

Title

Encouraging Global Media Engagement, Comparative Communication Studies and Job Skills Development through the Social Media Project.

Abstract

The Social Media Project requires my International Media students to maintain a Twitter account throughout the semester. The assignment has three components: 1. The creation of a series of Twitter lists where students follow accounts associated with international news, international diplomacy and other related topics. 2. The regular sending of Tweets and re-tweets. 3. A final “paper” that requires critical thinking and the ability to synthesize information in a meaningful way. The goal of the assignment is three-fold. 1. To encourage global news engagement. 2. To employ comparative communication studies in a way that helps students understand the similarities and differences in media content across the globe. 3. To offer students opportunities to develop skills that will serve them well in the workplace, including the ability to meet deadlines and the ability to think strategically about the operation of a social media account.

A Description and Explanation of the Activity

What follows is the description of the social media project as explained on my syllabus.

Social Media Project: Use of social media is exploding around the globe. To help you understand that explosion, you are to open a Twitter account. There are more details on the assignment page, but here are the basics: You must open a Twitter account and a Storify.com account by Sunday at the end of Week 1. By Sunday at the end of Week 2, you must have created two Twitter lists of accounts you're following. Each list should consist of 20 accounts. The first list should include 20 American journalists and/or news organizations covering international news. The second list should include 20 accounts representing foreign journalists and/or news organizations operating outside the United States. By Sunday at the end of Week 3, you must have created two more lists of 20 accounts each. The third list should include 20 Twitter accounts representing American embassies abroad (for example, the American embassy in London). The fourth Twitter list should include 20 Twitter accounts of foreign embassies in the United States (for example, the British embassy in Washington, D.C.). By Sunday at the end of Week 4, you must have created a final Twitter list of your choosing (provided it is a coherent list that relates to the class in some way). The list should have a theme that relates to the course (among other things it must be international in focus and must not be US-centric) and ties together the people you are following. This might be a country of interest, or a topic (global music, international politics) or something else that makes sense to you. The list should be "un-American" in the sense it should neither include Americans living abroad nor should it include foreigners living in the U.S. For example, if you want to follow English Premier League soccer teams and players, that's fine by me provided you aren't following American players. By the same token, you shouldn't be following international players competing in American sports leagues.

Every week between the week starting Jan. 29 and the week ending April 8, you should send at least two original tweets. (Retweets count, but only if you add something to the original.) Your tweets must fall on different days. You may send more, but you won't get

credit for more than one tweet per day and two per week. In other words, this is something you should steadily pay attention to over the course of the project rather than bingeing and purging. You can tweet about anything you want provided the content is relevant to either your chosen topic or one of the other Twitter lists you're following. All tweets and retweets in this class should include the hashtag #ucfmmc4300. By April 15, you should complete a 750 to 1,000 word "paper" (you'll use Storify) describing your experience and what you've learned. In addition to your "paper," you will include copies of all of your tweets as well as copies of tweets from accounts you're following that help support a point you're trying to make in your paper. Additional details to follow. DO NOT deactivate your account prior to the end of the semester. On rare occasions students have employers or other organizations of which they are a member place a ban on social networking. If you find yourself in such a situation, let me know asap. If you've already got a Twitter account and you want to use that, you may do so. But you should think long and hard about whether that's what you want to do because once you begin with one account you may not switch to another account without losing a significant number of points.

What follows are the instructions students receive before writing the final paper: This is the final portion of Social Media Project. Please review the syllabus and previous social media assignments to make sure you've done everything you need to do to be able to write your final report. If you missed one of the Twitter List deadlines, you should still go back and create the missing list (or lists) sooner rather than later. You won't receive those points if you missed the deadline, but you won't be able to write the report if you haven't created the lists and been paying at least periodic attention to them. In addition to sending your two tweets a week, you should be spending at least a little time each week looking at the accounts on your various lists. While doing this, you should have the questions in mind that you'll need to address in the final report. You should be taking notes and capturing specific tweets you may want to use as examples. The "deliverable" for this project is a report written in MS Word, Storify (if you got an account when the were still being issued) or some other program that produces a readable report. You may upload a document or a URL. Your name must be at the top of the report and each section must be numbered and must appear in numerical order.

Part 1: Briefly describe your experience with and perceptions of Twitter prior to this semester. Now briefly describe in what ways your experience with and attitudes toward Twitter have changed over the course of the semester. (This section should be approximately 100 words.)

Part 2: Having spent some time following Twitter Lists 1 and 2, please provide a thoughtful analysis of the similarities and differences between the Twitter content provided by the two different groups. Hint: It might make sense to take at least two issues or events and examine how American and international journalists treated the topics. (This section should be approximately 250 words.)

