

The “Liked” Department: Using Facebook Analytics for Strategic Communication

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ABSTRACT

The rapid diffusion of online social networking sites is changing the very nature of organizational communication. This is particularly true in higher education, where Facebook is increasingly being used as a means to engage with students, faculty, and alumni. Unfortunately, academic departments seeking to adopt such technologies often fail to understand the unique opportunities and challenges that accompany the adoption of social media. This article illuminates recent changes in organizational communication and describes the adoption of Facebook by a political science department at a midwestern state university. The authors develop a typology of Facebook posts to determine which types of information generate the most audience activity. They explain how this information can assist academic departments as they seek to bolster recruitment and retention of students, as well as ongoing investment from faculty and alumni.

Organizational communication has undergone dramatic changes in recent years as organizations of all types have rushed to experiment with social media as a means of interacting with key publics. In particular, colleges and universities have a keen interest in this trend, given that they are marketed as innovative institutions and that their target demographic is tech-savvy young people. The rapid adoption of social media technologies has resulted in poorly understood changes in why or how academic departments use sites such as Facebook and the effects that using social media to communicate various types of content have on student engagement.

Scholars have produced an impressive amount of research focusing on how social media can be incorporated into the classroom to enhance the learning process. Far less research has examined how universities and their various subunits, particularly academic departments, use social media to achieve goals outside of the classroom. This is perplexing given that even a cursory review shows that many university entities and subunits have a social media presence that is unrelated to classroom activities. Is social media being used for its own sake or is it actually accomplishing specific goals—and, if so, how? The purpose of this article is to answer these questions by examining how one academic department’s Facebook page has been

used to recruit prospective students and to share information with current students. This purpose was achieved by developing a content typology that allowed the authors to determine which types of posts generate the most student response or interest. The findings offer important lessons for those who want to use social media for organizational communication in higher academia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The advent of personal computing and the Internet promised to usher in a new era of possibilities for organizations to communicate with and engage their key stakeholders and the general public. However, much of the research suggests that organizations have struggled to use these technologies, perhaps as a result of lacking the know-how or the staff to create content and monitor feedback (Kent, Taylor, and White 2003; Saxton, Guo, and Brown 2007). Online social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have the potential to mitigate these obstacles, given that they are free and incredibly easy to use and have built-in interactivity that provides organizations, both large and small, the opportunity to maintain real-time contact with a wide variety of stakeholders (Waters 2007).

The potential of social media to enhance organizational communication is particularly intriguing to those working in higher education. Whereas e-mail continues to be the dominant form of communication on college campuses, studies suggest that many students prefer social media (boyd and Ellison 2007; Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005). The ubiquitous and interactive nature of social media opens up several avenues to further the missions of colleges and universities.

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Educators have long recognized the importance of social integration and engagement for student-learning outcomes (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Pascarella 2001; Umbach and Wawrzynski 2005). According to social-penetration theory, low levels of self-disclosure foster a greater willingness among individuals to create new social connections (Altman and Taylor 1973). Social media offer a new means of low self-disclosure networking wherein messages can easily be sent, received, or ignored from personal computers and mobile devices (Barkhaus and Tashiro 2010; McElvain and Smyth 2006).

It is not surprising that professors—eager to meet their teaching objectives and improve their evaluations from students—have made substantial efforts to incorporate social media into the classroom. Less attention has been given to the ways in which social media have the potential to further a university’s goals outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, the little research that does exist on the use of social media by universities and their subunits (as opposed to teachers in the classroom) centers on administrative support (Collis and Moonen 2008; Griffiths and Wall 2011), university policies regarding privacy and appropriate behavior (Joosten 2012), and the place of social media in university marketing plans (Kowalik 2011).

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By reflecting on a firsthand account of the creation and maintenance of a Facebook page at a state university, this article seeks to better understand why and how academic departments use social media, as well as the effects that communicating various types of content have on student engagement. The authors’ analysis of preliminary data regarding student engagement and content virality results in meaningful insights for academic departments seeking to capitalize on their social media presence.

