
Social Media: A Relevant Synergy for Research in the Humanities

by

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Abstract

The electronic, networked and interactive nature of social media has significant impact on research, opening up new possibilities for gathering and analysing data. This paper argues that the techniques by which users interact with data in social media, particularly categorisation and semantic tagging, can be applied to a broad range of humanities research methodologies using similar interfaces to those of social media platforms. This study combines a general review of possibilities generated by social media data and human subjects with an exploratory assessment of the feasibility of social media mechanisms. It uses both qualitative and quantitative techniques to generate, gather, analyse and interpret data from both social media and human subjects. Analysis of the data gathered shows a high record of research related activities online even as the human subjects attests to using social media for research. However, caution is needed in interpreting the results of social media data, or generalizing from these data to the public at large. This study recommends that all social media data be benchmarked against other data sources as most indicators developed through social media processes can be difficult to interpret in isolation.

Keywords: Social Media, Research, Humanities, Social Mention, Social-Searcher.

INTRODUCTION

Major developments in information technology are eventually influencing the way in which research is conducted. The rise of social media provides a potential model for humanities research, particularly as it differs greatly from previous technologies in its capacity to engage end-users in an electronic way. The evolution of social media has changed the way most people share and gather information. The concept of consumers generating their own contents on the internet has become ubiquitous. This has created new opportunities for researchers to observe, interact and gather information especially as concerned research in the humanities which is all about human value. Already, many techniques have been developed to leverage social media. Such include: community panels, crowd-sourcing, co-creation, netnography, blog mining and web scraping. Moreover it is likely that many more will evolve over the coming years as the internet continues to change. Social media data often include personally identifiable information

as social media allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated contents and provide a structure for people to get organized, exchange and collaborate.

The use of electronic tools and techniques for extracting and analysing data from social media channels and the internet for the purpose of research have opened new possibilities for researchers thus the need to understudy the various openings and opportunities that await the researcher in the social media world. From an exploratory point of view, this work reviews the possibilities generated by social media data while also assessing the feasibility of social media mechanisms, particularly the data management tools available for use with different social media platforms. Given its nature, social media based research represents a useful research resource that produces results based on the understanding of what social media channels are used, in what way, by whom and what is being said. Thus, social media-based research relates more to a method of monitoring and observing the contents and information produced in the internet and popular social media channels, instead of a method for doing systematic research in the traditional way.

The main thrust of this paper focuses on examining the role of social media in humanities research. An understanding of this issue can aid in identifying platforms for generating, assembling and analysing social media contents for research purposes. Second, it looks at the relationship between data generated from human subjects and data generated from social media. Third, it examines the direct and indirect influence of social media on research-relevant topics. Using a combination of survey, content analysis and data mining to study research trends on social media platforms and gather data from human subjects, this study adopts both qualitative and quantitative approached to determining how social media aid in research. Data gathered and analysed from social media platforms reflects the results recorded after a seven (7) day process of monitoring and recording activities on the sites.

SOCIAL MEDIA: RELEVANCE AND COMPLEXITY

Taprial and Priya (2012) define social media as “all web based applications which allow for creation/exchange of user-generated content and enable interaction between the users” (p. 8). Contrary to the general perception of social media being restricted to networking websites like Facebook and Twitter,

social media encompass all the services that facilitate creation, sharing and exchange of user-generated contents; these include but are not restricted to internet forums, groups, blogs, microblogs, networking sites, social bookmarking sites, wikis, podcasts, content communities for articles, video/photo sharing, questions and answer sites etc. (Taprial and Priya, 2012. p.6).

