What's Trending? Teaching Students to Monitor Social Media Content with Meltwater

Cara R. Lawson, M.S.
Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
Phone: (806) 742-2880
Email: cara.lawson@ttu.edu

Courtney Meyers, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Graduate Studies Coordinator
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
Phone: (806) 834-4364
Email: courtney.meyers@ttu.edu

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Introduction / Need for Innovation or Idea

According to Paine (2011), "in order to succeed in this new era of easy and frequent conversations, it is critical that you continuously listen to and evaluate what your market is saying about you" (p. 5). Due to its ease of use, speed, and reach, social media have the potential to set agendas and trends in a variety industries (Asur, 2010). For effective online communication efforts, audience analysis and interaction are important factors, and agricultural communicators must be mindful and aware of the audience's appraisal of media content to gain knowledge and insight to consumer sentiment regarding agricultural issues (Gorham, 2016). Meltwater is a social media monitoring system that seeks to measure consumer sentiment.

Agricultural communications educators are tasked with preparing students for entry to the agricultural communications profession; therefore, they need to educate students on successful uses and benefits of technological tools to better engage audiences with information (Rhoades & Aue, 2010). Students entering the communications profession must be familiar with tools and platforms to efficiently monitor, research, and analyze social media content. The innovative pedagogical strategy described in this narrative was also developed to provide undergraduate students with an opportunity to conduct research. Undergraduate research projects allow students to gain skills in critical thinking and problem solving and can also help to clarify and refine career intentions (Hunter, Laursen, & Seymore, 2007).

How it works

Meltwater is a social media monitoring platform that allows users to monitor and analyze social media coverage through interactive informational dashboards (Vance, 2018). Dashboard features include tools for measuring items such as top social posts, sentiment, and trending themes. In groups of three or four, agricultural communications students at Texas Tech University were assigned an agricultural organization to monitor using Meltwater. Before starting the project, students watched a Meltwater introductory video and completed an accompanying worksheet to learn about the various functions, tools, and capabilities in the program. Students then met in their groups and established searches and dashboards in Meltwater.

To begin, students researched their assigned organization to learn about its purpose, activities, and existing online presence. Then, they determined a time frame and keywords to use in monitoring social media content. Meltwater searched for those keywords in publicly available online content during the established time frame and provided information through a variety of data visualization tools. Students observed how their assigned organization was represented on social media during a set time frame because viewing data over time allows for a more effective measure of content (Asur & Huberman, 2010). Mid-semester, students were asked to complete a progress worksheet that outlined questions and areas to be addressed in their final reports. The final reports summarized how their assigned organizations were represented on social media, shared figures and charts, and provided recommendations for improving or changing the organization's social media presence. Students were given four class periods to work on the project and were also encouraged to meet with their group members outside of class.

Results to Date/Implications

On the final day of class, students were asked to complete a survey about the project including what Meltwater features were used, suggestions for future classes, what was confusing, how they might use Meltwater in future careers, and levels of agreement regarding research skills. Of the 34 students enrolled in the class, 32 completed the questionnaire. While a variety of features were available in Meltwater, four of the 20 features were used by at least half of the students. The most commonly used Meltwater features were sentiment (72%), social reach v. social volume (53%), top social posts (50%), and social reach (50%).

Overwhelmingly, students said they enjoyed using the monitoring capabilities available in Meltwater (84%). Common comments from students were: "There was lots of information to look through and gather from," and "It was nice to see the results of social media and the impact it has." However, students did report confusion in navigating the platform and setting up searches and features. Students suggested future classes be provided with more instruction on how to use the platform and be provided with more information on the final project. Students also indicated they would use Meltwater in the future if available to monitor industry trends (75%), monitor their brand or company (69%), and share analytics with co-workers and supervisors (44%).

Students indicated their level of agreement with eight statements to determine the impact of the project on research skills and benefits of the research process (Hunter, Laursen, & Seymour, 2007; Lopatto, 2003; Trosset, Lopatto, & Elgin, 2008). Using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = strongly agree, students provided their level of agreement to statements such as, "I encountered a sense of curiosity while working on this project," and "I sought to produce a meaningful final report." The overall mean for this scale was 3.88 (*SD* = 0.83) indicating a slightly positive perception of their research skill development and benefits of the research process.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This was the first time Meltwater had been used integrated in this class. However, as others have noted (Rhoades & Aue, 2010; Settle et al., 2011), it is important agricultural communications students learn to conduct social media monitoring activities. This resource will continue to be used in future offerings of this course.

While Meltwater did provide a wealth of monitoring information, many students reported it was confusing to navigate. To overcome this, students should be encouraged to spend more time on a regular basis exploring the program. Instructors should invest adequate time teaching students how to set up and save searches and dashboards and consider a Meltwater check-in type of activity more often. Providing students with examples of the final monitoring report may have eased their apprehension about the assignment. Now that several have been created, these will be available to serve as guidance for future students.

Costs/Resources Needed

Meltwater for educational purposes was free. An email to Meltwater will connect instructors to someone in the education division who will help students establish their accounts and provide educational resources. Meltwater is available for more professional uses at varying costs.

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