*PRD GIFT Winner AEJMC 2020*

# Who's Out There? Using Google Analytics and Social Media Data to Research Online Publics

Melissa Adams, Appalachian State University

## Rationale

This assignment was designed as an in-class workshop for public relations students, working in "agency teams," as part of their senior capstone campaigns course. For the first stage of their campaign proposal (also referred to as "book") development, students are required to research the online publics of the client organization. This work builds upon the information shared during the client briefing and helps students prepare for doing primary research of their own prior to campaign development. This assignment illustrates the value of digital research methods to understand who is already following the organization online and how they are engaging with them and their content. Finally, this assignment provides students with the opportunity to dig into analytic data and work as a team to analyze findings and develop profiles of key publics—much in the way one would in a professional agency setting.

To do this assignment, students work individually to complete the worksheet but sit together to discuss it as part of their previously formed

agency teams. This arrangement allows students who may have had some exposure to online audience research or Google Analytics to assist teammates who do not, and it provides the instructor more freedom to move around the room to help each team or answer questions as needed. Each student must have access to WiFi and a device with internet access capability to complete the assignment.

## Student Learning Goals

This assignment will help students gain knowledge and cultivate skills in the following areas:

- Build research skills through the use of secondary data analysis (Google Analytics and social media accounts).
- Develop analytic acumen through the synthesis of multiple data points to develop profiles of organizational publics.
- Understand how to perform a basic social media audit for a client.
- Gain experience working with actual client organization data to develop a campaign addressing current business/organizational goals.

## Connection to Public Relations Practice and Theory

Understanding how to access, analyze, and synthesize digital data to provide insights into client publics as part of campaign planning and evaluation is a necessary skill in digital public relations. This assignment mimics basic research activities I performed in the industry as part of campaign planning, which involved analyzing new client social outreach and messaging issues. The assignment may be used in any public relations or social media course focused on strategy and campaign planning. However, the client must provide access to its analytics account to the instructor, which is a minor process requiring less than a minute of their time. As Google Analytics is a free service for all but the very largest organizations, it is commonly used by nonprofits as well as small to medium-sized businesses to track their online engagements and campaigns. Therefore, most instructors should be able to identify clients

who use the platform. If for some reason instructor access is not possible, the assignment may easily be adapted to rely on Google Demo Account data.

In preparation for this assignment, students take part in an instructor-led tour of the client's Google Analytics account and data to familiarize themselves with the platform and standard reports. Special emphasis is placed on the overview reports for demographics and social media traffic. This tour takes place just after client discovery at the start of the course as we discuss the research stage of campaign planning and students read the "Formative Research" section of the assigned text (Smith, 2017).

The reading complements a short lesson on public relations research and supporting theory, including the situational theory of publics and the four levels of activation publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1997). The lesson notes that campaigns may target non-active publics and that through analysis of social media and analytics data, we can start to identify these levels of activity in the client's online audiences. This theoretical connection is extended by asking students "Who is missing?" in relation to the client's online publics. Thinking about inactive or latent publics as simply "missing" from the online data helps students understand that it is often just as important for practitioners to know who they are not reaching online, as it is to know about who they are, as those publics may be key to the organization (Hallahan, 2020). This critical consideration is incorporated into the assignment as a search for missing publics. Following this lesson and discussion, students are then ready to start their research, and the assignment serves as the official "kickoff" for their campaign project. Students access client analytics via a generic Gmail account set up by the instructor for this purpose and conduct searches to identify client social media accounts for observational analysis.

## Evidence of Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes for this assignment are evidenced during the in-class workshop and in the students' written research chapter of their client campaign proposals. Additionally, students are asked to prepare and present a short research report to their classmates following data collection and analysis for the research phase of the project. The research presentations allow students an opportunity to observe, critique, ask questions, and provide peer feedback and ideas for improvements. Finally, evidence for the efficacy of this assignment has been indicated in course evaluations as students noted they appreciated the opportunity to develop "real world" experience to understand how Google Analytics and social media auditing may be used in public relations research. Evidence of both positive learning outcomes and the value of the assignment have been provided by former client organizations through anecdotal feedback at the end of the semester following student presentations and review of final campaign proposals. According to one former class client, student research produced as part of this exercise included some "eye-openers" that helped them move beyond assumptions about their online audiences.