Part 3: Having spent some time following Twitter Lists 3 and 4, please provide a thoughtful analysis of the similarities and differences between the Twitter content provided by the two different groups. Hint: It may make sense to take at least two issues or events and examine how American and foreign embassies treated the topics. (This

section should be approximately 250 words.)

Part 4: Describe the theme of your Twitter List 5 and offer some thoughtful observations about the things you learned and/or observed about these accounts and their content. (This section should be approximately 200 words.)

Part 5: Imagine you're interviewing for a job or internship that (among other things) requires you to manage the organization's Twitter account. What can you tell the interviewer about your experience this semester and/or the things you learned that might convince them you're the person for the job? Hint: It's probably helpful if you can point to at least one specific example of something an organization is doing on Twitter that you would like to emulate. (This section should be approximately 200 words.)

Note: Although I've asked you to keep each section brief, I expect you to write concisely and provide as much information and thoughtful analysis as possible under the circumstances.

Final Note: DO NOT deactivate your account prior to the end of the semester.

Here's what each grade on this project represents:

A: You've done a thoughtful and thorough job on all five sections. Your analysis got below the surface and you made observations that not everybody would've picked up on. You communicated your ideas clearly and concisely. If an employer looking for somebody to manage a social media account asked me for recommendations, your performance on this project would put you on my list of recommendations.

B: You've done a thoughtful and thorough job on most but not all five sections. Your analysis occasionally got below the surface but other times but authorities struck me as obvious or mundane. You communicated your ideas relatively clearly and concisely, but there was room for improvement. You had your moments, but your overall performance on this project didn't set you apart from the crowd.

C: You've met the minimum requirements of the assignment, and this is clearly college-level work. But as often as not, your analysis seemed thin and/or obvious. You probably struggled with clarity and/or conciseness.

D/F: You've failed to meet the minimum requirements of the assignment.

Rationale

This assignment has evolved over a number of years. When I first began using a version of this assignment, I had two primary motives that that stemmed from the fact I teach a fully online International Media class at a large university that serves a diverse student body. The first motive was a desire to give students in this 100-plus person class an opportunity to do something other than take online quizzes and tests. At the same time the assignment had to be manageable. The vast majority of the points for this assignment are assigned for creating Twitter lists and sending tweets and re-tweets. Those are things my teaching assistant can monitor without spending more than a couple hours per week. I grade the final paper, and can do so efficiently because the rubric focuses on macro-level issues that can be assessed relatively efficiently. The second motive was that although many of the students in the class are from my school's limited, access mass media programs (such as journalism and advertising/public relations), many other students are general studies majors. Discussions with this latter group concerned me because it appeared that many of these students were graduating without having necessarily

developed skills that might make them employable. I recognized there was only so much I could do in this particular class, but I felt an obligation to do something. I knew anecdotally that many students were getting jobs or internships that involved managing social media accounts. The assumption was these were digital natives who new how to manage social media accounts. I, however, knew that this wasn't necessarily the case. At least now, these students will have spend a semester operating a Twitter account and paying attention to how other organizations manage their accounts. As the assignment has evolved over the years, I now have additional rationale for continuing to use it. Perhaps the biggest is that I want to create opportunities for students to think about media content more broadly. Most of them primarily consume American media and assume that the ways things are done in America must be the "right way" or perhaps even the "only way" things are done. I want to create opportunities for them to consider how American news outlets cover the world compares to how other international news outlets cover the world. This year I added the digital diplomacy aspect of the assignment because I think it's important to consider how America's approach to diplomacy may be similar or different to that of other countries.

Learning Outcomes and Evidence of Student Learning

Outcome 1: Students will increase their engagement with global news content.

Comments from student papers that provide evidence they met Outcome 1:

"Previously, I followed accounts such as CNN and The New York Times, but did not recognize the importance of following international outlets such as Al Jazeera and Reuters, especially because journalists from these news organizations can be in danger of imprisonment if their reporting is found to be offensive by the government. I will continue to have this course Twitter account even after this semester to obtain more international news as CNN and The New York Times now report news that mostly has to do with our own presidency, with there being equally important news to read regarding other countries, which is mostly provided by international sources."

"Previously, I was not an active Twitter user. I considered Twitter to be another means of looking into my friends thoughts and lives. Already a Facebook and Instagram user, Twitter did not seem to be a necessary application. However, I overlooked the fact that Twitter feeds are a result of who you follow. While the application can be fun and full of quirky comments, it also has the potential be a source for breaking news and political discussion. By strictly following accounts focused on international media, my news feed became a valuable news source and less of a social media website."

