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.

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.
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 to 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

#bobevans and other companies I cover

event-specific hashtags

- #agriculture
- #Ohio

### Blogs reporters follow

- Bovidiva.com
- Farmpolicy.com
- Dailyyonder.com
- CivilEats.com
- National sustainable ag coalition (can’t remember name of blog)
- Frenchfoodintheu.s.com
- The Rural Blog
- Coal Country
- Aquaforinia
- 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

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