Each tool of social media has its benefits and peculiar services. All that need to be done is to identify the tool that best serves a particular need. Social media use is a growing phenomenon in contemporary society as the various platforms offer their users an easy way to access and develop networks of friends, family and relevant professionals. Online communities of interest can be found to suit the interests of almost anyone. Social

media platforms are increasingly used by many as a means of communication, sharing information and attitudes as well as behaviours on a huge breadth of topics. It is this user generated content that presents such a valuable opportunity to researchers. Whereas before, researchers gathered information through a variety of methods such as questionnaires, in depth interviews and observation, such data are often now accessible at the mere click of an electronic button. Such data, found on social media platforms are mostly rich in content, numerous and naturally occurring especially since social media allows the wear of anonymity mask. It is on this note that Beningeret al. (2014) list Facebook, Twitter and Google as leading social media platforms for data collection by researchers across diverse disciplines. Twitter as a tool of social media represents a powerful platform to broadcast news, crowd source leads and stories and expand the media's role and earn relevance in the new age of media. Most social media sites have their monitoring or search tool like Facebook has Insight, Twitter has Twitter Search and Google has Google Insight.

The strengths of social media lie in its accessibility, speed, interactivity, longevity/volatility and unlimited reach (Taprial and Priya, 2012). All of which are positive push for social media based research. However, Mayfield postulate that complexities in the use of social media arise from the challenges facing social media which include but are not limited to poor internet services, limited skills, challenge of sifting through millions of data, the monopolistic nature of some social sites, negative use of the anonymity syndrome, requirement of personal information by some social site. Kaplan and Michael (2010) add the following challenges: credibility/reliability of information made available, risk of being biased, violation of data protection rights and information security, breaking of private/professional boundaries, lack of regulation.

Despite the complexities, social media are still described as one of the defining phenomena of the present times reshaping the world. *Statista* ranked Facebook as the leading social network worldwide as at September, 2016 with 1.712 billion active users and also estimated the [number of worldwide users of social media](#) to reach 2.95 billion by 2020. *Statista* adds that Nigeria had 69.1 million internet users as at 2016 and this figure is projected to grow to 84.3 million internet users in 2017.

HUMANITIES RESEARCH: CONCEPTUAL EXPLANATION

The liberal arts can be divided into the physical science, the social sciences, and the humanities. The humanities include the academic disciplines of philosophy, religion, languages and literatures, linguistics, history, and the arts. The arts include the visual arts, drama, and music. The humanities are those academic disciplines that study human culture. According to Ndiyo (2010), the humanities is "concerned with human values... it incorporates subjective information based on the reaction to or interpretation of a work" (p. 36). He adds that the humanities use methods that are primarily critical, or speculative, and have a significant historical perspective.

Asika (2004) describes research as "an organised enquiry that aims at providing information for solving identified problems" (p. 2). Fundamental to the concept of research is precisely this creation of something new; in the humanities, this might consist

of literary authorship, which creates new knowledge in the form of art, or scholarly research, which adds new knowledge by examining texts and other cultural artefacts in the pursuit of particular lines of scholarly inquiry.

Research is often narrowly construed as an activity that will eventually result in a tangible product aimed at solving a world or social problem. Instead, research has many aims and outcomes and is a discipline-specific process, based upon the methods, conventions, and critical frameworks inherent in particular academic areas. In the humanities, the products of research are predominantly intellectual and intangible, with the results contributing to an academic discipline and also informing other disciplines, a process which often effects individual or social change over time. Cohen and Lawrence (1986) have it that, the aim of humanities research is “to develop an understanding of social situations and human acts and of the controversial value issues which they raise” (p. 211).

According to Scimeca and Robert (2016), the four methodologies applicable to research in the humanities are:

1. **The historical method:** This is the oldest of the four methodologies used in the humanities. What this methodology attempts to do is look at a given period of time that is first defined and temporally delineated, and then analyse texts and recorded events within that perspective.
2. **Textual criticism:** It is strictly concerned with the analysis of a given text regardless of discipline. It is used primarily in literature.
3. **Conceptual elucidation:** This has always been in the domain of philosophy. Since ancient times, example, [Plato's dialogues](#) and the texts of [Aristotle](#), the principle concern was and still is the analysis of abstract concepts.
4. **Synoptic method:** This is an attempt to look at the origin and development of an idea or concept from various disciplinary perspectives. The synoptic method is not concerned with the truth or falsehood of an idea or concept, like conceptual elucidation, but strictly how a given idea or concept emerged and evolved within various disciplines to increase human knowledge.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH

Social media research covers all research where social media data are utilised either by itself or in conjunction with information from other sources. Such include: Monitoring or crawling social media platforms (from automated monitoring of brand sentiment through to ad-hoc desk research); Ethnographic research (from observing online social behaviour to participating and collecting primary data in various forms, including ‘friending’ users), this includes netnography; Co-creational techniques used for research purposes; Online communities that generate or deliver consumer opinions, reactions, feedback on a regular, formal or systematic basis. Social media tools like Facebook and LinkedIn are effective tools for identifying users that belong to a particular field of body and thus offer a way to construct snowball samples for exploratory work.

Woodfield et al. (2013) identify that online data collection takes two main forms: conducting ‘traditional’ methods online and using ‘naturally occurring’ online data. Firstly, traditional methods such as interviews and group discussions can be conducted online. For example, a researcher can host a group discussion in a chat room about a subject of interest. This approach removes the need for a physical venue and transportation costs, and enables geographically spread individuals to participate in the same discussion. Gathering people from different regions, and even different countries, to participate in online discussions makes it possible to explore international and cross-cultural perspectives more easily. Also, using online platforms can provide anonymity for participants. This is an appealing feature for some researchers as anonymity may increase participation as well as encourage a more open and honest discussion.

The second approach which is sourced through ‘naturally occurring’ data involves researchers using textual, photographic and video data created and shared on social media to answer research questions. Woodfield et al. posit that over recent years researchers have been able to collate vast quantities of information from social network websites; a process known as data mining which involves examining large sets of pre-existing data to produce new information. They added that mining publically shared information on social media websites can be used by companies and organisations to help better understand trends and attitudes as well as to help predict future behaviours. The use of data mining of tweets to better understand complex social issues has been growing in popularity amongst researchers.

The potential opportunities and advantages social media platforms offer for research are numerous. However, they also raise a number of methodological and ethical challenges. There are potential limitations to inferring meanings from the data that researchers wish to use and ensuring that information is not taken out of context. With the option of preserving anonymity online presents the new challenge for researchers to obtain sufficient demographic information to know their sample. The use of social media websites in research also generates discussion around the ethical dilemmas of such methods.

Bright et al. (2014) argue that social media will however not be useful for accessing the opinions of people who do not use the internet; but then previous surveying methods have also suffered from similar problems (for example, telephone surveys struggle to contact people who are ex-directory, whilst face-to-face interviews are biased towards those who are not within reach). They add that social media research seems particularly suited to:

1. Learn how social information flows in different channels, target groups of individuals and/or geographical areas.
2. Identify new topics and trends in people’s interactions.
3. Gain insight of consumers’ sentiments, attitudes, opinions, and thoughts about one or more specific issues.
4. Gain insight into organization’s communication strategies, actions and other aspects with regard to one or more specific issues.
5. Have a real-time overview of people’s reactions during an episodic event(s)

6. Monitor consumers' reactions to a recurrent or chronic event(s) during an extended period in time.
7. Identify potential influencers and opinion makers across the main social media platforms.

Based on observation of activities in different social media platforms, it could be said that the use of social media for humanities research can provide a number of advantages relative to other research methods, such include;

- i. Opportunity to collect and analyse data in real-time.
- ii. Opportunity to collect a wide diversity of messages/information produced by a heterogeneous group of people.
- iii. Opportunity to collect data corresponding to different moments in time, very quickly.
- iv. Online data/conversations seem to yield a higher level of honesty and transparency.
- v. Allows access to a large sample of people, from different geographical areas, with relatively little practical restraints.
- vi. No need for data transcription.

