



Intentional Analytics: Social Media Measurement Strategies for Student Media

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Abstract

Savvy student media teams and proactive educators know that social media analytics and measurement are a must for running accounts associated with their news products. Students and advisers can be (more) intentional about how they use data to make decisions about social media content and management. Incorporating analytics into curricula and data into meetings gives students more experiences to carry into their future careers. This article outlines ways student leaders and advisers can help teams focus their social media management with analytics and evaluation.

In addition to running their publications, broadcasts, and agencies, today's student communicators are managing an average of four social media sites (Maben & Colley, 2017) connected to those communication enterprises. Like their professional counterparts, the additional "duties as assigned" are accomplished by adding designated social media managers to the team or asking practitioners to handle the extra digital outlets. Their efforts vary in effectiveness and could all be improved by using social media analytics to inform content creation and social media planning. The purpose of this paper is to provide ways to weave social media analytics and measurement into the social media landscape of student-run communication endeavors.

Successful social media management includes monitoring analytics to discover what is working and what is a waste of time. Social media analytics refers to "the art and science of extracting valuable hidden in-

sights from vast amounts" of social media data (Khan, 2018, p. 91). According to advisers surveyed in one study, a little more than half of student media outlets were reviewing their social media analytics weekly or monthly (Maben & Colley, 2017). Thirteen percent never analyzed the stats, and 15% of advisers did not know if students conducted such analytics.

What the research failed to ascertain was the depth of analytics and what kind of analytics were consulted. Social media measurement is multi-layered. With free online tools, students can use multimedia analytics, hyperlink analytics, location analytics, and network analytics to dive deeper into understanding their audience, their needs, and preferences. Using the tools and the data produced to make decisions and tailor social media work requires intentionality on the part of the students and advisers. Ideas for scaffolding a more intentional approach to social media analytics for student media teams are expanded below around

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these topics: articulating purpose, audience visualization, creating a data culture, curricular support, and adviser scaffolding.

Articulating Purpose

The student team needs to discuss their purpose for using each social media outlet. What do they want to happen? This conversation is prime for orientation, training, or a brainstorming session. Analyzing a sample of posts may indicate an overarching purpose for the platform, or may point to a lack thereof. In a study of award-winning student-run TV stations, two-thirds of tweets promoted station activities and a quarter delivered breaking news blurbs like a headline service (Cozma & Hallaq, 2019). Looking at a collection of student media, with news/TV outlets, public relations agencies, and radio stations, Maben and Colley (2017) identified the main reasons student communication enterprises use social media: as an extension of the news/media product, ways to connect with readers/viewers, and as an additional distribution vehicle. The purpose of each platform may vary. The organization's Facebook page may be a distribution portal for campus-wide stories, Twitter might be used for breaking news, Instagram for wild art and photo stories, and TikTok for shortened broadcasts of longer versions that are posted on YouTube. Students can write quick one-sentence purpose statements to guide each platform and that intended audience. Longer standing teams might create a full communication audit with a strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) assessment and situation analysis, or they could partner with public relations students who need a real-world client.

The one-sentence purpose statements should push beyond vague "engagement with readers/viewers," students need something they can measure. Do they want more non-followers to find their Instagram posts, increasing the outlet's reach and brand awareness? If the purpose statement for Facebook is to distribute campus news articles, they could measure shares and reach, with a goal of increasing those numbers quarterly. They can even check their website analytics to see which site is leading the most clicks to the online articles. Articulating the purpose helps keep the team on target when crafting content.

Visualizing Audience

Platform analytics give basic demographic statistics such as follower age and gender. Students need to re-

view these to see if their social sites' viewers are who they perceive them to be and how it matches their other readership/viewership stats. If they imagine a first-time-in-college residential student and Facebook Insights reports 50-year-old women as the top viewers, a disconnect must be remedied.

To better conceptualize their audience students can use analytics like demographic data to build a model follower to keep in mind when crafting messages. For example, our Instagram follower is an 18-24 woman living in our college town who is online in the late afternoon on Thursday. They can also craft personas they wish to reach and tailor content. Atwong (2015) asks students to create a target persona for California State University-Fullerton's social media practicum. Students build a persona after interviewing actual individuals. The graphics team or a cartoonist could create a visual representation of Betty, Devon, and Juanita to post in the newsroom so the social team keeps the personas in the forefront when creating social content. If the team notices a disconnect between a platform and a potential audience, building a target persona will focus posting strategies with the new demographic in mind.

Some platforms allow data to be parsed to see if the top few percent account for most of your consumption. These top fans could be used as model personas, and partnerships could be explored for additional ways to connect like reader advisory board membership, online brand ambassadors, or influencer interactions.

Creating a Data Culture

Integrating data into the student media routine and coursework will help create a data culture. Analytics should be provided to the entire executive team at regular intervals. While chasing likes and followers can become distracting, students and advisers can focus on the purpose statements for each platform. Did we do what we hoped to do? Did we improve over last month? Which post drove the most clicks to our website? If the team has a social media manager, ensure that person is on the agenda to deliver a quick data-driven report. Next to the redlined/marked-up edition from yesterday, add social media posts and how they could have been improved to better accomplish the main goal for the platform. Alert content creators to analytics for their posts so they can see which ones excelled and which ones missed.