METHODOLOGY

Before the fall of 2010, the political science department lacked any social media presence. Similar to most academic units, it used several means to communicate important information to current and prospective students, including posters, flyers, and in-class announcements as well as university-supplied direct mail, e-mail, and web pages. Although each outlet had its unique benefits, none offered instantaneous communication in an immersive, attention-rich environment as popular as Facebook. Thus, with the consent of the department chair and college dean, a Facebook page was created on August 27, 2010.¹ The page administrators agreed to inform the university’s marketing division of the existence of the newly created Facebook page and to abide by the university’s social media policy—a set of broad guidelines that emphasizes uniformity, branding, and protecting the institution’s reputation. No other restrictions or oversight requirements were imposed.

The intent was to use social networking as one component of an overall communication strategy aimed at recruiting and retaining students in the department’s undergraduate and graduate programs. Although not as comprehensive as mass e-mail, the Facebook page would give the department another outlet to share pertinent information regarding opportunities available to students, boast about the accomplishments of professors and student organizations, and share

articles of interest to those in the political science discipline. Except for the requirement to notify the administration of the department’s social media presence and to promise to abide by the university’s code of online conduct, the authors are solely responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Facebook page, including the posting of content on behalf of the political science department.

Creating the page was simple to accomplish using the directions provided by Facebook when the administrators signed up for the service. After the page was created, the “About” section was filled in with the department’s contact information and a cover photo (in this case, a university logo) was uploaded. An e-mail with an invitation to “Like” the page was sent to the department’s majors, minors, and graduate students. Likewise, professors were encouraged to send an e-mail to their students and post a link to the Facebook page on their course pages using Blackboard, an online course management platform. Those instructors teaching introductory courses (i.e., primarily populated by freshmen, many of whom have not declared a major) were encouraged to make an in-class announcement about the Facebook page. This process was repeated at the beginning of each semester, with intermittent reminders in flyers and in the department newsletter distributed throughout the term.

Some professors even went so far as to include a link to the page in their e-mail signature. The department chose not to use Facebook’s paid advertising model.

After more than two years of social media use, the political science department is in a good position to reflect on its online communications strategy. Digital ethnography—that is, the process of conducting research aimed at exploring cultural phenomena in a digital space—is an opportunity to gain better insight about the university-affiliated Facebook page and to identify the types of content that generate the most student engagement online. Unfortunately, despite the proliferation of new communication technologies, the research on digital ethnography as a valid research method is lacking. The ever-changing nature of social media, along with the role of the participant–observer in the research process, can complicate traditional research methodologies (Murthy 2008). Nevertheless, Merrill (2011, 31) asserts that “digital ethnography as a flexible social research methodology for analyzing online habits can be applied to examine social media use in higher education communications.”

The data in this study are from July 26, 2011, to March 14, 2013—almost a year and a half. The authors freely admit that this is not a typical dataset; it is composed of analytics produced by Facebook for the use of its members. In other words, the authors used the data that Facebook makes available, not what they might choose to construct. This limits the questions that can be asked and answered. For instance, Facebook privacy settings make answering fairly obvious questions (e.g., who is liking and/or sharing the page and why) almost impossible to calculate. However, previous research demonstrates that such analytics can be superior to other assessment tools that track and gauge the popularity of content within a network (Merrill 2011, 44). In the interest of driving the discipline, Merrill insists, “moving forward, we must continue to incorporate these new tools into our research methodologies” (2011, 46).

It is clear from reading the Facebook analytics *FAQ/Guidebook* that Facebook is cognizant of the usefulness of its data in a marketing capacity. The analytics provided are clearly oriented in that direction. Table 1 describes the analytics that Facebook provides for each post.