"Before this project, I mainly used Twitter for personal use, and also to keep up with what was trending and being talked about. I would commonly go through the trending and moments to see what news was considered worth talking about, and I would try and search through different users to see their different perspectives. After beginning this twitter project, even from the first list that I made, I was able to recognize the differences. Searching for new exclusively through trending was giving me a skewed vision of the world, based off of what Twitter thought I wanted to see based on my region. Once I

began following sources and journalists around the world, I had access to news that was breaking and relevant, and nowhere to be seen on trending. “

Outcome 2: Students will develop an understanding of the similarities and difference in media content across the globe. In particular, they will come to understand that the way US media do things isn't the only way or even necessarily the “right way” to do things.

Comments from student papers that provide evidence they met Outcome 2:

“The topic of my 5th Twitter List was United Kingdom politics. What stood out to me the most was the level of critical thinking that went into each tweet. Accounts would often begin a tweet by stating a political occurrence, but ended it with a personal comment that invited the reader to further probe into the topic. Their tweets not only encourage further thinking, but also invites discussion and debate. Many authors challenge the politics of the United Kingdom, but they do so in a way that explains why they feel a certain way rather than simply slamming the issue. By explaining their opinions, tweets remain open minded to alternate beliefs and leave room for an open discourse of the topic between readers.”

“There was one major difference I noticed between the two lists, and it had to do with how much focus was given to the United States. The national news organizations focused heavily on how global issues would affect the U.S. and reported stories with U.S. involvement. The international news organizations reported on the same stories, but focused more on the actual event, rather than its implications for the U.S., and often reported stories that have no direct U.S. involvement.”

Outcome 3: Students will develop skills that will serve them well in the workplace, including the ability to meet deadlines and the ability to think strategically about the operation of a social media account.

Comments from student papers that provide evidence they met Outcome 3:

“This section is personal and relatable to me because I am in fact taking an internship position this summer where one of my main jobs consists of keeping up with the companies social media and advertising their events to the public. When applying for the job I did inform them of this project and how much I have learned from scrolling on Twitter with an actual end goal. I told my employers that I have learned that Twitter is not just a medium used to be funny or vent to your followers, but there are important social and political issues being expressed all over the world using Twitter.”

“After keeping up with tweets this semester I learned how organizations use Twitter to get the most important information out, as quickly as possible so the public is constantly being updated. I think news is evolving along with technology, and video, photo, and other visual forms of media coverage will become more and more prominent. Twitter is a great place to use video and photo to tell a story because there's a limited word count,

and people can get their news in quick burst, with a simple photo and headline or caption. ABC News uses viewer submitted content to tell some of its news stories, like the video they recently tweeted of four escaped baboons running along a highway in Texas. The video told the novel news stories better than words could and gave readers a news update from a fun and viewer-centered approach. Twitter provides the opportunity to connect with tons of people almost instantly and is a great tool to take advantage of new trends in technology and mobile journalism.”

“Upon the analyzation, interaction and association of Twitter accounts created by news organizations, I have realized that the key to professional Tweeting is sharing the most important section of a story and accompanying it with the effects it has on a society. When you can begin to make readers analyze what an event means for their society, they begin to place themselves in the situation and stop keeping themselves from reality. When reading the news, most people begin to disassociate themselves from the reality of it all. They begin to see it as a story and means of entertainment late at night but not how what happens in this country actually affects them on many levels. When begin to strip the humanity of it all but when we can start to ask ourselves and our readers what these stories really mean, we can begin to dig deeper and welcome ourselves back into a relevant, understanding society. In Tweets, when you can ask a question or paint the picture of a story clearer, people will want to read what the article being shared it about.”

“If was trying to convince an organization that I was fit to run their Twitter account, I would talk about how this exercise taught me what kinds of tweets get the most attention. When tweeting, the best things for a business to do is get the attention of people who wouldn't normally go to their page. I have learned that posting things that are interesting and not necessarily important is what people want. You obviously must tweet serious news as to not lose credibility, but the way to generate interest is to tweet things people want to see. If you can get them to your site, then they will eventually get to the important news. If its an organization such as a large new outlet whose main business is serious news, then you want to tweet headlines that sound interesting. That seems to be what most of them do. You don't lie in the headline, but you want to include that part of the story that is going to make people want to click on it. Once again, of you can get them to the story, they will see the important information. I think knowing how to get people to the site and to interact with tweets would convince them.”