de diferentes eventos organizados en la capital de Italia como conferencias anuales dedicadas a la cultura Romana o cursos para estudiantes. El interés especial está dirigido hacia los medios sociales, que permiten a AIRC llegar a la gente de todo el mundo. La combinación de acciones tanto en el mundo real y virtual ofrece a AIRC buenos resultados en la difusión de la cultura romana antigua. Lo que es realmente excepcional, es el hecho de que su actividad en internet no está solo enfocada a una plataforma, sino que la organización simultáneamente está visible en Twitter, Facebook, Google +, Flickr, Youtube, Vine, Instagram y Pinterest. Otros medios de comunicación con la audiencia incluyen la publicación regular en la web, en el blog, en el boletín de noticias, pero también organizar seminarios a través de Google Hangouts, que da a sus seguidores una oportunidad real para el compromiso.

### Abstract:

The American Institute for Roman Culture (AIRC) is a non-profit organization which was established on 21st April in 2002. It aims at preserving cultural heritage of Rome via different events organized in the capital of Italy like annual conferences devoted to Roman culture or courses for students. Special interest is directed towards social media, which enables AIRC to reach people from all over the world. Combining actions both in reality and in virtual world offers AIRC good results in disseminating ancient Roman culture. What is really outstanding, is the fact that their internet activity is not only focused on one platform but the organization simultaneously is visible on Twitter, Facebook, Google +, Flickr, YouTube, Vine, Instagram and Pinterest. Other ways for communicating with the audience include regular posting on web site, blog, newsletter but also organizing webinars via Google Hangouts, which give their followers a real chance for engagement.

## 1. Introduction

The American Institute for Roman Culture (AIRC) was established in 2002 by dedicated individuals, among others American archaeologist, Ph. D. Darius Arya, who until this day is the CEO of the Institute and the main coordinator of all activities. Since 2010 his wife, Italian journalist Erica Firpo, has joined AIRC team and became a social media strategist to implement the idea of sharing their mission with the broad audience of the whole world.

The main goal of the Institute is to preserve the cultural heritage of the ancient Rome and make people aware of the problem of often forgotten or simply neglected historical buildings, monuments and places. It aims at taking care of the precious architectural and cultural treasures for present times as well as for future generations. Moreover, they are strongly committed to passing their knowledge about historical facts, past events and the influence of Romans on the development of our current civilization. Furthermore AIRC offers gaining practical experience by organizing summer programs for students, which enables them to deepen their interest in the field of archaeology by participating in excavation field school. Internships in social media offers students opportunity to learn how to maintain the dialogue and broaden the outreach on the Internet.

To fulfill the mission, AIRC is accessible to the whole world by being present in almost every recognizable and popular social media platform. This is due to the fact that the Institute wants to gain the widest audience possible, in which it can find potential donors or philanthropists, who will be willing to fund some of their initiatives, for example gaining funds for restoration and renovation of the Roman architecture. In order to be reliable, Institute's communication is kept in the form of professional, intelligent and open for everyone dialogue.

In the near future AIRC plans to launch a completely innovative and unique project called Ancient Rome, Live. It will be a step towards widening its target group, because the organization no longer wants to focus on students only, especially the ones interested in history and archaeology, but also on children, adults, tourists, journalists, who can easily spread the initiative as well as cover Institute's projects and educators. This project offers a wide range of different tools on multiple platforms and actually fully uses the potential of social media.

The main idea is to form an interactive website to which everybody can have easy access. It will consist of fun and educational content like an animated map of Rome, which will reconstruct the past and give the look at the city from different angles. Moreover, there will be a free blended learning course available, along with an e-book, also free of charge, both on iOS and Android system. If the Institute manages to raise the missing capital to complete the project, it might be one of the most spectacular initiatives conducted by the non-profit organization.

## 2. Case development

American Institute for Roman Culture aims at attracting a wide range of students from the whole globe and participating in their educational programs in Rome. A goal not that easy to achieve, especially when considering a non-profit organization. Without having specific means of reaching this dynamic group it would be impossible to sustain growth of the company. Having limited budget the ideal marketing policy seems to be the one via all kinds of diverse social media channels. And so AIRC does so. They are present and consistent in their activity on such platforms as Facebook, Instagram, Google Plus, Flickr, Pinterest, Twitter, Youtube, and Vine. They are taking the advantage of the email marketing and different non-conventional digital forms of promotion.