## References

Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Grunig, J. E. (1997). A situational theory of publics: Conceptual history, recent challenges and new research. In D. Moss, T. MacManus, & D. Vercic (Eds.), *Public relations research: An international perspective* (pp. 3-48). International Thomson Business Press.

Hallahan, K. (2000). Inactive publics: The forgotten publics in public relations. *Public Relations Review, 26*(4), 499–515. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(00)00061-8

Smith, R. D. (2017). *Strategic planning for public relations* (5th ed.). Routledge.

**Appendix**
**Double-Sided Assignment Instructions & Worksheet**

**Assignment: Audience Analysis (Identifying online publics)**

**Research Objective:** Develop basic descriptions of the organization's publics using Google Analytics and the client's social media accounts to research.

**Time to complete:** 45 minutes to 1 hour.

This assignment helps provide the foundation for the Publics Analysis in the Research section of your campaign proposal.

**Assignment:** For this assignment, you will analyze the client's publics who are visible on owned social media accounts. You will also use Google Analytics to look at traffic visiting their website. Note the demographics represented and try to identify (by predominance) the primary public and secondary public currently engaged with their online efforts. Be sure to answer all the questions noted in the instructions!

• Give each public a distinctive name that describes them demographically or by their interests (example: "Local enviro-loving millennials"). Record these on your worksheet. Also make notes of any observations about the behavior(s) of these publics that might inform your campaign (example: most engagement on the weekends). We will discuss our analysis during our next class. Be sure to turn in your worksheet when finished. (You may use the reverse of this worksheet or attach an additional sheet of paper if needed.)

- Note any "missing" publics (example: ages, genders, locations the client serves) that are not represented in current followers and traffic reports. (By "missing" publics, I'm referring to any groups not represented in the data we can access—but could be a target public that the organization desires to reach out to. Remember our discussion of active vs. inactive or unaware publics?)

**Social Media Analysis Instructions:**

1. Using the client website or Google search, identify **ALL** of the client's social media accounts. (In addition, once these are found, go ahead and follow them (put yourself in the stream of the client's social media communication!)

2. Record the metrics from their platforms (example: 22,002 Facebook followers).

3. Look at their social followers (user profiles)—who are they? Click on user profiles to see what you can see. Are they students? Employees? Where do they live? Try to discern some basic demos from these profiles, as well as where they live, interests, etc. Make notes on the back of this page.

4. Then, try to find the most popular topics and/or posts. What is the conversation about? What content has generated the most comments or interactions (shares, etc.)?

5. Examine at least **two months of social media data**. If possible, examine more (six months) to gain even more insight into their social audiences.

**GA Analysis Instructions:**

1.  Log into Google Analytics (Gmail account - _____ @gmail. com /password = _____.) BE SURE TO LOG OUT OF YOUR GMAIL & ALL GOOGLE ACCOUNTS (including Drive) FIRST!

2.  Look at **one year of data**. Also look at **demographics** and simple data like **time of day** the website receives the most traffic. (To change dates, click on the dates in the top right and a box will open.)

3.  Where does most of their web traffic come from? (Go to "Acquisition" – then "Source/medium.")

4.  How much of their traffic comes from social media and which platform drives the most visits? ("Social"– then "Networks.")

*REMEMBER – the goal of this assignment is to gather information for your publics research. The more detail, the better! Let me know if you need help with Google Analytics or anything else.*

**WORKSHEET – Please record your metrics and audience description notes below.**

**Platform Metrics**

Facebook:           Instagram:           Twitter:           YouTube:

Other (list below):

Primary (Online) Public        Name: _____
Description (include demographics, interests, etc.)

Secondary (Online) Public    Name: _____
Description (include demographics, etc.)

Missing publics?
Name: _____
Description (include demographics, etc.)

Name: _____
Description (include demographics, etc.)

General observations: