Teaching Tweeting: Recommendations for Teaching Social Media Work in LIS and MSIS Programs

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A combination of public relations, marketing, advertising, and information and communication technologies, social media work is an increasingly important part of information professionals' jobs. This paper reports on a survey-based study of 49 information professionals who routinely use social media in their work. Respondents provided information about their most-used social media tools and platforms, described their specific social media tasks, and shared how they learned to use social media. They also gave advice on the possible integration of social media into an MLIS or MSIS curriculum. While considering technical skills and the knowledge of specific platforms to be important, respondents also recommend that professionals be able to multi-task, work and update their knowledge independently, and adopt new technologies. Above all, respondents emphasized the high standards for social media communication and encouraged strong written communications skills, thus suggesting that MLIS and MSIS coursework should actively develop such skills.

Keywords: MLIS curriculum, MSIS curriculum, social media, communications skills, information professional, social media work, social media librarian, research methods

Introduction

Social media attention can be a risky business. Doing something very well can result in an incredible and instantaneous surge of positive attention, as in the case of Esurance's Super Bowl 2014 "#Esurancesave30" twitter sweepstakes and advertising campaign (Nudd, 2014). The company gave away $1.5 million (supposedly saved by advertising *after* the Super Bowl rather than during it) to a lucky "re-tweeter," earning itself millions of re-tweets in "free" advertising. Doing something very wrong, however, can generate an equally spectacular backlash of public ridicule, as with JCPenney's confusing "tweeting with mittens" campaign during the very same Super Bowl event (Picchi, 2014). JCPenney's tweets were deliberately filled with typographical errors that confused or offended Twitter users (who claimed that JCPenney must be inept or even drunk), thus generating millions of derisive re-tweets for the campaign.

As multiple forms of social media pass into the realm of "daily life" in even the poorest countries (Pew Research Center, 2014), tapping into them becomes an increasingly necessary part of most businesses and services (Holmes, 2012). Large corporations, family-owned restaurants,

independent service providers, governmental agencies, and non-profit organizations have all developed a social media presence over the past few years; the leveraging of social media therefore extends into areas not frequently associated with traditional advertising and marketing, including libraries (Solomon, 2011). Consider, for example, the U.S. Library of Congress page, "Connecting with the Library," which allows users to interact with several forms of social media (Library of Congress, 2015).

Social media platforms have therefore impacted how various professionals share information with customers, clients, and users in an effective manner—fundamentally changing the ways that their organizations communicate (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Despite the importance of such communication, social media work and the expertise required to perform its tasks is neither well understood nor frequently integrated into academic coursework (Holmes, 2012). With such potentially high stakes, how does a new information professional learn to participate effectively in this dynamic activity?

The study presented here addresses this question, with answers provided by current American information professionals whose jobs include work with social media. Below, we begin by reviewing the scant literature on this topic. We then describe our survey methodology and profile our sample of respondents. Finally, we present the results of the study and discuss the implications for a Master's of Science in Information Studies (MSIS) curriculum.

Scholarship on Social Media Work and Academic Curricula

Social media work is a new and dynamic field that combines the tasks and responsibilities of public relations, marketing, and advertising, while strongly relying on the use of information and communication technologies (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Social media work may be defined by the specific use of mobile and web-based platforms where individuals and communities create, share, discuss, and change multimedia content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Although "social media is only a new set of tools, new technology that allows us to more efficiently connect and build relationships," similar to previously existing information and communication tools, social media may be considered "exponentially more effective" for these purposes (Safko, 2012, p. 5). Because consumers are increasingly using these platforms—such as content sharing sites, blogs, social networking, and wikis—to interact with (and about) organizations, such content can now "significantly impact a firm's reputation, sales, and even survival" (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011, p. 241).

Social media, therefore, has been changing the way that both organizations and individuals view their work and their profession. For example, one international study of public relations professionals found that 61% of participants agreed that social media and blogs have changed the ways that their organizations communicate (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Fields other than public relations have shown similar impacts: job postings requiring social media skills as part of employee qualifications increased by 87% from 2011 to 2012 (Holmes, 2012). An examination of the job postings on the professional networking platform LinkedIn indicates a wide variety both of skills that might be required (e.g., experience with social media tools and technologies, good oral and written communication skills, website management and implementation, design skills, project management skills) and of expected educational backgrounds (LinkedIn, n.d). Taken together, these diverse lists suggest that employers do not have a singular definition of the qualifications needed for an individual entering the field of social media work.

