

How Reporters Use Social Media

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Land-grant and agency media relations professionals are turning to social media more and more to reach ever-broadening audiences. But questions remain: How do reporters make use of social media? And how can university and agency communicators best reach reporters through this approach?

With help from a 2013 ACE Professional Development Grant, we conducted in-depth interviews with nine agricultural reporters based in Ohio (two of whom work for national ag media organizations). We reviewed what they said about their own use of social media and created a survey tool we could use to gather similar information from additional reporters, from both agricultural and traditional media outlets. With help from volunteers from California, Iowa, Louisiana, Alaska, Mississippi, Ohio and Washington, D.C., we gathered 53 surveys about the use of Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and blogs, allowing us to gain some insight in how general and agricultural reporters use social media.

Process

We interviewed nine representatives from the Brownfield Network, *Farm and Dairy* newspaper, *Feedstuffs* weekly newspaper, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, and *Ohio Farmer* magazine. These face-to-face interviews revealed a varied approach to social media and news gathering, and helped us understand how reporters were using social media on a professional basis. These interviews were instrumental in helping develop a survey that would allow us to capture information in a more reportable, consistent fashion.

An e-mail survey (attached) was sent to agricultural and mainstream media across the country by Ohio State and ACE media relations professionals. As an incentive, we offered \$10 Amazon gift certificates to ACE media relations professionals for every completed survey (Ohio State staff did not participate in this incentive).

Results from the survey were placed into a spreadsheet for comparison and analysis purposes. Reporters were promised anonymity, so while this report may categorize some according to type of media outlet, it will not identify them.

"I hate social media. I find it unbearably narcissistic."

"Using social media is a great way to quickly aggregate reactions around breaking news, find new sources for stories and share content we think will resonate."

"Facebook is a cesspool. I find other ways to read press releases, etc., rather than go through Facebook."

"It's relatively new to me, but sink or swim, I'm jumping in."

"Would like a Twitter link on every press release so I can send that release out to my Twitter followers."

What we learned

As the quotes above reveal, the survey showed vastly differing opinions and approaches in reporters' use of social media.

Among reporters interviewed face-to-face, age seemed to be a determining factor. The younger journalists were more apt to be using social media for news gathering and disseminating, while the older reporters were more likely to use it only when forced to by their employer. But there was an exception to this rule. One editor who might be defined as "older" is considered an innovative leader in the use of social media, for both information gathering and story dissemination.

We did not ask the age of reporters participating in the survey, but for the most part if a media outlet was aggressive in its use of social media, so were its reporters.

Despite the wide range in approaches, our analysis did reveal some trends. For example, 81 percent of participants use Twitter and 64 percent use Facebook for professional purposes. About one fourth of each get "quite a few" story ideas from Twitter or Facebook. We were also able to capture popular Twitter hashtags and blogs, as detailed later in this report.



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Survey Results

(not all respondents answered every question)

1. Do you use Twitter for professional purposes?

Yes: 43

No: 10

a. If yes, do you use Twitter to post about stories you've written?

Yes, almost all the time: 25

Sometimes: 10

No, hardly ever: 6

b. Do you get story ideas from reading posts on Twitter?

Yes, quite a few: 11

Sometimes: 23

No, hardly ever: 9

c. Do you find sources on Twitter?

Yes, quite a few: 8

Sometimes: 24

No, hardly ever: 10

d. Do you regularly follow hashtags on Twitter?

Yes: 11

No: 26

2. Are you on Facebook for professional purposes?

Yes: 32

No: 18

a. If yes, do you post about stories you've written?

Yes, almost all the time: 20

Sometimes: 12

No, hardly ever: 11

b. Do you get story ideas from Facebook?

Yes, quite a few: 9

Sometimes: 23

No, hardly ever: 9

c. Do you find sources on Facebook?

Yes, quite a few: 10

Sometimes: 24

No, hardly ever: 9

3. Do you read any blogs for professional purposes?

Yes: 36

No: 16

a. If yes, do you get story ideas from blogs?

Yes, quite a few: 7

Sometimes: 24

No, hardly ever: 5

b. Do you find sources from blogs?

Yes, quite a few: 5

Sometimes: 23

No, hardly ever: 10

4. Are you on Pinterest for professional purposes?

Yes: 6

No: 26

a. If yes, do you post items on Pinterest to link followers to stories you've written?

Yes, almost all the time: 1

Sometimes: 2

No, hardly ever: 9

b. Do you get story ideas from looking at others' Pinterest pages?

Yes, quite a few: 0

Sometimes: 2

No, hardly ever: 9

c. Do you find sources from Pinterest?

Yes, quite a few: 0

Sometimes: 2

No, hardly ever: 9

Open-ended responses

We also asked respondents open-ended questions about what time of day they are normally on Twitter and Facebook. In examining their responses, we found the vast majority responded with no specific time (e.g., "Off and on throughout the day," "8-5," "It depends").

This contrasts with findings by Dan Zarrella ("The Science of Marketing," 2013) that indicates Tweets posted in late afternoon during the work week have higher re-Tweet and higher click-through rates, and that Facebook posts in the early evening tend to have more "Likes" and "Shares.")

In our survey, most Twitter and Facebook users who mentioned specific times reported several times a day (e.g., "Morning before noon, again around 5 p.m.," "11 a.m. to noon, again late afternoon," "First thing in morning, late at night"). We grouped those responses according to specific times of day (i.e., 7 a.m. to 10 a.m.; 10 a.m. to noon; noon to 3 p.m.; 3 p.m. and later in work day). We found that those respondents were most commonly on Twitter between 10 a.m.-noon and noon to 3 p.m., and on Facebook between 7 a.m. and noon.