Facebook allows page administrators to sort each analytic, visualize the data in the form of line graphs and pie charts, and export page- and post-level data from a chosen time frame to Microsoft Excel. Despite being based on a “convenience sample” drawn from our own midwestern state university, the authors believe that these analytics can offer important insights about which types of content generate interest among specific subsets of students.

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Facebook Post Content Typology

To assess the department’s communication efforts on Facebook, the authors developed a typology of postings that consists of the following five categories:

- (1) Department Information. Academic departments are always engaged in a variety of department activities and are constantly working to make students aware of them. In the competition for students, departments often try to “sell themselves” as active, vibrant entities. Conveying information to interested students is always a challenge; therefore, using multiple channels of communication is important. Posts about department speakers, advising, classes, internships, and recruiting events are placed in this category, as are student activities and events.
- (2) Faculty Information. As consumers, students increasingly want to know what it is they are getting for their educational dollar. A department can market its faculty as part of an overall strategy to recruit and retain students. Students have an interest in knowing more about a department’s professors, including information about their background, the courses they teach, and their research interests. Posts about faculty publications, presentations, conference activities, honors, and media interviews are placed in this category.
- (3) General Student Information. Students on college campuses today are confronted with a bewildering amount of information and it can be difficult to sort through it. Posts in this category contain information about student organizations and campus events (including those unrelated to a particular academic department) that might interest current and prospective students.

Posts about workshops, career information, campus speakers, class information (e.g., registration deadlines), and graduation information are placed in this category.

- (4) General Political News and Information. A conscious decision was made by the page administrators to not use Facebook as a forum for discussing politically sensitive issues because the challenges of moderating such discussions would outweigh the benefits. However, posts about less contentious political issues that may be of particular interest to students still appear with regularity. Posts in this category include stories on state and local elections; major political events (e.g., the president’s State of the Union speech); research on the political views of young

people; and political stories affecting state, city, and university communities in general.

- (5) Humor and Miscellaneous Postings. For some students, humor is the gateway to an interest in politics (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). Posts containing political humor and satire are placed in this category, along with miscellaneous posts such as wishing students “a happy spring break” and “good luck on final exams.”

No conscious effort was made to divide the posts evenly into these categories. In the overwhelming majority of cases, material was simply posted as the page administrators encountered it and deemed it important enough to share on the department’s Facebook page. It was not until they were inspired to write this article that the authors considered developing a typology and coding the data accordingly to determine whether certain types of posts received more attention than others. Each author coded the posts separately and then they compared the coded data to ensure consistency.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Since its creation in August 2010, 282 unique individuals Liked the political science department’s Facebook page (as of March 14, 2014). As shown in table 2, Facebook indicates that 18- to 24-year-olds represent the largest age group of those interacting with the page (i.e., 69%), followed by 25- to 34-year-olds (i.e., 16%). Slightly more than 55% of the page Likes were from male students. In addition to these demographics, Facebook provided a breakdown of those who Liked the page based on their country, city, and language. Only 7% of those who Liked the department’s page listed somewhere

Table 1

Description of Facebook Analytics

Date	The day this post was published, in Pacific Standard Time.
Reach	The number of unique people who have seen the post within 28 days of publication (i.e., the sum of organic, paid, and viral views).
Engaged Users	The number of unique people who have clicked on the post within 28 days of publication.
Virality	The percentage of people who have “created a story” from the post (by Liking, sharing, or commenting on the post) within 28 days of publication of the total number of unique people who have seen it.

Table 2
Breakdown of Page Likes Based on Gender and Age¹

Female 44%	0.7%	31.6%	5.3%	2.1%	2.5%	0.7%	1.1%
Age Group	13–17	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+
Male 55%	0%	37.2%	10.3%	5%	0%	0%	0%

¹ Note that percentages may not add up to 100% given that some individuals choose not to specify their gender.

other than the United States as their country of origin, and only 1% listed their primary language as something other than English. Almost half (i.e., 48%) of those who Liked the page listed the town in which the university is located as their residence. The authors do not know whether those who listed another town as their residence are prospective students, current students who choose to list their hometown rather than their college town, or alumni who moved out of town following graduation. However, the demographic data suggest that the majority of the page followers are current students. Facebook also provides a clear picture of the page’s “reach” (i.e., the number of visitors who have seen the post) by indicating the total number of unique individuals (i.e., 123,474) who are friends with people who Liked the page.

The data in this study are from July 26, 2011, to March 16, 2013 (almost 20 months), with a total of 295 posts on the page. Although anyone on Facebook can post on the public wall of the department page, the administrators were responsible for all but six posts (which were not included in the analysis). The number of posts per month fluctuated with the academic calendar, with fewer posts during December (i.e., winter break) and March (i.e., spring break) and even fewer during the summer months (table 3). There also was an increase in posts in the months leading up to the 2012 elections.

Using a content typology to analyze the posts accomplishes three tasks: (1) it determines whether the content of posts aligns with the strategic-communication goals of the department; (2) it determines which types of posts receive the most views; and (3) it determines which types of posts result in the greatest amount of engagement and virality. The findings offer important clues for academic departments that want to capitalize on their Facebook presence.

The Facebook page was created with the intention of communicating important information about the political science department, boasting about faculty achievements, alerting students to campus events and resources, and piquing their interest in politics with news and humor. It is worth asking whether, indeed, these types of information are being communicated. Table 4 lists the posts by each category in the content typology. The results are reassuring if not altogether surprising. The page administrators’ desire to avoid overtly partisan views—which serve as fodder for most political comedians—and to focus on information pertinent to the department’s students explains the low number of posts in the humor and miscellaneous category. More than 40% of the posts were directly related to the department and faculty, which indicates that the Facebook page is achieving the goal of communicating department-specific information. Given the difference in scope, it is not surprising that there were more posts containing information about campus events and resources than those in the department. Likewise, it is not surprising that more than a quarter of the posts contained links to news stories, given that this content keeps the page “active” between department events and faculty achievements and also provides

real-world manifestations of important concepts within the discipline.

More care had to be taken with the remaining analytics. A post’s reach is a partial function of the total number of people who Liked the department’s Facebook page. This number has increased significantly over time as the department’s page has garnered more followers. Thus, to compare posts, it makes sense to report the number of “engaged” users as a percentage of reach. Table 5 lists

the top 20 posts by engaged users as a percentage of reach, which accounts for content type of the posts.

The findings suggest that the most clicked-on posts are those featuring content about the political science department and its faculty. Course schedules accounted for four of the top 10 most clicked-on posts. The top post—a course schedule released on November 2, 2012—was clicked on by almost 39% of Facebook users who saw it. This indicates that the Facebook page is achieving the goal of communicating department-specific information to its audience. In fact, users seem most likely to respond to posts in these categories. Whereas posts to the department and faculty information categories comprise approximately 40% of the total number on the page, table 5 shows that they account for 80% of the most clicked-on posts. Conversely, slightly more than half of the page’s total posts fall into the student information

Table 3
Total Number of Posts by Month and Year

MONTH	YEAR	POSTS
*March	2013	12
February		18
January		24
December	2012	13
November		19
October		33
September		24
August		18
July		3
June		2
May		7
April		8
March		10
February		17
January		23
December	2011	9
November		14
October		14
September		17
August		9
*July		1

*Data are only for a partial month.

#Post data unavailable prior to July 19, 2011.

or political news category but they account for only 15% of the most clicked-on posts.