Despite a complicated landscape of job requirements, some educational programs

have begun incorporating social media courses into their curricula. However, such social media curricula is not necessarily translating into increased proficiency in the workplace, and many professionals still feel highly uncertain about their work skills (Holmes, 2012). A lack of clear research into the particular knowledge and skills required for social media work directly impacts the ability to effectively integrate these requirements into formal educational programs.

This lack of research is particularly true for the education of information professionals. Although the use of social media by libraries and librarians to engage with patrons has gained recent attention (Hagman & Caleton, 2014; Ramsay & Vecchione, 2014), little is known about how such information professionals actually learn to use social media in a professional context. One study addressing the future of libraries and LIS work found a desire among LIS professionals to embrace tools, including social media platforms, that enable instant access to users and drive "libraries and librarians to be more user-centered and dynamic" (Partridge, Menzies, Lee, & Murn, 2010, p. 270). Another study of three LIS professionals found that the use of Twitter in their work assisted with sustaining connections with users and peers, building networks for professional support and information sharing, and staying informed with relevant news (Mulatiningsih, Partridge, & Davis, 2013). These studies indicate, however, that a both wider and deeper understanding of social media work is necessary in order to prepare a curriculum for LIS programs.

Current students training to be information professionals believe social media instruction to be essential for their education (Nathan, MacGougan, & Shaffer, 2014). Although social media work can overlap with other forms of LIS work, the specific tasks involved in this work look different and use specific tools. Additionally, students studying in LIS programs may find themselves utilizing these social media skills within a variety of positions, including positions beyond the traditional LIS field. In order to reconcile these gaps in the literature with the needs of MSIS students, the input of current information professionals working with social media is critical for shedding light on the nature of social media work in a variety of settings and for outlining necessary knowledge and skills that can best prepare students for a wide range of possible positions.

We therefore surveyed information professionals from a number of information fields in order to develop a diverse portrait of this still-emerging work. We collected meaningful data on the necessary knowledge, aptitude, and tools that one should know before taking on social media work tasks. Our study is thus a significant step towards preparing future information professionals for doing social media work within a variety of contexts, as the results of this study directly contribute to understanding what might constitute effective social media instruction within an MSIS curriculum. Along with exploring the broad nature of the social media, we address the following key questions:

1. What work settings and tools do information professionals use for social media work?
2. What skills, knowledge, and experience are important for successful performance of social media work?
3. What sources of knowledge do information professionals consider important for gaining social media skills? And finally,
4. What advice do professionals have for the instruction of future professionals who do social media work?

Research Methods

Survey Development and Administration

In order to create a survey that would effectively address the questions above, we conducted both primary and secondary re-

search. Exploratory interviews were held with six information professionals who regularly perform social media work; in some cases, these professionals were also observed doing this work. We also performed an in-depth exploration of existing scholarship, social media blogs, websites, and job postings. Based on these sources, we developed a draft survey that included both closed- and open-ended survey items focusing on such topics as: the tasks that an information professional who does social media work performs on a daily basis; the tools and skills he or she draws upon to complete these tasks; how educational background and professional development contribute to being able to do the job; and advice for integrating social media into an MSIS curriculum.

The survey draft was reviewed by colleagues and revised before pretesting it with current MSIS students, other members of the research team, and some other individuals unassociated with either the research project or social media. Pretesting included measuring response time (in minutes), identifying problems with question wording or fluency, checking on construct validity of both the individual items and of the general survey, and catching any technical errors or typos. Based on the pretest, the survey was revised and then inputted into the SurveyMonkey online survey software, where it was piloted with four social media professionals who had participated in the earlier interviews. The final survey included 24 questions in the categories of: professional background information, everyday work, education and development, personal occupational enrichment, knowledge, and changes in the workplace. Thirteen additional questions requested individual difference data, such as indicating part- versus full-time worker, industry, and gender. The average time to take the survey was 15 minutes.

The final survey was administered online in March/April 2014 via a link to SurveyMonkey. The survey was anonymous; it did not request nor store identifiable data of respondents (e.g., IP address, email address as available). Because this social media work survey was one part of a larger survey of many information professional roles, survey respondents were initially asked, "Among the roles that you take on in your everyday work, which of the following would you like to answer questions about?" Respondents were allowed only one choice and were not allowed to re-take the survey or to answer questions about multiple roles. The results from those who selected "social media work" are presented in this article.

