

**Keeping up with the Professionals: Gaining Insight About Emerging Online Media
Through Interviews With Experts**

Innovative Poster

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

Emerging online media are all around us: whether you are searching for content on a website, commenting on a friend's Facebook status, or playing a game on a smartphone application. Rice and Gattiker (2001) identified components of emerging media: 1) communication structured through technological mediums, 2) communication that creates a network between individuals and information, and 3) digitalized content. Emerging media were once considered electronic mail and video conferencing (Lea, O'Shea, & Fung, 1995). In the past 20 years, emerging media have evolved into an exhaustive list of any digital method of communication. Although many scholars once regarded certain aspects of emerging media (including the Internet) as passing fads, Kawamoto (2012) said "few would disagree that digital media technologies are an important and enduring feature of the global communications landscape" (p. ix).

Agricultural communications research has explored topics related to emerging digital media (Shaw, Meyers, Irlbeck, Doerfert, Abrams, & Morgan, 2015; Wagler & Cannon, 2015; Moore, Meyers, Irlbeck, & Burris, 2015). These studies explored how emerging media were being used by agriculturalists or how emerging media portrayed agriculture. However, little research has been conducted on teaching emerging media strategies to agricultural communications students. Clem (2013) found that the core competencies needed of agricultural communications students included communication and proficient use of technology.

As agricultural communications faculty look to create a "sufficient scientific and professional workforce that addresses the challenges of the 21st century," (Doerfert, 2011, p. 9) faculty should expose students to emerging media technologies and discuss strategies for use. To achieve this purpose, an innovative assignment was used in an emerging media course to help students connect the abstract concepts discussed in class to how those concepts would appear in actual online communication efforts.

How it Works

As an assignment in a graduate-level agricultural communications course at Texas Tech University, students were asked to interview an agricultural communications professional whose main job responsibility is working with emerging digital media. A class discussion guided the development of the interview questions and protocol; however, the students had freedom to add or delete questions based on their interviewee's job title. Students were responsible for identifying and contacting the selected professional to conduct an in-person or phone interview. After the interview, students submitted a question-and-answer article to provide information about the interviewee's role and responsibilities regarding their work with emerging media.

After the question-and-answer article was submitted to the course instructor, the students completed a short reflection that addressed five questions: 1) What did you learn? 2) What was the best part of this experience? 3) What was the most challenging? 4) Should this be an assignment for next time? and 5) What would you change about this assignment next time?

Results to Date

When asked to provide a reflection on what was learned, the students focused on four key aspects relating to work with emerging media: 1) connecting to the audience, 2) creating a consistent plan, 3) willingness to experiment, and 4) high level of career potential.

Students were asked to reflect upon the best part of this experience; three main themes emerged: 1) learning social media in a business setting, 2) connecting and networking with professionals, and 3) personally connecting with the agricultural communications profession.

Students said three aspects of the assignment were challenging: 1) keeping the interviewee on track, 2) developing questions, and 3) time associated with contacting people.

Each of the students agreed the assignment should be used in the future. One student reflected, “This should definitely be an assignment for next time. I think sometimes it is better to hear how other companies work from the source rather than just taking notes over it and listening in a lecture. It also helps the students go out of the element to speak with a professional.”

Future Plans and Advice to Others

Based on students’ reflections and evaluating their submitted work, this assignment will be used again. Students were asked what they would change for the next time the assignment was assigned. While a classroom discussion provided a brainstorming session on potential questions, multiple students asked for more time to develop good interview questions. Perhaps an interview guide should be submitted to the professor for feedback before the interview is conducted.

One student who spoke with more than one professional for the assignment suggested all students should speak with at least two emerging media professionals. The student reflected, “I spoke with two people, and received very different responses to similar questions. Speaking with only one professional may provide a limited view of the opportunities in the industry.” Another student provided valuable advice to others. She explained how it is necessary to get out of your comfort zone. Students should be given the advice to contact a large agency or someone they do not know so the assignment could create networking opportunities. Another suggestion was to create a social media post based on the interview. The student explained how the post could be a thank you to the professionals on social media, a short blog about what advice they learned from their interview participants, or an example of how the student is going to utilize the knowledge learned in the interview.

From the instructor’s viewpoint, this assignment was very effective in helping students gain a first-hand perspective of what someone in an online communications role does on a daily basis. The students’ feedback will be considered when making changes to the assignment in future course offerings. One change will be for students to provide a summary of what they learned from the interview as a conclusion for the Q&A article.

Cost and Resources Needed

No costs are associated with using an interview assignment in the classroom. Students and the instructor developed the questions. Instructors should allow adequate time when incorporating self-reflection in the classroom.

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