A similar pattern is demonstrated with respect to the most viral posts (i.e., Liked, shared, and/or commented on), which is also calculated as a percentage of reach (table 6).

those related to faculty. Seven of the 10 most viral posts (i.e., Liked, shared, and/or commented on) boast of faculty achievements. Overall, faculty posts, which accounted for only 18% of the total page posts, comprised 50% of the most viral posts. The remaining three posts in the top 10 consisted of pizza-party announcements and a post titled

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The department and faculty themes were even slightly more pronounced when virality was examined: posts in these categories account for 85% of the most viral posts. According to the data, the most viral posts exhibit a strong congratulatory theme, especially

“Top Ten Reasons to Love Our Department.” Despite the greater frequency of posts featuring campus information and links to news stories, such posts—along with those featuring political humor—received the least amount of attention. Posts from these categories accounted for almost 60% of the total page posts but they comprised only 15% of the most viral posts.

The data clearly show that department- and faculty-related posts generate the most student interest. This is true whether interest is measured in terms of engaged users or post virality. Students appear to use the page as a source of information about the political science department and its faculty. The strong showing of faculty-related posts also suggests that there is a supportive and reciprocal relationship between

Table 4
Facebook Page Posts by Number and Type

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF POSTS (N=295)	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POSTS
Department	67	22.7
Faculty	53	18.0
Student	82	27.8
Political News	76	25.8
Humor/Miscellaneous	17	5.8

Table 5
Top 20 Posts by Engaged Users as Percentage of Reach

	DATE	POST SUMMARY	PERCENTAGE	POST TYPE
1	11/02/12	Department Course Schedule	38.82	Department
2	01/02/13	Department Course Schedule	36.00	Department
3	02/19/13	Thanks for Attending Department Pizza Party	35.83	Department
4	02/07/13	Announce Department Pizza Party	32.67	Department
5	10/19/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	25.37	Faculty
6	01/22/13	Top Ten Reasons to Love Our Department	25.32	Department
7	09/16/11	Congratulations Faculty Publication	25.00	Faculty
8	09/08/11	Story on Goals of College Freshmen	25.00	Student
9	02/26/13	Department Course Schedule	24.27	Department
10	03/11/13	Summer Course Schedule	23.19	Department
11	09/22/11	State Governor on Daily Show	22.00	Humor/Miscellaneous
12	11/21/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	19.12	Faculty
13	09/10/11	Biology and Politics	18.92	Political News
14	09/19/12	Department Professors Moderate Political Debate	18.26	Faculty
15	11/18/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	18.18	Faculty
16	01/15/13	Faculty Quoted in Local News Story	18.09	Faculty
17	12/11/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	18.06	Faculty
18	01/30/12	Campus Photographs	17.80	Student
19	12/10/12	Faculty Quoted in Local News Story	17.56	Faculty
20	12/13/12	Department Poll Cited in Local News Story	17.39	Department

faculty and students. Students want to know more about their instructors and they have an interest in what they do outside of the classroom.

The poor showing of posts in the student information and political news categories potentially leads to the question of whether they are effectively communicating any information to students. Based on the data, it appears that these posts might be a waste of time. The results may be a partial reflection of the page administrators’ desire

to communicate messages not measured by Facebook’s analytics. Consider, for example, signaling theory, which describes situations wherein two parties have access to different information. One party, the sender, must choose whether and how to communicate (or signal) that information. The other party, the receiver, must choose how to interpret the signal (Connelly et al. 2011). It may be reasonable to assert that posts featuring political news links, humor, and general student information send a signal that the

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to refrain from posting controversial news stories. It is possible that controversial news stories are what attract students’ attention and, in an attempt to be uncontroversial, the administrators are posting stories that do not capture the interest of the page viewers. It is also possible that those who like the department page obtain their news elsewhere and do not consider the page to be a news source. In other words, the page may be where viewers go for information about the department and faculty rather than political news and general student information.

Does this poor showing suggest that academic departments should refrain from posting this type of content on their pages? Perhaps not. Basing a communication strategy solely on clicks, Likes, and comments may rob a department of the opportunity

department is aware of (and engaged with) the rest of the campus and the “real world.” The page administrators want to think that these signals are valuable, even if the data suggest that the contents of such posts are the least clicked-on. Omitting news links and posts about general student information would result in the page remaining dormant for longer periods. This lack of online activity could then result in the false impression that the political science department is less engaged with its students or is teaching students skills that are not applicable to the real world.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is clear that the creation and maintenance of the political science department’s Facebook page has not been a waste of time.