Sample Development

Our study primarily used two non-probability sampling methods: convenience and snowball sampling. The convenience sample comprised a list of all registered alumni (2,631 individuals) who had graduated with an MLIS, MSIS, or Ph.D. from our institution between the early 1950s through 2013. An email invitation was sent to the members of this list; those who did not respond or opt out were sent two reminder messages. The snowball sample resulted from asking respondents to send an anonymous survey link to other professionals (not strictly LIS professionals) for whom they believed the survey would be relevant. This request appeared both in the invitation email and on the last page of the survey, with a link provided in both locations. Finally, to increase the overall sample size and the diversity within the sample, an additional group of non-LIS specific professionals who do social media work was specifically sampled by sending emails to personal contacts, social media professional associations, and online social media groups, as well as by using Twitter retweets and hashtags. The final survey results included 49 responses to the social media survey. Some questions received fewer than 49 responses; therefore, the total number of responses to those questions have been provided where appropriate.

Respondent Profile

Most of the 49 respondents of our survey are employed full-time (89%), working 40 hours a week or more. Additionally, most respondents (90%) are employed by a single organization and their primary industries are "information" (18%), "education" (14%), "government" (8%), and "arts, design, entertainment, sports, or media" (8%). Respondents were asked to write in their job title, which resulted in a range of responses. The most common title includes some sort of librarianship (librarian or other library work), making up 38% of the responses. Other major categories include a communication or marketing function (29%), titles with "social media" in the name (16%), and a few managers and other professionals (e.g., city manager). About three-quarters of respondents indicated that they have been "doing social media work" for between 1 and 5 years, with the remaining quarter reporting 6 to 10 years.

Survey respondents are highly educated, with 65% holding master's degrees, and the remaining 35% holding bachelor's degrees. Three-quarters earned their highest degree in Library and Information Sciences/Information Studies, with the remaining percentage made up of other related fields. About half of the respondents were alumni of the survey host institution. Among those who reported gender, three-quarters of respondents indicated "female," perhaps consistent with the current gender composition of information professional occupations more generally.

Findings

Our findings strongly suggest that while respondents identified themselves as participating in social media work, most did not view this work as their primary task—with many describing their overall work using other terms. In fact, most individuals responding to this question did not agree ("disagree" or "strongly disagree") that

social media is their primary work task. Likewise, nearly all of the respondents agreed ("agree" or "strongly agree") that they are responsible for tasks other than those related to social media, with most respondents stating that they spend 4 hours or fewer per week on social media-related work tasks.

What is the Nature of Social Media Work?

In order to explore how professionals think about and express their social media work role, we asked respondents to select all the terms they use to describe the work they do. The most frequent terms selected include "marketing" (65%), "communications" (63%), and "public relations" (47%). Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) selected "social media" as a term for describing their work to others. This variety of terms used by respondents to describe their work may possibly be related both to the newness of this developing field and to the lack of indicators that social media work is an established profession: only a small number of respondents answered that they have been involved with a social media professional society. Additionally, the majority of respondents typically work independently on their social media tasks in an office provided by their employer.

An integral component of social media work is the social media platform itself. In our interviews, we discovered that some platforms may be considered very important for an individual's work, even if they are infrequently used. We therefore asked respondents to indicate the importance of various social media platforms for their work. Facebook was viewed as the most important platform given, with a mean score of 3.49 ($n = 45$, SD = 0.869, on a four-point scale where "not at all important" is 1 and "very important" is 4), followed closely by Twitter, with a mean score of 3.23 ($n = 44$, SD = 0.937). Although respondents considered detailed knowledge of platforms' user interfaces

to be very important, with a mean score of 3.55 (n = 44, SD = 0.589, four-point scale), understanding the "technical specifications behind current social media platforms" ("e.g., software coding or hardware specifications") was not considered particularly important (mean = 2.07, n = 42, SD = 0.867).

Social media work consists of more than merely using social media platforms, however, and our respondents reported a variety of skills and tasks to be important for their jobs. "Communication skills" represents the most important skillset presented in our survey, with a mean score of 3.89 (n = 44, SD = 0.321, four-point scale). Notably, no respondents selected "not at all important" or "somewhat important" for this skillset. Respondents also rated "project management skills" and "public relations skills" as important; these skills were significant themes within several open-ended questions also, particularly the perceived importance of multitasking and social media's role in acting as the public face of companies and organizations. Table 1 shows the means of importance for several skills and experiences specifically included in the survey.