Social media work must be integrated into the

staff's evaluation process. Cozma and Hallaq (2019) found in their study on student TV-news Twitter usage that multimedia was a significant predictor of retweeting. For example, students could review how content with images fared against video and text-only posts to decide how best to deploy mobile journalists, photographers, and videographers. A review of a semester's content may not be reasonable as students rush off to finals at the end of the term, but the next semester's orientation or training session could inform the new team. Sometimes it is easier to critique others' work, so what about swapping data with another university's organization or publication team?

Data could provide fodder for an infographic or quick brief on the most clicked-on stories based on the platform to be shared with readers and viewers. Disseminating the data also represents an effort for transparency. Practicing with their own data helps student journalists see the value in tackling large data journalism projects or PR students better conduct research in the public relations campaign process. Benefits to a data culture include valuable accompanying skills, as Veeck and Hoyer (2014) found when adding social media analysis to traditional marketing research projects. Social media analysis includes primary data and students must collaborate, think critically, gather that data, analyze it, and report it (p. 39).

Curricular Support

Instructors can help set a culture of evidence-based decision-making in classes. Students in media writing courses could submit with each story two possible social media posts with hashtag options that would promote or disseminate their stories. By providing two, the social media team could split-test or A/B test the content, or colleagues could discuss why one post might work better than the other. Students can test copy options, photography options, location tags, and hashtags and how to adapt content for different social platforms. Students in photojournalism courses can practice writing captions for various platforms, selecting images for carousels, and weaving images together for Instagram Reels. When feasible, these posts could be posted on actual accounts and the analytics reviewed. Factoring social media workload into collegiate courses prepares students to automatically think of digital as an accompanying piece to their efforts and prepares them for their dual roles of communicator and news marketer (Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

In Garcia and Brooks' (2023) social media take-

over activity, they guide students from client introductions to analytics and reporting through an exercise where students learn about strategic content creation. For those replicating the exercise, they suggest measuring the takeover's success by comparing "social metrics for the posted content and the total number of scheduled posts against the number of posts that followed the strategy and went live on social media" (p. 62). Infusing analytics in course exercises supports the necessary evaluation phase in public relations work and reader/viewer feedback and engagement metrics for journalists.

Big data also offers a backdrop for conversations about privacy, information stewardship, and definitions of engagement and listening. Mining data for ideas and preferences is surveillance rather than listening. Student media can check their analytics for evidence of listening (and responding) by checking on how the team responded to comments left by their social media followers. They can practice information stewardship by creating policies on how data will be safeguarded and who will have access. Engagement is a construct that students will need to define for their organizations. For some platforms, it might be shares or remixes; for others, it could be comments or likes. This goes back to why is the organization managing this platform.

Students can pursue online certifications that will help with social media data analysis. Some certifications offer discounts or free modules if faculty members register their courses with the provider. One bonus is that students can add well-regarded certifications like Hootsuite, HubSpot, Google Analytics, Adobe Analytics, and Meltwater Academy, to their resumes. Integrating data analysis into the student media terrain gives students some experience, but other questions the team wants answered by data may merit outsourcing. Public relations courses, PRSSA, and even graduate research methods courses need data to analyze and could provide the experience of "hiring" and communicating clearly with an outside "firm." The client-analyst relationship is another potential learning lesson for students.

Adviser Scaffolding

Research supports the fact that student media outlets are not employing best practices in social media (Filak, 2014; Saks et al., 2019). Advisers and students prioritized social media differently as Kothari and Hickerson (2016) found that faculty used social out-

lets for crowdsourcing ideas, source recruitment, and promoting student stories. But students rated these potential usages at much lower percentages. Advisers can bring best practices to student leaders. For example, Saks et al. (2019) identified these best practices for student media usage on Twitter: “retweeting and mentioning accounts beyond the news organization, using hashtags, tweeting multimedia including, polls, pictures, graphics, and videos, linking to the publication’s website, linking to external content” (p. 293). Analytics can help student media measure how well they are matching—and exceeding—industry best practices.

Intentional scaffolding for student media teams provides individual and organizational benefits. For organizations, resources can be better allocated based on data and outcomes. Underperforming and older platforms might be phased out for newer ones that target the intended audience. On the individual level, students will be positioned with more than just content creation skills. Adding analytics and measurement extends the virtual laboratory (Atwong, 2015) of student media. Whether going into journalism, public relations, or a major outside of communication, students will have analytics skills, hands-on experience, and an understanding of data and social media analytics from planning to execution to evaluation.

Checklist for Intentional Analytics

- √ Define each platform’s purpose with a one-sentence purpose statement.
- √ Check each platform’s demographics. Do they match your perceptions?
- √ Develop a sample person to illustrate your main audience for each platform.
- √ Make data discussions part of the culture and curricula.
- √ Include social media analytics in orientations and staff training, making certain to pass along institutional knowledge.
- √ Discuss relevant data at regular intervals. Did you fulfill your purpose statement?
- √ Add redlined social media posts to your newsroom bulletin board next to the last issue.
- √ Use best practices to set content posting guidelines and then measure effectiveness.
- √ Aggregate the outlet’s most relevant social media data to share with readers and viewers in a brief or an infographic.
- √ Trade data with another organization for a third-party critique of social media efforts.
- √ Support student and adviser professional development through analytics certificate programs.
- √ Rinse and repeat. Social media measurement is a cycle.

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