### Hashtag strategy

AIRC takes the advantage of great possibilities that hashtags offer on every social platform. The Institute has created its own amazing hashtags and uses them consistently. All posts on AIRC social media platforms (if needed) are accompanied by specific and precisely selected hashtags. It helps to track their activity and find information from other users.

All posts connected to AIRC's Excavation Schools are tagged #WeDigRome. It is used on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google Plus, Vine and in blog posts. Whereas, content connected to culture or its preservation is labelled #CulturalHeritage. Posts connected to Rome are followed by #meetRome. All of these hashtags are created by AIRC and are often used not only by the Institute itself but also by other

users. Vines created by the American Institute for Roman Culture have their unique hashtag: #6SecPostcard.

A few months ago, AIRC has launched and widely promoted its new hashtag connected to the conservation of the Colosseum: #ColosseumForDays. Director Arya was encouraging everyone to use it, particularly when posting photos of the Colosseum on Instagram.

**Figure 1.** Characteristic features distinguishing AIRC on their social media profiles



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

### Social Media strategy

The main goal of AIRC's social media marketing strategy is to engage in as many dialogues and conversations as possible on the biggest number of platforms. First of all, the Institute wants to reach students who participate in their semester and summer programs and then educators, media and recently also tourists. The new *Ancient Rome, Live* project is going to be targeted, for the very first time by AIRC, also to this latter group - tourists.

AIRC perceives social media *as a way of storytelling* the Ancient Rome's history. Stories that bring benefits to everyone: the followers (great educational content), the Institute (higher outreach and interest in their work) and finally Rome's culture (donors that make preservation initiatives possible).

### Facebook

Facebook being the constantly-leading among students social media platform is successfully used by AIRC for marketing. Both, the profile account and the fanpage site are available for their audiences, each having different purposes.

Facebook account is an easy way of staying in touch with old friends and students. Close relations with the students from previous programs can be maintained with the use of Facebook groups. Whereas, the purpose of the fanpage is to gain new followers.

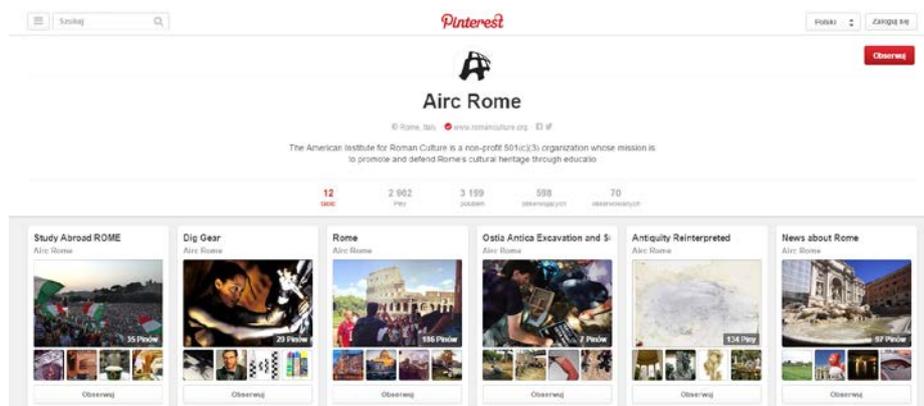
On Facebook different kinds of content are being posted in order to keep diversity. Quotes, interesting facts concerning the history of Rome, videos, articles, important history dates, interviews, questions, infographics, AIRC's blog posts, information about events happening in Rome and other parts of the world connected to Roman history and many more can be found on their Facebook page. Yet, breaking news posts about successful restoration of Rome's most popular monuments, i.e. scaffolding of the Colosseum going down were gaining the most attention. The great advantage of their Facebook profile is the usage of all types of features this platform has to offer. Namely hashtags, geotags, emoticons, posting links/photos/videos.

### Pinterest

Pinterest is a platform on which graphic content can be found. However, it is not as chaotic as Instagram. The biggest merit of this site is that the content is divided into sections, which eases the search for the desired material. AIRC account has 12 different walls, consisting of 2962 pins, both from outside sources as well as internally generated ones. It has gained almost 3 200 likes and 600 followers during more than 2 years of their presence on this platform. However, a drop in activity can be observed, as the last pin was done about several weeks ago, which is quite a long time of absence for any social media platform. It is the regular and consistent engagement that matters most.

Pinterest is a type of channel that enables the user to look for the content that the reader is particularly interested in. And AIRC made a good use of it. As all of the walls are oscillating around the topics strictly connected to Italy and its culture, in-between the visitor can find photos taken by AIRC members, which present current activities and events organized by them. A very effective, yet not so bothering way to communicate their mission and achieve the goal of promoting the Institute in social media.