Our preliminary research suggested written communication skills would be especially important for successfully completing social media tasks. As shown in Table 2, we asked respondents to rate the level of importance of a number of writing tasks. Among the tasks we asked about, making posts on social media and responding to comments by readers were rated as most important and had the least variation among respondents. Proofreading was also considered important, with a mean of 3.24 out of 4. Less important were blogging and drafting public relations statements and press releases.

We also asked respondents about the importance of several other social media-specific "activities" that they might perform in their work to understand how important coverage of these activities would be in a social media curriculum. Among these, respondents considered "analyzing data from social media" to be most important, with a mean of 2.93 (n = 46, SD = 0.854, four-point scale). However, responses about the importance both of "using social media management applications" and "managing a team" were mixed.

Considering the fast-paced, ever-chang-

Table 1. Mean Importance of Select Skills and Experience.

Skills and Experience	n	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Communication skills	44	3	4	3.89	0.321
Project management skills	44	1	4	3.32	0.771
Public relations skills	43	1	4	3.28	0.766
An understanding of psychological concepts	39	1	4	2.87	0.801
Marketing experience	42	1	4	2.76	0.958
Journalism experience	43	1	4	2.33	0.892
Advertising experience	42	1	4	2.26	0.857
Technical specifications behind current social media platforms	42	1	4	2.07	0.867
Design skills	44	1	4	2.91	0.741
Website management and implementation	44	1	4	2.98	0.902
An understanding of analytics	43	1	4	3.07	0.737
Web technology experience	42	1	4	3.14	0.899
Detailed knowledge of using social media platforms	44	2	4	3.55	0.589

Table 2. Mean Importance of Several Writing Tasks.

Writing Task	*n*	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Making posts to social media	45	2	4	3.62	0.684
Responding to messages or comments	45	1	4	3.37	0.747
Proofreading official communications	46	1	4	3.24	1.015
Drafting public relations statements and press releases	45	1	4	2.71	1.180
Blogging	44	1	4	2.84	1.098

ing nature of social media platforms, we asked one question specifically about "the level of change that [respondents] have experienced in working with social media" since starting their current position. Most respondents reported "significant change" (the highest level). When asked how they thought "[their] social media work would change over the next five years," respondents provided a wide variety of open-ended comments indicating both a high level of uncertainty and a high level of change prevalent in social media work. Some respondents predicted that change would come in the form of new social media platforms, while others discussed the migration of specific audiences away from well-established platforms and projected an increase in the use of mobile social media.

How Did Survey Respondents Learn to do Social Media Work?

The professionals taking our survey strongly emphasized the process of independently building knowledge through methods such as "keeping up on the social media trends," attending workshops and training sessions, and having personal experience with social media platforms—including "[getting] their hands dirty and [using] the platforms." When respondents were asked to rate the importance of various knowledge sources in "shaping [their] current knowledge on social media," informal education and work experience were considered more important than formal education, with 13 out of 42 respondents listing formal education as "Not at all im-

portant." This response may be explained by most respondents having received formal education in fields that are intertwined with social media work in its current form, rather than specifically in social media. Accordingly, the need for flexibility and the willingness to learn were recommended by several respondents.

In exploring possible sources of social media work skills beyond college or university education, we found that approximately one-third of respondents "frequently" participated in webinars as part of their work related to social media, while just over a quarter of respondents "frequently" participated in conferences. Seven respondents added "other" sources of informal knowledge for their work: reading blogs, newsletters, social media focused news, or social media journal article; being involved in a social media group; learning through social media; and following experts. In open-ended comments, several respondents described additional knowledge sources, including following experts, reading current research and best practices, and using personal social media experience. When asked which "ONE" activity (orientation training, in-person seminars, webinars, workshops, or conferences) has had "the single greatest impact on developing [their] social media skills," respondents most frequently selected "none of the above" (16 of 39 respondents). "Webinars" was the second-most selected option, with several additional comments independently describing "experience" as having had the greatest impact on developing their social media skills.

How Important Were Particular Courses for Learning Social Media Work?

One of the primary goals of this study is to contribute ideas for supporting relevant curriculum that incorporates a social media-focused component within an LIS program. We therefore asked respondents about the importance that they would place on different classes potentially taken as part of a degree curriculum for their "own preparation to work in social media." Table 3 shows the mean perceived importance of the courses taken.

The response means form three rough groupings of importance: four very important classes with a mean of about 3.0 (Communication Studies, Social Media, Marketing, and Public Relations), three important classes (mean = 2.61–2.69), and two only somewhat important classes (mean = 2.35–2.52).