This finding could have implications for public information officers who wish to try posting at different times of day maximize exposure for their Tweets and Facebook posts.

As part of the survey, participants shared information about hashtags, blogs, and organizational Facebook and Pinterest pages they follow.

Hashtags reporters follow

#farm
 #farmbill
 #GMO
 #cawater
 #BDCP
 #bakersfield
 #cawx
 #sacdelta
 Only follow hashtags when there is an event like a trial or disaster I'm following
 #fairbanks
 #alaska
 #agchat
 #plant13
 #harvest13
 #farmbill
 #haelex
 #breaking
 #mississippi
 #jackson
 #farming
 #soil
 #bobevas and other companies I cover
 event-specific hashtags
 #agriculture
 #Ohio

Pinterest pages reporters follow

AgChat Foundation
 Use Pinterest for finding points I want to illustrate in my work blog

Blogs reporters follow

Bovidiva.com
 Farmpolicy.com
 Dailyonder.com
 Civileats.com
 National sustainable ag coalition (can't remember name of blog)
 Frenchfoodintheu.s.com
 The Rural Blog
 Coal Country
 Aquaformia
 Maven's Notebook
 Edible Geo
 Discovery blog
 Forbes blogs
 The Salt
 ModFarm
 Createquity
 Small business Administration
 Nonprofit associations related to business
 Advocates for Agriculture
 Inside Iowa State
 Civic Skinny
 Chronicle of Higher Education
 IFT cropwatch
 Farmgate
 AgWired
 Iowa state University ICM blog
 AgDM blog
 Agricultureproud.com
 Dairycarrie.com
 Doccamiryan.wordpress.com
 Righteousbacon.com
 Machinefinder
 Jim Romenesko
 Education week
 Buzzworthy

Facebook pages reporters like or follow

United Farmers and Ranchers Alliance
 Illinois Farm Families
 International Federation of Agricultural Journalists
 I (heart) climate scientists
 Sons of Anarchy
 National Cotton Council
 Various University of California sites
 NPR
 National Geographic
 Food & Wine
 Food Tank
 Modern Farmer
 Fish and Wildlife Service
 Army Corps of Engineers
 CA Department of Water Resources
 Corps of Engineers
 Office of Emergency Preparedness
 National Weather Service
 LSU Ag Center
 American Farm Bureau
 Louisiana Association of Health Plans
 National Association of Farm Broadcasting
 Other TV/News Outlets
 Local clubs
 Fairbanks Police Department
 Fairbanks Fire Department
 Alaska State Troopers
 All radio stations
 University and community colleges
 4-H
 National FFA
 National Farm Machinery Show
 Various Farm Bureau pages
 Machinery Pete
 Machinefinder
 Rotary Club
 City Facebook page
 Area restaurants
 Crime page for county
 The Clarion-Ledger
 Mississippi institutions of higher learning
 Mississippi Emergency Management Agency
 Media pages – TV, radio, newspapers
 Farm related organizations such as American Farm Bureau, Ohio Farm Bureau, Corn and soybean organizations
 The companies I cover (Wendys, Max and Ermas, Bob Evans)
 Ag groups, photography, shale news
 Ohio Department of Ag, Ohio Corn and Wheat Growers, OSU Extension

Other social media tools

We also asked an open-ended question about other social media tools reporters use or anticipate using in the future for professional purposes. Surprisingly, the most common response (n=8) was Instagram, followed by YouTube, LinkedIn and Google+ (n=6 each) and Tumblr (n=1). Public information officers may want to check with the media they work with most often to see what new tools they are using and determine how they may be able to provide information in new ways for such efforts.

Participating news organizations

The following news organizations took part in face-to-face interviews, the survey, or both.

Farm Progress
 The Daily Dig blog
 Associated Press
 ThomsonReuters
 DTN
 Capital Public Radio, Sacramento
 LA Times Metro
 Penton.com
 LA Times
 Sacramento Bee
 Fresno Bee
 Baton Rouge Advocate
 Baton Rouge Business Report
 Monroe News Star
 KTVF 11, Fairbanks
 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner
 Ames Tribune
 Farm Progress
 Statehouse News Bureau,
 Columbus, Ohio
 Toledo Blade
 Cleveland Plain Dealer
 Akron Beacon-Journal
 Farm Journal Media
 Delta Business Journal
 Sun Herald, Gulfport, MS
 The Hattiesburg American
 Delta Democrat Times
 Vicksburg Post
 S. Market Bulletin
 The Starkville Daily News
 Clarion-Ledger
 Chickasaw Daily Journal
 Daily Journal
 Ohio AgNet
 Columbus Dispatch
 FarmPolicy.com
 Ohio Farmer magazine
 Farm and Dairy newspaper
 Brownfield Network
 Feedstuffs
 Ohio Farm Bureau Federation

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank ACE for providing funding for this project through the ACE Development Fund.

Thanks to Anne Adrian, eXtension, for advice in organizing our survey instrument.

Thanks to Tracy Turner and Kurt Knebusch from The Ohio State University for assistance in conducting the face-to-face interviews and/or the surveys.

Thanks to the following ACE colleagues who assisted with the surveys:

Marci Hilt, Washington D.C. retiree
 Brian Meyer, Iowa State
 Pam Kan-Rice, University of California
 Nancy Tarnai, University of Alaska, Fairbanks
 Linda Benedict, LSU AgCenter
 Susan Collins-Smith, Mississippi State
 Keri Collins Lewis, Mississippi State
 Bonnie Coblentz, Mississippi State