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Learning web analytics: A tool for strategic communication

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the usefulness of analytical software for public relations and communication professionals. Using data from four organizations (academic, professional, governmental, and activist), the authors unpack web analytic tools and their potential for improving the strategic communication skills of students.

The time has come to move web analytics from the boardroom to the classroom. This article describes one of our latest communication technology tools and unpacks it for students and professionals. Google Analytics has already made huge inroads into the sales, marketing, and advertising toolboxes of professionals but has received almost no attention as a public relations tool in spite of its utility for improving campaign planning, message design, and strategic communication.

Analytic data are gathered by tens of thousands of organizations on a minute-by-minute basis, ranging from non-profit, educational, and governmental organizations, to public and private, large and small organizations and corporations. Many of the readers of this article work for schools or organizations that already gather analytic data, and most of the students who graduate over the next few years will use it as professionals.

Web analytic data should be a staple research tool in capstone, management, campaigns, and similar courses, as well as used in student-run agencies to gather data on behalf of clients. Just as social media have become part of most student-run campaigns, analytic data are an everyday part of the business and professional world. As part of class projects, students regularly conduct primary and secondary research for clients, examine their websites, propose campaign strategies and tactics based on that research, and advise clients how to reach and influence key stakeholders and stakeseekers. The gathering of analytic data should become part of the regular research process enacted by students in advanced classes, and students in introductory classes should be exposed to analytic tools and learn the possibilities.

This essay examines the usefulness of analytical software for public relations and communication students and professionals. Using data from four websites, the authors unpack web analytics tools and their potential for improving website effectiveness and organization–public relationships.

1. Web analytics

Web analytics are measured by software that tracks website visitors' mouse clicks and information requests. The data are stored by Google and can be compared over time to help Web managers improve the effectiveness of websites, and managers make decisions about campaign effectiveness. The data gathered by Google Analytics can be used to determine which pages on an organization's website are the most popular or most accessed, what type of information visitors to the site are interested in accessing, what path visitors take as they navigate to and away from an organization's website, how much

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time they spend on the site, etc. Analytic data are not stored on visitors' computers and contain no personally identifiable information.

Google Analytics works by having a website administrator paste a bit of computer code onto to each web page or link/document that the user wants to track. Google Analytics begins tracking the site as soon as the revised web pages (with the tracking code inserted) have been uploaded.

Metric data can be used to determine overall usage trends and which sections, information, documents, or features of a website visitors find the most useful. For example, a software company might want to be able to more quickly direct visitors to an online help forum or FAQ. An educational site might want students to be able to more easily obtain information on admissions or courses, reducing the burden on advisors to answer common questions.

2. Understanding how to interpret analytic data

Analytic data are made sense of quantitatively, via numbers and percentages. Over time, stable website traffic patterns emerge. For example, a sales website will be accessed more during holidays and sales. During crises, organizations involved will be accessed more often. Informational, non-profit, and health organizations will be accessed after relevant news stories air, or after campaign messages are viewed or heard. Being able to effectively interpret analytic data requires knowledge of the organization involved.

2.1. The dashboard

The dashboard is a concept borrowed from business where several small data boxes or informational graphics of key performance indicators (KPIs) are arranged on a single page, providing a snapshot of sales, marketing, and other performance variables. Google Analytics uses a "dashboard" of indicators approach to present key data.

The Google Analytics dashboard can accommodate 12 indicators, and always displays "Visits and Site Usage" data at the top of the list. Although all indicators can be examined separately, the customized dashboard is efficient, and includes only the items thought to be the most informative for each individual organization.

2.2. Understanding analytic data

As suggested above, analytic data always needs to be interpreted in context so that they are more meaningful. For example, the web traffic for a personal website belonging to one of the co-authors has been tracked for almost five years. Beginning in spring 2010, Kent's site traffic dropped off dramatically, and the number of visitors dropped by 950% (subsequently stabilizing at about 25% of the prior level). The big question, of course, was why did this happen? The case studies below give insight into how to make sense of analytic data.

By examining analytic data, a snapshot of website visitors is constructed. How much time individuals spend on particular pages suggests how valuable the content is to him/her. Google Analytics preserves the search terms that people use as they move from a search engine to an organizational web page. Knowing what key words are used to find an organization can help explain how stakeholders and stakeseekers view the organization and allow meta terms to be tweaked.