The disadvantages and limitations that could possibly arise include:

- i. Repetition of messages on the same platform or on different platforms can over represent the sample of messages and lead to biased interpretations, depending on the research goal.
- ii. Social media quantitative analysis does not completely draw on the richness of consumers' responses and, thus, they provide only a superficial analysis.
- iii. Deeper and richer qualitative analysis could be a highly time consuming task, given the size and the unstructured nature of the data.
- iv. Deeper and richer qualitative analysis may require investing in specific software programmes.
- v. Loss of paralinguistic phenomena. Non-verbal communication plays a significant role in conveying meaning and emotion and its loss can affect the interpretation of messages. In accordance, although the analysis of some forms of written expression of emotions (e.g., emoticons) can give some insight in this regard, they still provide an incomplete view of the phenomena.
- vi. Generalization to the broader population is constrained, unless complemented with additional methods/data analysis procedures.
- vii. Samples might be biased by excluding people that do not use social media or internet regularly and/or that are illiterate.

However, where many social media profiles are used and need to be managed, it becomes quite cumbersome to post updates on individual platforms and also to follow the updates of established connections. Social media engagement tools or account management tools come handy in such scenario. The online services provide a single dashboard with all the users' profiles integrated so it can be possible to monitor all the

conversations and respond to them from a single place, rather than individually monitoring of all the profiles. The tools are:

- a) **HootSuite:** Can be used to manage multiple accounts/profiles across Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace, Wordpress, Ping.fm and Foursquare. It provides an integrated dashboard for monitoring updates, creating and scheduling own updates, track click-through and also assigns task amongst multiple team members. It also gives enhanced analytics and integrates reports from google analytics, Facebook insights along with the network statistics.
- b) **CoTweet:** Is a web-based social media management, engagement and reporting solution which helps in engaging, tracking and analysing conversation around a brand or product across Twitter and Facebook. It allows for unlimited users, analysis, conversation history and scheduling activities.
- c) **SproutSocial:** Integrates with Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Foursquare and Gowalla. It is a complete social media management tool which allows publication, update scheduling across various channels, monitoring of conversation, collaborating with team members and analysing of performance on social media. It also has a contact management feature and a discovery feature, which facilitates finding target users.
- d) **Seesmic:** Like other engagement tools, it allows posting and scheduling updates, monitoring of streams across subscribed channels and in addition also has a feature of adding pictures and geo-location to the updates. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Foursquare and Salesforce can be managed with Seesmic.

There are other tools for managing social engagement like Tweetdeck, MarketmeSuite, Simplify 360 among others. The choice depends on what is to be achieved.

Apart from the Social media engagement tools that could be effective for research, the social media monitoring and analysis tools could also come in handy where need be. They are also known as the social media listening tools. They can keep track of brand mentions and users' sentiment across the various social media platforms. They include:

- a) **Social Mention:** A search and analysis platform that aggregates user-generated contents into a single stream. Also provides analysis in terms of the strength, reach, sentiment and passion and users can create and receive email alerts for the selected keywords.
- b) **Addictomatic:** Searches for keyword related content on popular websites and presents the results in source boxes.
- c) **Social-Searcher:** A real time search engine that combines keywords relevant to the search made into a single stream.

Other tools include: howsociable, backtype, trendrr, icerocket

METHODOLOGY

This study is designed to use qualitative and quantitative techniques to generate, gather, analyse and interpret data from both social media and human subjects. The social media monitoring and analysis tools used are Social Mention and Social-Searcher while for human subjects, questionnaires were administered and interviews conducted. Fifty

(50)questionnaires were administered to students and lecturers in four (4) different universities while the interviewees (16) were also selected from the four (4) universities. The four (4) universities are: University of Calabar, Akwa Ibom State University, Cross River State University of Technology and University of Uyo.

**RESULTS: DATA FROM SOCIAL MEDIA
RESEARCH RELATED SEARCHES**

Source	Percentage
Social Mention	56%
Social-Searcher	62%

Data from Social Mention showed that 56% of the searches made within the week of study were research related while Social-Searcher showed a total of 62% research related searches during the week. Both records are above 50% thus reflecting that research activities take a lead on activities that happen on the site.

DATA GATHERING ACTIVITIES

Source	Percentage
Social Mention	67%
Social-Searcher	61%

During the week of study, Social Mention recorded 67% as a reflection of data gathering activities on the site while Social-Searcher reflected 61%. The percentages recorded showed that a lot of data gathering activities happen online.

TOP HASHTAGS

Source	Arts	Humanities	Academic	Science	Conference	Others
Social Mention	21%	19%	14%	16%	13%	17%
Social-Searcher	18%	23%	9%	15%	8%	27%

The top hashtags represent areas users talk about the most. The results showed that Arts related discourse takes the lead in Social Mention followed by Humanities. While in Social-Searcher, Humanities take the lead followed by Arts. These reflect the high level of interest in Arts and Humanities related discourses.

TOP SEARCHES

Source	Research	Humanities	Academia	Science	Arts	Postdoc	Social	Link	SSchat
Social Mention	14%	11%	11%	13%	12%	7%	10%	9%	13%
Social-Searcher	13%	12%	7%	11%	19%	5%	17%	6%	10%

Social Mention and Social-Searcher are search and analysis tools, their statistics reflect what users are engaged in. From the table above, Research as a keyword tops the charts of searches made on Social Mention; this is followed by Science and SSchat with Arts taking the third place. While on Social-Searcher, Arts takes the lead, followed by Social and then Research.

RESPONSES TO HUMANITIES RELATED SEARCHES AND ANALYSIS

SOURCE	Strength of Mentioning	Response	Reach
Social Mention	62%	60%	74%
Social-Searcher	67%	65%	70%

Data from the above table reflect the response rate and involvement of users in published searches and data gathering processes. It reflects the engagement level recorded in the process of data gathered. Social-Searcher has a higher response rate and strength of mentioning but Social Mention has a higher Reach.

DATA FROM HUMAN SUBJECTS:**SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE**

SOURCE	Yes	No	Total
Questionnaire	44	6	50
Interview	14	2	16

From the table above, 44 of the questionnaire respondents (out of 50) representing 88%, use social media, while 6 respondents (representing 12%) do not use social media. For the Interviewees, 14 persons (87.5%) use social media while 2 persons (12.5%) do not use. These reflect that most people make use of social media.

According to Felix Ibiang (Personal Interview), the advent of social media is at a time in which the world has been forged into a single entity. With technology evolution and the internet, we can establish connection with anyone, at any time and from anywhere. Information about people are readily more available than ever. With all this, the chances of social media growing even more rapidly than expected are rather huge. Tina Manyo (Personal Interview) adds that there is a likelihood that 99% of the citizenry will join in the usage of social media as its benefits far outwit its challenges.

REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Source	News Update	Socialising	Research	Entertainment	All the Mentions	None of the Mentions	Total
Questionnaire	8	12	11	9	10	---	50
Interview	3	2	4	2	5	---	16

From the table above, 10 questionnaire respondents (representing 20%) claim to use social media for a combination of news update, socialising, research and entertainment. Also, 5 (31%) of the interviewees claim same. While 11 of the questionnaire respondents (representing 22%) attest to using social media for research purposes while 4 of the interviewees (representing 25%) also use social media for research purposes.

Adedeji Ayinde (Personal Interview) explained that Social media has come to stay and chances of its growth are certain as more platforms of operation are likely to

evolve. He added that the major problem of social media in respect to gathering fact is discipline (Personal Interview). Ibiang described Social Media as a one stop for all searches, with its widespread advantage; researchers can harness its offers to a full advantage.