**Figure 2.** Initial screen from the official account on Pinterest



Source: [<https://www.pinterest.com/aircrome/>], as available at 25/11/2014.

## Twitter

Institute is using Twitter to gain new audiences, such as journalists, professors, historians and in a great part- other institutions and organizations, newspapers or potential donors. The key is to remain consistent and talkative. It is important for the Institute not only to post content but also to engage in a dialogue: to create conversations, attract people and then ultimately inform them about every Institute's update. Twitter is continuously engaging new followers with their number reaching currently 16 000.

What is outstanding about their Twitter profile is reposting content from their other platforms. Vine videos gain great attention on Twitter because of the fact that they are played automatically and although the post is a thumbnail it looks very immersive. Vines posted there are of AIRC staff own production. This is the great attraction comparing to many traditional text or photo-type posts and at the same time it promotes AIRC's other social media profiles.

The importance of hashtags on Twitter does not need to be explained to the Institute as they are successful both in using top hashtags as in creating their own ones. What is more, AIRC Director, Darius Arya and AIRC Social Media Strategist, Erica Firpoput great attention to their own private Twitter accounts. This enables to engage their own followers in following AIRC profile and increase the number of followers.

## Flickr

There is no better place to upload own photos and search for others' ones than Flickr. AIRC has already shared 1,816 photos since November 2009. This amazing bank of pictures serves as a source of photos for their social media posts. Shots of Ancient Rome and its empire - AIRC students and workers or colleagues- these and many more can be found on the Institute's account.

Each program and project is grouped into albums so it makes easier to browse them and then take a look at Institute's work. Flickr permits smaller but more engaged dialogue with certain users. For example, regular usage of somebody's photos builds a connection with the users and shows appreciation for their work.

## Google Plus

Google Plus is, for AIRC, an interactive way of communicating with followers. By having successfully conducted Google hangouts, AIRC seems to be reachable to its audience.

The Institute has made a hangout streaming live their Conversation for Conservation conference. It made possible people from all over the world to connect and engage with Rome. AIRC strives to preserve culture of the Ancient Rome. Although the dialogue on this platform has calmed down, growing presence of AIRC in Google Communities may change this.

## Instagram

It is no secret that twenty first century population tends to glance superficially at the given material rather than read the whole information step by step. Being overwhelmed with information and knowledge that surrounds us, people had thought of ways how to select the most important things for them. Photos with short, but substantial descriptions are put on Instagram therefore it wins with more complex content that could be found on blog, website or even Facebook wall.

One of the co-founders of AIRC, archaeologist Darius Arya, has established an account on Instagram with a catchy and easy to remember nickname - *saverome*. The data shows a great success - the profile has over 45 700 followers as for 1 090 posted photos since Christmas Eve in 2011, when it was launched. Photos are posted regularly, every one or two days. Each image has a number of likes oscillating at about 1000, which shows that it has gained a group of regular followers. Following hashtags is always included: #HeritagePreservation #CulturalHeritage #MeetRome #Rome.

This platform shows a great potential for fulfilling main goals of AIRC. By putting photos of most common and recognizable tourist attractions in Rome with short descriptions and historical facts during different times of the year, it manages to forward the educational content to the audience at regular intervals. However, sometimes so called 'forgotten monuments and buildings' are also captured and that touches Institute's second most important goal - to save Rome's heritage from oblivion.

Another outstanding action of AIRC on this profile is that it updates information about renovation activities that are taken up to preserve the historical buildings and places in and around Rome. Such posts build an internal consciousness by reminding people of the problem of deteriorating historical places, buildings and monuments. This arouses the mass to communicate the problem to wider audience, for example using the best technique- "word of mouth", encourages discussion and thinking of the ideas about changing it and eventually taking steps to stop the process of limbo.

Furthermore, it reminds about important cultural or historical events that take place in Rome. Keeping the regular followers informed about current issues is crucial, but sometimes, mainly because of simple and popular hashtag #Rome, visitors of this city can also get to know (sometimes even by chance) what is happening there during their stay via this channel. And that can further lead to getting interested into the Institutes activities and probably future cooperation.

Last but not least is the fact that it promotes the Institute itself by placing photos showing current activities of AIRC like images showing the participants working on particular programs offered by the Institute.

**Figure 3.** Initial screen from the official account on Instagram.



Source: [http://www. HYPERLINK "http://www.instagram.com/saverome"Instagram HYPERLINK "http://www.instagram.com/saverome".com/saverome], as available at 25/11/2014.

## Youtube

The great thing about AIRC is that it does not only share a written or photographic content, but also it offers a wide range of movies to choose from. This channel was introduced on 20th March in 2009 and according to the latest data from the end of November 2014 they have had 465 subscriptions and just above 100 000 views. As for 126 movies posted during over 5 years of non-profit organization activity it is a very good result.

AIRC has several different types of short videos which are posted on YouTube channel in the form of mini documentaries. First of all, AIRC in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MiBACT) is an organizer of the annual spring conference called UNLISTED, which has already taken place three times. The main idea of this conference is to be involved in a dialogue with different people from academic, historical and cultural environments. At the same time it is being streamed via different digital media channels to reach the largest audience possible and start the conversation between users about actions that could be undertaken to preserve Rome's heritage. But it does not only end in simple conversations but leads to specific steps and actions which aim to save ancient Rome's remains. When the conference takes place, one can find live streams, which makes it accessible for everybody from all over the world. This year this event was conducted under the name Conversation for Conservation and was about the use of social media in preserving the cultural heritage, something which AIRC is a real expert in.

Furthermore, AIRC's Youtube profile offers another video series called Digging History, which is actually a set of about 5-minute movies that show in a simple and accessible way the history of Rome, most important facts about it and the most famous historic buildings and places in the capital of Italy. Such approach to history of Rome is not conventional and therefore interesting not only for history-lovers, but also to any viewers of different ages and interests.

And once again, social media platform is used to promote the Institute itself. Here, visitors can watch movies where Darius Arya explains the aims of AIRC, presents results of successfully conducted student programs like Field School Excavation and actual records of undertaken archaeological activities. The main idea of placing those videos is to encourage people to come to Rome and visit its heritage, become an active member of the AIRC group as well as to present projects and persuade potential donors to invest in the Institute.

**Figure 4.** Initial screen from the official account on YouTube.



Source: [<https://www.youtube.com/user/WEDIGROME/featured>], as available at 25/11/2014.

## Vine

As it was in the case of Facebook and its younger and compact relative called Instagram, there is also an alternative for long content material, which can be found on YouTube channels. Vines, because that is how they are called, are the short movies, which last at the longest 7 seconds, were introduced by Twitter at the beginning of the previous year and they are still popular among social media users.

AIRC joined Vine almost exactly after introducing it to the market, on 29th January, 2013. Till the end of the September, Vines were posted on this site at quite regular time intervals. During this period it has gained over 18 000 loops and almost 200 followers. However, right now there is no sign of activity on this account. Actually it is a pity because after analyzing data concerning the popularity of this profile, it turned out that last videos reached even 1000, up to 2000 loops, which is quite a lot.

What is really interesting is that this platform focuses particularly on the ongoing restorations in Rome, showing the works in different stages and visible changes for better. Moreover, many of the Vines focus

only on fountains, which is a completely unique approach. The core actions of AIRC are explicit, this time on Vines portraying the participants of Excavation programs or other archaeological undertakings.

All those actions gained quite a great number of followers. It might be caused by the fact that there are not so many other accounts which focus on Rome's heritage. Another point for their uniqueness is that AIRC created a unique hashtag only for this platform - #6SecPostcard.

Probably a good idea might be to introduce a series of Vines connected with one topic in particular, because similar actions on other platforms proved to be successful.

### E-mail marketing

AIRC has adjusted the e-mail marketing strategy to their needs. There is the possibility of signing up for a newsletter in many places on the website. This increases the chance of gaining more people willing to follow AIRC news.

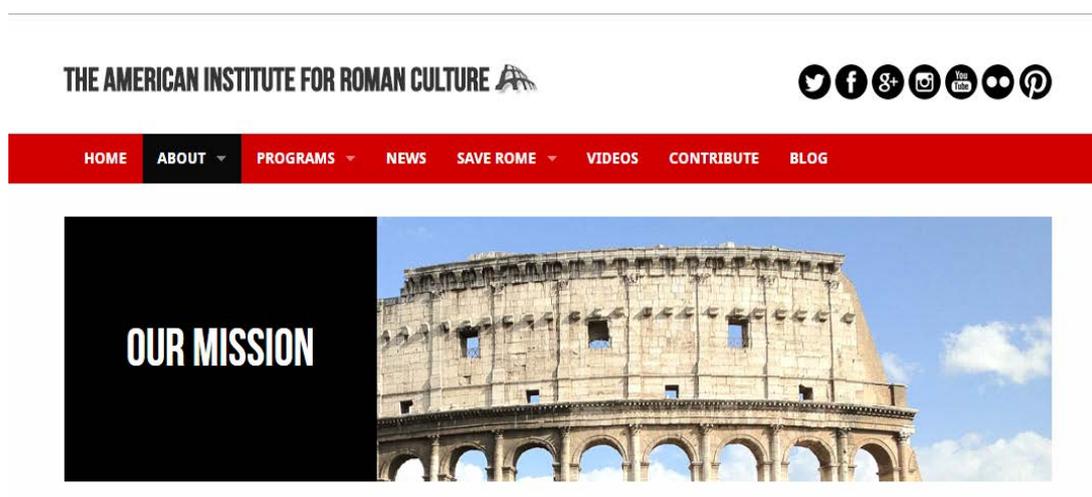
Additionally, every e-mail which is sent by the Director of the Institute has got hyperlinks to all of their social media profiles. This endeavor does not only simplify the way of finding certain channel but also informs about the existence of them which ultimately increases the awareness and engagement.

### Website and blog

AIRC website is the main source of information about the Institute and its activities. First of all, the layout of the website is clear and quite intuitive in use so that everybody can easily find out what AIRC actually does and look for the interesting content. What is more, it exposes all the links to other social media platforms in a very visible way so that a potential viewer can easily find his or her favorite social media platform to follow the actions of the Institute.

The website includes also blog. Content is posted there a few times during the month and undertakes very different topics. Namely, starting with reports from AIRC's core activities (archeological excavations and students' summer programs), through tips and suggestions which places are especially worth visiting in Rome and ending with references to historical facts and important anniversaries and discussions about current issues concerning ancient heritage. Many pieces of content are created and posted by the participants in summer schools, as part of the series called *Life In The Trenches*. It is another way of engaging their part-time members but also giving them a chance to contribute their own experience and discoveries and ultimately share it with others.

**Figure 5.** Initial screen from the official website of AIRC. Really important thing is that they put visible links to other accounts on every possible subpage



Source: [http://www.romanculture.org], as available at 25/11/2014.

### Cooperation and networking to boost social media marketing

AIRC being a non-profit Institute understands the importance of cooperation with more powerful as well as with smaller organizations, companies or institutions. It helps to outreach further and promotes the Institute in new and often international communities.

That is why the Institute keeps in touch with the Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism. AIRC has been collaborating with American universities and U.S. State, UNESCO entities or social initiatives such as Shoot4Change. The contact, varying from the institution, consists in supporting social media marketing of both parties, preparing visual content, exchange of knowledge and know-how, direct promotion among potential students.

**Figure 6.** Number of followers or views (if stated so) on AIRC social media platform.

Social media platform	Number of followers (or views if stated so)
Youtube <i>views</i>	106 000
Instagram	90 000
Vine <i>loops</i>	18 554
Google Plus <i>views</i>	17 214
Flickr	9
Twitter	16 000
Pinterest	598
Facebook	15 000

Source: American Institute for Roman Culture, own presentation, Youtube, November 2014

### 3. Questions for discussion and conclusions/judgements

1. How to successfully arouse awareness among potential donors and their willingness to contribute?
2. How to enhance new target group consisting of tourists and visitors of Italy on social media?
3. How does AIRC digital strategy using different social media platforms?

The digital strategy has been successfully embraced by AIRC. It appears to be pivotal to the success preserving the cultural heritage of Rome. On the basis of the undertaken research it can be concluded that the most visible benefits connected with the presence on social media can be grouped as follows:

- Education connected with the engagement
- Communication and interaction through passion

The digital strategy enhances the ancient Rome in the area of: content, interaction, building community of ancient Rome lovers and donors. AIRC can be a great benchmark for other non-profit institutions to learn how best utilize social media by adjusting the profile of each social media platform. Moreover what has increasingly become apparent is that, with the communication on social media channels, the generation and maintenance of trust and commitment has become, in many ways, relatively more impersonal and more remotely facilitated.

We believe that reaching the wider audience will bring amazing benefits to the Institution. At the moment the engagement comes mainly from students coming from America, Europe and Australia. However there is a great potential in other continents considering the cultural differences and experience possibilities which combined with current strive to save the oblivion can bring remarkable outcomes.

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