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Learning web analytics: A tool for strategic communication

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A B S T R A C T

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.

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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