Additionally, by examining entry and exit pages, an organization can build a picture of visitor interaction (most people do not enter through the front door, or home page, but rather via search engine links), and what part(s) of the site appeal to visitors the most.

In the case of Kent's website, the key words suggested that most people visited the website for information about special occasion speeches, rather than public relations, and would depart quickly after not finding what they wanted. A prominent link was added to a website of great speeches several years ago. That link quickly became the "Top Exit Page."

In the case of a nonprofit or sales organization, tangential key word searches may indicate that visitors are looking for something that the organization *could* provide but currently is not. By acting on key word data, perhaps reorganizing the site to highlight information, or creating new content to meet the needs of visitors, a website can become a resource for visitors who previously went elsewhere for their information, goods, or services.

The key to using analytics effectively is to think creatively and strategically. Numbers, and data, do not speak for themselves, which is why incorporating analytics into the classroom is a useful pedagogical tool for students. The fact that a website's top entry and exit page is its home page could be a sign that the page has exactly what visitors were looking for, or could be a sign that the page is offering nothing of value. To find the answer requires examining "key words," "time on site," "length of visits," and "visitor loyalty." If the home page is frequently visited and people spend a few minutes on it (say it contains a calendar of events), then the conclusion might be that the site is effective. If the page has a high bounce rate, few return visits, or is not linking users to other pages, the page is probably failing. Understanding the reason *why* something is happening on a website is a valuable management skill.

2.3. How data are reported

Programs like Google Analytics put data into an easily understandable and interpretable form. Data are converted into tables. Moreover, Google Analytics uses Sparklines, a data reporting technology invented by Edward Tufte (2006), a world

leader in information design. Sparklines allow for large amounts of data to be reported in very small "word sized" blocks that can be inserted into reports and easily visualized.

The next section of this essay will provide data from four organizations. Each organization tells its own story and requires individual "interpretation" of data.

3. Case studies of analytic data

Four organizations' analytic data are briefly examined as a means of showing how to interpret analytics. The websites include a professor's website, the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) (an independent social cause organization), the city of Prague OK (a municipal, governmental website), and PR Romania (a professional information site).

3.1. Analytic data for academic website

The first site is an academic website (faculty-staff.ou.edu/K/Michael.L.Kent-1) and illustrates some of the strategic communication issues associated with academic or government websites. The biggest issue was a dramatic drop in site traffic. Kent's site illustrates that sometimes a seemingly negative change, like a decline in site traffic, is sometimes a positive thing. In this case, the decline in visitors came from people who were looking for tertiary content on the site (public speaking), while the visitors coming for public relations content remained stable.

Kent's website experienced a 90% decline in site traffic, eventually stabilizing at 25% of the prior level. After examining 12 months of data, the drop in site traffic was obvious, traffic drops from more than a hundred visitors some days, to fewer than half-a-dozen visits almost overnight. However, when only a cursory examination of *monthly data* (the default setting) is conducted, the decline is difficult to notice. With the exception of the month in which the decline happened, each month of a monthly graph of visitors, whether 100 visitors per day or 15 visitors per day looks similar, with peaks and valleys each day. If a manager focused on the bounce rate and average time on site rather than on number of visits and pageviews (on opposite sides of the screen), everything would look fine. Thus, an important lesson learned here is to spend a few minutes looking at short and long-term numbers to see if you can spot any trends.

Interestingly, in spite of the reduction in traffic to the site, the bounce rate (percentage of people immediately leaving the site) decreased, and the time on site (length of time people spend on the site) increased. Examining the bounce rate (BR) and time on site (TOS) on three identical occasions for the month of October, we see an increasing bounce rate and decreasing time on site: 2007 (BR 77.7%, TOS 3.3 min), 2008 (BR 79.9%, TOS 2.4 min), and 2009 (BR 81%, TOS 2.06 min), However, when we look at the most recent October after the precipitous drop in traffic earlier in the year, we see the lowest bounce rate yet, and a significantly increased (296%) time on site (BR 70.4%, TOS 6.09 min). Although the site experienced a sharp drop off of visits in April 2010, the type of visitors who remained, or visited the site since, are of higher quality (i.e., more interested in what the site has to offer). Visitor loyalty figures suggest that more than 200 people come back to the site almost every day.

After careful examination of the analytic data, the loss in traffic is probably attributable to several key words (on public speaking) found during searches that ceased being effective at bringing traffic to the site. A lot of competition exists for Internet traffic and techniques such as meta terms, ad words (paying browsers money to feature advertisements when specific words are searched for), and other techniques are used to drive traffic.

3.2. Analytic data for the Institute for Policy Studies

Institute for Policy Studies' (www.ips-dc.org) data was gathered for more than a year. Twelve months of data are used here (April 13, 2010 to April 13, 2011). During that period, the IPS received 292,000 visits, 202,000 (69%) of which were from new visitors, while 16,000 (5.5%) of the visitors were repeat visitors. Visitors to IPS came from around the world: 201 countries and territories. The United States contributed the most traffic, accounting for 78% of the visitors.

The IPS data are interesting because they show how stepping back and examining an organization's overall traffic (the E in the RACE acronym) can reveal important issues. In particular, IPS conducts "ad campaigns" nearly every week with limited success but devotes little attention to its more than 16,000 loyal visitors who come to the site nearly every day.

The data analysis suggests that more attention be paid to the thousands of loyal visitors and that strategic communication initiatives be directed specifically to their large website public. One of the arguments made about the value of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Blogs) are that they are user-directed. People sign up for the information themselves, self-select to receive it, and an organization can push messages to interested individuals. What is overlooked is that many websites actually do the same thing better. On an average day, of the 4711 Facebook users who "like" the IPS's site, only 4 people have checked in. That same day, 16,000 people visited the organization's website on their own.

The "social media bias" (or error) certainly deserves a study all its own, but for our purposes, the issue is just to note that the IPS has 16-thousand loyal visitors to its website, yet spends a lot of time trying to attract and serve a handful of random visitors via ad campaigns (70–95% of whom will never come back), and pushing messages via Facebook to fewer people than visit the site on any given day.

3.2.1. New vs. returning visitors

The majority of IPS' web traffic comes from new visitors, who account for 69% of site traffic. Returning visitors averaged 3.38 pages per visit in comparison to the new visitors' 2.33 pages per visit. The average length of a visit is 8 min. Returning visitors spent significantly more time on the site, averaging 15 min compared to new visitors' average of 5 min, and the 140,000 uninterested visitors who leave immediately. The 8-min site "average" visit tells us little, but when we unpack this figure the numbers become more meaningful and an important target public emerges.

The visitor loyalty data suggest that more than 10% (12.16%) of the site's 292,000 visitors return more than once per month, and 5.47% of the site's visitors (16,025 visitors) return weekly or daily. From a strategic communication standpoint, the number of loyal visitors suggests that specific message content addressing the interests of this public should be developed. Possibilities include creating a listserv or RSS feed to communicate directly with these individuals, posting calendars of important events, hosting Web conferences, or perhaps initiating a blog where issues can be discussed among interested members.

3.2.2. Campaigns, adwords, and bounce rates

Campaign traffic (traffic associated with purchasing ad words on Google) accounts for only 1.5% of the IPS' total yearly traffic. Overall, the weekly campaigns *have* boosted traffic from "new visitors." However, the campaigns may not be worth the time and money. The bounce rate of the "new visitors" generated by these campaigns approaches 80–100% most weeks. Clearly, the campaigns or the strategic messages need to be reconfigured.

The bounce rate of AdWord visitors is 7.4% higher than the site average and the visitor time on site is 27% lower. Thus, the people drawn in from the AdWord campaigns are clearly *not* IPS' target publics. Based on the visitor referral data, a more beneficial use of organizational resources would be to focus on the websites with the highest visitor impact and lowest bounce rates. Among the websites that referred the most loyal visitors were Wordpress.org (19.48% bounce rate), Hotsalsa.org (27.19% bounce rate), Netvibes (34.51% bounce rate), and Wikipedia (39.73% bounce rate). While these referral sites may not provide the largest audience (Google and Facebook do), they provide perhaps the most interested audience. Adding content to the Wikipedia site, as well as broadening the outreach to Facebook visitors, could have a big impact.