Table 6
Top 20 Posts by Virality as Percentage of Reach

	DATE	POST SUMMARY	PERCENT	POST TYPE
1	10/19/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	13.43	Faculty
2	02/07/13	Announce Department Majors Pizza Party	9.90	Department
3	12/11/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	9.72	Faculty
4	03/14/12	Congratulations on Faculty Grant	9.62	Faculty
5	12/15/12	Congratulations to Department Graduates	9.42	Department
6	01/22/13	Top Ten Reasons to Love Our Department	9.09	Department
7	09/16/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	9.09	Faculty
8	11/06/12	Thanks for Attending Election Night Party	8.26	Department
9	11/18/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	7.79	Faculty
10	09/04/12	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	7.75	Faculty
11	12/13/12	Department Poll Cited in Local News Story	7.61	Department
12	11/21/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	7.35	Faculty
13	08/24/11	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	7.27	Faculty
14	01/21/13	News Story on Presidential Inauguration	7.04	Political News
15	10/22/12	Join Us for Election Night Pizza Party	6.87	Department
16	11/12/12	Congratulations to Mock Trial Team	6.59	Faculty
17	10/09/12	Campus Dem/Rep Groups and Election	6.50	Student
18	11/06/12	Join Us for Election Night Pizza Party	5.93	Department
19	09/18/12	Daily Show Debate Story	5.88	Humor/Miscellaneous
20	09/21/12	Congratulations on Faculty Publication	5.81	Faculty

The page reach continues to grow, and the data confirm that the posted content fulfills the administrators' primary goals and that much of it is well received by the primary audience. In reaching these conclusions, this article also demonstrates the usefulness of Facebook's analytics for those who want to conduct a quantitative assessment of their communication strategies.

Although Facebook analytics can provide useful information, the authors caution against relying solely on them without considering communicative qualities (e.g., signaling) not measured by Facebook. This article describes only one case study, which relies entirely on analytics regarding online behavior collected by a third party. The free data provided by Facebook are useful but limited; for example, privacy settings prevent researchers from asking important questions (e.g., who is Liking particular posts and why).

More research is needed to determine whether differences exist in the types of content posted to the pages of departments from different types of institutions (e.g., research, teaching, and two-year schools). Likewise, do students at different types of institutions appreciate (i.e., click on, Like, share, and/or comment on) different types of post content? This avenue of research also would benefit from survey instruments capable of measuring motivations and perceptions unaccounted for by Facebook's analytics. It would be interesting to determine whether students' interest in particular types of content holds constant across other forms of social media (e.g., Twitter). Until this type of research is conducted, it will be difficult to know whether the authors' experience is typical of those who manage an academic department's social media site.

Nevertheless, the authors' findings presented in this article suggest that this avenue of research is worthy of academic pursuit. Furthermore, the methodologies used and findings herein can guide other academic departments as they begin to develop a social media strategy. This process begins with the departments asking the following questions:

1. Do you want a social media presence? Does it make sense for your organizational unit?
2. Which type of social media presence do you want and why? Which type(s) of social media is best matched to your goals?
3. Which institutional policies are in place and how will you adhere to them?
4. Do you have the capacity to manage your social media presence? Who will be responsible and why? What is your comment policy?
5. How will you measure results?
6. How will you incorporate feedback into social media postings to increase your strategic communication?

Social media can be an effective tool for communicating with current and prospective students as long as academic departments realize that it will be most effective when used as part of a more comprehensive communications strategy. ■

NOTES

1. The authors are coadministrators of the political science department's Facebook page.
2. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/help/pages/insights>.

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