

Chapter 7

Social Media Audit and Analytics: Exercises for Marketing and Public Relations Courses

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ABSTRACT

Beyond influencing the ways we communicate and we do business, social media is currently challenging traditional higher education in many respects: from the way in which courses are delivered and students interact with each other and with their lecturers to the content that the courses cover. In particular, the emergence of the social media specialist working in marketing-communications, creative industries or journalism, and their use of ever-changing content management and analytics tools require adaptation of courses to the constant changes in industry. Starting from two case studies of teaching social media auditing and analytics as part of courses taught in Belgium and Bahrain, this chapter aims to present a model exercise for marketing and public relations classrooms covering these topics. The discussion of the challenges of teaching social media audit and analytics emphasizes the need of more and constant collaboration between academia and industry as well as the need to ensure that students have a high level of media literacy before they embark on such a career route.

INTRODUCTION

It is an exciting time for communicators, academics and students. With social media uses going beyond the traditional business and educational fields and with its adoption rates increasing ex-

ponentially every year, educators have numerous opportunities to explore how social media change not only how practitioners, companies and publics communicate but also how they teach the discipline.

With calls for public relations professionals for instance to be social media ready (Falls, 2009) and indications that some might be still struggling

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2851-9.ch007

with the impact of new media (Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel, 2006; James, 2007), educators may need to review course curricula in light of new media developments and industry responses. After all, revisiting content would only be in line with academia's pledge to prepare students for their professional life and integrate practice in the classroom (Ehling, 1992).

While educators agree that active learning is the best method through which students can put theory into practice, Coombs and Rybacki (1999) suggest that public relations educators are rather slow to utilize new technology in the classroom. This lack of integration of new and social media in the teaching process – from the method of delivery to content – is also perceived by students (Hemmi, Bayne and Land, 2009) who include new technologies and electronic communication in their list with items which they associate with their weakest feeling of preparation. The same list includes, among others, understanding technology, setting performance criteria and design and layout.

Drawing on reflective practice and several case studies of implementing social media audit exercises as part of undergraduate courses, this chapter aims to fill the new media skills gap perceived by students as lacking in their preparation and deemed necessary by practitioners. In doing so, the chapter presents several models for social media audit exercises and how they have been used in different educational contexts. Although the primary focus of the exercise is on B2C the principles can easily apply to a B2B context. While the chapter examines the importance of evaluating current media activities from a strategic perspective, discusses the link between strategy, goals and objectives and how they reflect into a company's social media communication, its aim is to present a model exercise in its evolution and discuss its potential use in the classroom rather than evaluate its impact on teaching, learning and practice, the author considering it is to soon to see any effects on either areas.

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA, AUDITS, AND ANALYTICS

Social media is one of the newest concepts associated with new and emerging technologies and one of the fastest growing areas within the new media landscape. In her review of the impact of new media on public relations, Melanie James (2007) emphasizes that definitions related to new media remain fluid and continue to evolve, their key features including portability of data and mobility in communications. Like new media definitions, social media definitions are fluid as well. Heidi Cohen's (2011) collection of 30 definitions of social media offered by a group of social media, marketing and PR professionals and Econsultancy's (2009), a community for digital marketers, equally impressive list of 34 definitions are both good examples. While some definitions focus on platforms, formats, tools and specificities of the digital content production process, others provide reflections about social media as channels for communication and interaction between organizations and target audiences.

However different, most of the definitions recognize that communication through social media is in real-time and users generate the content that can be posted, transported, linked or aggregated from a platform to another. Among the platforms mentioned most often are Facebook, the social networking site with more than 640 million registered users, Twitter, the micro-blogging platform with more than 200 million registered users (Uehara Henrikson, 2011) and YouTube, the multi-media sharing site owned by Google where more than 48 hours of video are uploaded every minute (Bal, 2011).

Other characteristics of social media include a requirement for transparency, a potential for engagement and dialogue - either one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many -, a customer-centered approach and when used for marketing and communication purposes a need for strategy and coordination. The strategy however requires

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