3.2.3. Top landing pages

Although the top landing pages were the front page (108,000 visits), about/joinus (19,000), reports/executive_excess_2010 (13,000), staff/phyllis (5000), and staff/bob (3000), both "joinus" and "executive_excess" had bounce rates exceeding 80%. The home page had only a 44% bounce rate, while staff/phyllis and staff/bob had 56% and 59%. The site average is 62.5%. Clearly, Phyllis, Bob, and the home page are highly desirable places to visit. From a strategic communication standpoint, a section drawing attention to staff members might be incorporated into the home page. Featured profiles would not only energize underused screen real estate, but would also provide greater access to the pages in which visitors appear to have the most interest. A redesigned home page would allow top content to be seen sooner. By redesigning the home page and moving the most important elements to positions of prominence, the home page could be more useful to visitors and have a greater potential for serving strategic communication goals.

3.3. Analytic data for the city of Prague, OK

The Prague website is a governmental site and emphasizes how websites serve as resources for publics. Often, we think of websites as international resources where people from around the world visit, but we lose sight of the local public(s) that many sites are intended to serve. The Prague site reminds us that the focus of a community website should be on the local community.

The city of Prague Oklahoma (www.CityofPragueOK.org), is a small town of approximately 2100 people in central Oklahoma. Immigrants from the Czech Republic (former Czechoslovakia) settled the town. Prague is best known as the birthplace of athlete Jim Thorpe, the site of the National Shrine of the Infant Jesus of Prague, the Avatar Meher Baba Heartland Center, and the home of the Kolache Festival.

Prague's home page provides space for multiple story stubs, along with photos. In April 2011, the lead story on the site was an announcement of the city's new online payment system—posted two months earlier in February. Two other stories featured a short article listing the dates of the city-wide spring clean-up (posted in March), and a two year-old announcement of the city's Connect-CTY service. The home page also provides sidebar links to city news, council agendas, minutes, various city departments, and the town's library site, as well as an option to sign up for the city's mailing list. The Prague site also, oddly, contains local advertisement on a banner at the top of the home page nearly as large as the town's masthead, while the site's textual content is quite small and difficult to read.

Clearly, even without Google Analytics, an observer could see that the site lacks content and should be more professional. Still, an examination of the analytic data tells us more. Data have been gathered for six months (October 2010 to April 2011). The site received 2559 visits. Of those, 2123 were unique visitors, meaning that 17% (436) returned to the site more than once. The site averaged 12.01 visits per day, with a high of 32 and a low of two. The site's bounce rate is 45.37%. However, among Oklahoma viewers, the bounce rate was lower (39.71%). The bounce rate from visitors from the Czech Republic is

60.87%. Surprisingly, given the slim content on the site, more than half of the sites visitors spend some time on the site, and the equivalent of 20% of the towns residents come back more than once.

3.3.1. Characteristics of visitors

Not surprisingly, half of the site's traffic comes from within the state of Oklahoma (50.68%). An additional 13.13% visited the site from California, Texas, and Kansas (Texas and Kansas border Oklahoma). Ninety percent of the visitors were from the US. However, the Prague site also had visits from 36 countries.

Oklahoma visitors spent an average of more than 2 min on the site and viewed an average of 3.3 pages per visit. Unfortunately, although Google Analytics can identify visitors' locations by using IP addresses, Prague is a small enough city that IP addresses of nearby residents do not sync with their town. Thus, saying how many Oklahoma visitors visited the site from in or near Prague is impossible.

3.3.2. Key words

Some combination of "Prague" and "Oklahoma" (or "OK") directed 479 (16%) of the visitors to the site. Visitors also searched specifically for the city of Prague Oklahoma (332 visitors), Prague lake (102 visitors), and the Prague police department (113 visitors). Thus, 40% of the key word searches were by people who were interested in information related to Prague OK.

3.3.3. Top pages

The most popular page on the site are clearly city oriented: The most popular page is the home page (2331 visits), followed by the PragueOK news page (506 visits), the directory page (346 visits), the city's contact information page (296 visits), the police department's page (287 visits), the library's page (262 visits), and the calendar page (198 visits). Prague clearly serves a role in providing information about a majority of city services.

From a strategic communication perspective, a redesign of the home page to reflect an emphasis on the kind of information people who visit the site search for seems in order, as does moving (or removing) advertisement from the site's page so that the emphasis is on the needs of the residents. Switching to static ads that only change only when the page is refreshed, rather than every few seconds, and moving the ads to a sidebar, will make the site appear more credible.

Additionally, census data reveal that the mean age in the county where Prague is situated is 39. More accurate local estimates are surely available, but since middle-aged people largely access the site, the tiny type on the site calls for a redesign to meet the needs of local residents.

Other recommendations include:

(1) Updating the site more often and adding new content. Creating a system whereby local agencies can contribute content each week on their own to increase content in general without increasing the workload of the webmaster.
(2) Publicizing the website (adding the URL to city stationery and business cards, and including the URL in information distributed by other agencies, the local paper, etc.).
(3) Adding links on the home page to all city department and services.
(4) Adding links to local attractions.
(5) Clarifying the names of some of the sites pages to better reflect the content.

3.4. Analytic data for PR Romania

PR Romania (www.pr-romania.ro) is one of the leading public relations publications in Romania, aiming to inform and educate its readers about public relations practices and strategies. Unlike the city of Prague's website, PR Romania is rich in content and takes a cross-cultural approach. PR Romania's content is mostly in Romanian, but the English section has been recently expanded. The site is updated three to five times a week with news, analytical articles, opinion articles, and interviews. In addition, the home page includes video, still images, and a Facebook feed.

PR Romania's analytic data was gathered between March 9, 2010 and April 20, 2011. Over that period, the website received 114,065 visitors, 61% (69,420) of those being new visitors. The average time on the website was 2.3 min and each person visited an average of 2 pages.

Visitors came from 94 countries, although 89% of the traffic was from Romania, and 4% from Moldova (the official language is Romanian). The Moldovans have a nascent public relations practice, a population of 4 million, but no locally published public relations professional resource. Romania has a more sophisticated public relations community and a population of 22 million or 5.5 times larger. If we adjust for population, we see a group that is equivalent to about a forth the size of the site's Romanian visitors. Moldova is only 4% of the site traffic (4500), but equivalent to about 25,050 Romanians.

From a strategic standpoint, and given the importance of PR Romania in Moldavia, developing content specifically for Moldavian communication professionals and/or in concert with Moldavian professionals makes sense. Another related suggestion to increase the reach of the website would be to expand its English section (or offer translations in English), a common second language across the globe, thereby reaching visitors from across Europe and many other regions, as well as

the U.S. and Canada. PR Romania might partner with The Holmes Report or PR Daily, increasing the number of visitors while raising visibility on the international level.

3.4.1. Visits per day

PR Romania's content is updated three to five times per week, with substantive articles and brief news stories. The analytic data show that the majority of visitors accessed PR Romania on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Given that many Romanian professionals work fewer hours on Fridays through Sunday, on weekdays, the articles should be job related, professional information, while the articles published on weekends should be shorter, soft news stories like career success or interviewing.

3.4.2. Visitor loyalty

Unpacking visitor loyalty is another important analytical activity. Returning visitors account for 39% of the entire site traffic. Although this number seems impressive, only 28% (12,500) of the returning visitors visited the site more than twice. Possibilities to improve visitor loyalty include obtaining polling data from visitors, contests/competitions, debates or web-casts, creating a database of professional information, etc. Still, the site's 12,500 loyal visitors are also worth targeting in some way and should not be ignored.

4. Use of analytic data in the classroom

As the several case studies above illustrate, understanding analytic data is an interpretative exercise. In general, most students need more practice with data analysis. The justifications given by students in campaigns classes for making choices about message strategies, social media use, and target publics are often just stereotypes and guesses. Having data allows professionals to make better decisions. Just as many professors use scenarios and case studies to teach ethics, having access to real data and helping students learn how to interpret data is valuable.

4.1. How much analytic data is needed?

In order to get the most out of analytic data, you need to have gathered information for a while or have access to established data from cooperative organizations. How much data depends upon the needs of the organization. Three to six months can be long enough for an organization with a well-established web presence to see meaningful data. However, some features like visitor loyalty and geographic data require time to obtain meaningful results. Weekly data or monthly data can be sufficient to see if an ad campaign is working, but multiple data points are preferred.

A typical in-class activity might involve breaking students up into small groups and having each group either interpret the same set of organizational data, or work on different data sets. Students might then be directed to individually write an explanation of what they see, expanding on what the group found, and make suggestions for how to improve strategic communication.