Finally, when asked about the potential usefulness of "a university course that teaches a basic understanding of social media technologies and platforms," 73 percent of respondents answered that it would be "useful" or "very useful" for a person just entering the social media profession. In open-ended comments, respondents also remarked specifically on the need for formal education to prepare students for social media work and on the importance of formalized social media knowledge more generally. For example, one respondent stated that "just because someone knows how to use Facebook/Twitter doesn't make them a successful social media professional; strong communications skills and an understanding of marketing and branding are important as well."

What Are Some Recommendations for Teaching Social Media Work in an MSIS Curriculum?

When asked to provide advice for "a degree program that educates social media professionals," respondents provided a great variety of open-ended answers. Recurring themes included the need for practical experience, the importance of continual education, and an emphasis on appropriate writing skills. Some notable responses include: "Help students develop skills to stay on top of changing technologies and strategies to stay engaged as transitions occur . . ." and "We don't want everyone to be social media robots, but there are (perhaps unwritten) standards of use." Other respondents focused on the importance of relating to customers/users, the importance of an appropriate voice, and the importance of brand knowledge. Several respondents additionally suggested that the skills important to social media work need not come from a social media-specific course.

Table 3. Mean Importance of Select Formal Courses.

Skills and Experience	n	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Communication studies	44	3	4	3.89	0.321
Social media	44	1	4	3.32	0.771
Marketing	43	1	4	3.28	0.766
Public relations	39	1	4	2.87	0.801
Information studies/sciences	42	1	4	2.76	0.958
Design	43	1	4	2.33	0.892
Journalism	42	1	4	2.26	0.857
Advertising	42	1	4	2.07	0.867
Psychology	44	2	4	3.55	0.589

We therefore recommend that an MSIS curriculum intended to prepare future information professionals for working with social media seek to combine the multiple elements described above that are involved in social media work. Coursework intended to prepare students for this field should actively develop multi-tasking skills and the ability to coordinate/lead different tasks and kinds of activities, along with independent work skills, such as managing a workload and constructing a personal work schedule. Although it is important for an educator to keep apprised of (and point students toward) the latest developments in social media, it is more important to teach that very process to students.

Future professionals must be able—and willing—to guide their own continuing education in order to successfully handle the frequent changes within the field. Therefore, knowing both how and where to look for information relevant to social media work is crucial. Strong communication skills, particularly written skills, must be developed through a high number and large variety of activities and assignments. Lastly, on-the-job and current, contextualized training should be emphasized, potentially in the form of required internships during a course or through capstone projects.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to discover what information professionals who do social media work believe should be incorporated into a formal MSIS educational program, based on their own experience. Previous literature describes a "social media professional" as having a background in journalism, communication, marketing, public relations or advertising (Wright & Hinson, 2008; Avery *et al.*, 2010). However, we suggest both that professionals in many information occupations are routinely taking on this work and that graduates of LIS programs are entering such "social media professional" positions that may previously have been considered within the realm of these other fields.

The majority of our respondents deem communication and advertising coursework to be very important for social media work, with most also believing that a course specifically on social media platforms would be useful. However, respondents emphasized that coursework should focus on developing certain themes and skills, rather than on promoting specific platforms, software tools, or information and communication technologies (ICTs). Finally, our respondents indicated that although social media coursework should be able to promote self-dependence and self-education, such a formal curriculum would still be highly valuable.

Our study has two main limitations: the small sample size and the oversampling of the host institution alumni. Although the convenience sampling of the alumni list produces an overrepresentation of a certain part of the population, this limitation is not believed to substantially affect any of the questions in the survey related to social media work. Additionally, because the purpose of this survey was to inform a curriculum specifically for an MSIS program, the input of graduates of that type of degree may provide more relevant feedback for expanding beyond our exploratory study. While further study into the experiences and practices of social media work is strongly encouraged, the results presented here indicate some initial avenues for developing coursework focused on preparing future professionals.

Although working with social media can sometimes be a tricky business, with high levels of rapid change, it is not unteachable. Moreover, our respondents indicated that the field of social media work can be rewarding and enjoyable for a wide variety of information professionals working in different settings, on different tasks, and with different ICTs. Based on the results of this study, the flexible application of a few basic principles can successfully

inform both a "Marketing and Communications Coordinator" and a "Social Media Librarian." With a little guidance, a social media-based curriculum can, indeed, do something very right.

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