A typical essay or take-home assignment might involve students interpreting the data on their own and writing up a strategic communication analysis for a fictive supervisor. Such an assignment might involve explanations of what is happening and why, a short and long term organizational analysis, and tangible strategies and tactics that might be employed to improve the effectiveness of the website.

Questions for exams might range from asking students to define/explain the various features of analytics (bounce rate, time on site, etc.), interpret a set of data and explain what it means, or be able to explain how specific data could be used to improve external or internal communication. In advanced classes, students should be provided with actual data from clients, and be able to explain what it means to their client.

4.2. Scope of activities

Whether you are teaching about analytics as part of an introductory or advanced course matters. In the introductory public relations or writing courses, most instructors probably have enough to do with just covering the basic content. Teaching students how to set up and monitor analytic data is beyond the scope of the class. Students might only receive a lecture on analytics.

A useful approach for teaching about the tools is to show students what the data actually looks like (logging into an actual site, say the department's home page), by bringing up the data on a screen and talking the students through the various analytic tools. As you go through each item, ask the students to comment on what it might mean: "high bounce rate and high loyalty among a small group"; "short time on home page but long time on another page," etc. Students should be tested on key terms, and understand the tools when encountered later in their academic and professional careers.

Ultimately, you need some data to use to teach about analytics. Obtaining access to already established analytic data through a professional colleague is one approach, as is coding your departmental home page over summer or winter break. There is no bad data from a pedagogical standpoint. A month of data can be enough to get you going.

Over time, departmental data become more valuable pedagogically and as strategic communication tools for the department. Students are able to look back and see trends. There are predictable spikes in site traffic during various times of the

year (ends of semesters, when high school students are looking for schools to attend, etc.), and various parts of the site are accessed more than others (class descriptions, blogs, etc.).

4.3. Using analytics in upper division courses

In advanced courses such as capstone courses or campaigns courses, students should learn how to set up analytic data themselves and begin the process of monitoring. Google allows any number of individuals to be granted access to the data, provided they have a (free) GMail account. Each student should learn to create their own dashboard, and groups should regularly monitor client data.

For campaign data to be useful, students need to code client sites within the first few weeks of the semester, so that six to eight weeks down the road they will have meaningful data. Many organizations (both for-profit and non-profit) already have Google Analytics installed, but preparing a website for analysis only takes a few hours for a large site.

Ideally, advanced classes would use analytic data to conduct a strategic communication analysis and identify a number of ways for the organization to improve their mediated communication. Currently, many student campaigns rely on social media data generated via Facebook and Twitter accounts. Social media are skewed toward younger publics and are often not the best way to evaluate the full range of knowledge and interests of organizational publics.

Inevitably, people who learn about organizations' Facebook sites still visit organizational websites to learn more (Scalzi, 2011). Without analytic data about the full range of organizational visitors and their interests, social media data are just slices of a larger picture (as noted above, often a small slice). Additionally, organizations often reach more people on a daily basis through their website than through a Twitter feed or Facebook.

In order to help teach advanced students about analytic data and to encourage them to interact with it and think about it, students might also be asked to write papers analyzing a specific data set or explaining the data obtained from their in-class clients. As is true of all data analysis, the more time spent poring over the information, the better the researcher understands it. Initially students are only able to report the basic statistics: "Eighty percent of the visitors come from the US"; "The bounce rate in 79%." But over time, as students interact with the data more—and are prompted by their instructors in lectures or group sessions—they learn to tease out the intricacies: "The bounce rate is currently 67% but over the last month since the campaign was initiated the bounce rate has dropped by 15%."

4.4. Using analytics in student-run agencies

In advanced courses such as capstone or campaigns courses, analytic data can be used for both instructional purposes and for client counsel. A student-run agency capable of maintaining long-term relationships with clients and gathering years of data should make analytic data a staple of its secondary research and environmental scanning. Analytics are passive metrics that require little maintenance once installed. The data are continuously monitored by Google and might, for example, be examined in detail once per semester on behalf of clients in a report.

Additionally, gathering analytic data is essential for organizations that want to run AdWord campaigns, track donations, determine where website visitors are from geographically, what kind of technology visitors are using (connection speed, browsers, etc.), or understand which pages of the organizational website are the most and least visited.

5. Google Analytics in public relations

The use of web analytics in business is compelling, and useful for profit and non-profit organizations (Phippen, Sheppard, & Furnell, 2004, p. 293). Yet, there are problems with naively applying for-profit practices to non-profit organizations, or expecting public relations professionals to behave as marketers or advertisers. The literature on online business and sales treat website visitors as customers (business, marketing, and advertising models, not public relations), with little focus on establishing long-term, dialogic, relationships.

Visitors to non-profit organizations, and members of the media, come to websites for different reasons. The need to serve multiple stakeholders is a crucial difference between business and marketing's use of analytics and public relations. Outside of sales, most people seek out organizations that they identify with and make them feel as though they are making a difference. Similarly, the media come to websites for information pertinent to a story or a news event, not to purchase goods or services.

From a public relations standpoint, especially in non-profit, health, education, government, religion, and public service, the experience of stakeholders and stakeseekers as they visit websites is more than "I want to buy this." The organization–public interaction is qualitatively different for visitors to PETA's Web site, than someone coming to Amazon.com (where analytic data has been used extensively to help encourage sales).

Learning to shift the mindset from advertising, sales, and marketing (something that many students implicitly see as a central part of public relations), to relationship building, counsel, information provider, and trusted colleague, takes work. Most undergraduates see event planning as a public relations activity much more keenly than issues management or crisis communication. Many naively believe research is something only done in class, not the real world. Thus, getting students to think about relationships as being built over time, and about how to provide information to publics rather than manipulate them, takes work.

Another issue to consider is that understanding any data is a process that (a) requires understanding the data itself and what it means and (b) requires understanding and being able to think about the big picture. Like the example above of PR Romania, thinking only about the organization itself (and Romania) is easy, but being able to place the organization into the larger frame of the Europe and the world requires the interpreter to understand a lot more. Once the categories are understood ("bounce rate is . . ."), the next move is to be able to understand how one variable influences another ("bounce rate and time on site are related . . ."). The third move is to be able to explain how variables change and interact over time or because of external forces ("the outbreak of Malaria drove up TOS during the month of April and also drove down the bounce rate . . ."). This sort of sequential, cause and effect, reasoning takes some time and practice to master.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Some of you may feel that web analytics are too complicated for the public relations classroom. The truth is, analytics are easy to understand. There are many options for obtaining data from school-wide or department-wide sources (even other departments or schools if your own department or school refuses). The code that needs to be placed on pages to begin tracking data is very easy to install and Google provides instructions on its site for how to do it. Many schools (probably most) already gather analytical data (even if it is not Google Analytics) that will work just as well as Google for pedagogical purposes.

Two of the authors of this paper learned how to use Google Analytics in under an hour. Even if you have little computer aptitude, you can ask for help from your school's IT expert. Indeed, the Web manager at our school added the tracking code for us, rather than grant access to the school's web pages. Many schools and organizations have content management software that will automatically place the tracking code on all of the pages for you. Finally, there are books on how to use Google Analytics that are very easy to use. With a day of work you can be up to speed on analytical software and ready to tutor your students.

To obtain access to data from non-academic organizations, all you have to do is ask. Getting access is no harder than requesting a media kit from an organization. Many organizations already have analytics installed. With a bit of relationship building and a bunch of requests, you can secure access to already well-established data. Based on a three-paragraph e-mail and a follow-up telephone call to about twenty organizations, we received permission from two organizations for a research project on analytics. Other organizations from which we gathered data were obtained in a graduate course by students who already had relationships with the organization.

Undoubtedly, in a class of 15 students, there will be a few students who are conducting (or have conducted) internships with organizations that would grant access to their data. By the end of a year, you could easily have access to several organizations' data and be able to use it for everything from exam questions and in-class activities, to teaching students how to write a report or make a presentation on the data to clients.

As public relations professionals, we need to think about web analytics from a strategic communication standpoint. We are not marketers or advertisers, ultimately our interest should be on the strategic communication, relationship building value of the tools.

Many professionals argue that the web is dying, but anyone who understands the trajectories of the various media technologies knows that all technologies are X + 1—not either/or but both/and. While the fact that the web is being augmented by an assortment of Internet and telephone applications (apps) is true, the web is still widely accepted as a must-have presence for organizations, and journalists routinely use the web for background information on organizations. With new tools like analytics in the hands of communication professionals, understanding stakeholders and publics becomes easier, and students become stronger professionals.

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