MOST VISITED WEBSITE

Source	Facebook	Twitter	You Tube	Google	Blogs	None of the Mentions	Total
Questionnaire	11	6	9	17	5	2	50
Interview	3	4	1	8	-	-	16

The table above shows that Google is the most visited website, represented by 17 questionnaire respondents (or 34%) and 8 interviewees (or 50%).

The data presented above are in tandem with the views of AritEffanga(Personal Interview) who stated that social media have come in its own time and at a point that the world is ready to embrace it. She added that social media have increased the propensity for international relationship, factual information dissemination, forwardness of information gathering, research to unveil hidden secret in society personally and collectively thus increasing the level of reliance on.Ayinde agreed that researchers are bound to rely on social media because of the numerous and outstanding advantages they pose but gullible embrace in entirety should not be encouraged because it might not do the academic world much good.

MOST PREFERRED SITE FOR RESEARCH

Source	Facebook	Twitter	You Tube	Google	Blogs	None of the Mentions	Total
Questionnaire	1	7	16	21	5	-	50
Interview	-	-	2	14	-	-	16

Data from the table above show that Google is not just the most visited website but it is also the most preferred for research. 21 (or 42%) of the questionnaire respondents attest to this, while 14 (or 87.5%) of the interviewees state same.

According to Manyo, it is important that researchers harness the power of social mediatoempowerwhatreallymatters – thehumanside of research which is what the humanities is centred on.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The rise of social media has created a communication revolution. New platforms now exist for people to discuss an endless set of topics online, and the breadth of access to these conversations makes them a powerful new force in a number of areas, including research.Analysis of data gathered shows a high record of research related searches online, thus reflecting that users recognise the usefulness of social media for research. Records also show that data gathering activities are done online, this reflects a shift from total reliance on the traditional way of conducting research. Data recorded for hashtags show that social media is not only used for socialising and gameplaying but academic

activities also trend. And this is reflected not only on the top hashtags but also the keywords of top searches.

Data gathered from human subjects show that most people make use social media and the reason for social media usage is wide spread. While some persons use social media for news update, socialising, research or entertainment, others use social media for multiple reasons. Analysis of data gathered also shows that google is the most visited website as well as the most preferred website for research.

PROJECTIONS: THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BASED RESEARCH

Social media have evolved from a mere source of entertainment to a serious and effective business and research tool in the hands of competent and knowledgeable professionals. The increasing ways in which social media allows researchers to contact and communicate with participants offers new and exciting opportunities for developing participatory research models, real -time and longer term relationships with participants which might provide richer, deeper insights into the questions being explored. But then researchers need to both explore and understand the economies and ecologies of social media.

As observed by Bright et al. (2014) using social media to understand current salient issues; knowing what the public is thinking about is a crucial precursor to knowing what their opinion is of any given topic. It is also an area where social media has the potential to offer real added value. A crucial problem in current opinion poll research is that while there may be a political need to know the public's opinion on a specific matter, the public themselves may have given the subject little attention. Offering an insight into currently salient issues is hence an area where social media has the potential to really fill in a gap. By providing a forum for unsolicited public comments and conversation to emerge, different social media platforms provide an indication of what the wide body of social media users are thinking about at any given time. They add that it is no surprise therefore that a variety of indicators from social media are already starting to enter common parlance.

Ripberger (2011) noted that "researchers have also started to explore the potential this type of data has for predicting human behaviour, on the basis that informational searches often precede a particular activity" (p. 239). Choi and Varian (2012) added that research have shown Google, Wikipedia and other types of social media offer highly accurate predictions of a whole variety of socially interesting questions. They further state that, exploring the dynamics of public attention can also be a way of identifying key information sources which both inform people of what is going on and (potentially) help shape their opinions. This is what Bright et al. describe as something which traditional public opinion polling has always struggled to give a clear answer to. Of course, traditional surveys can ask questions, but the answers can be quite vague; social media data, by contrast, offer the potential to pinpoint details and sources. The data on information sources could also be made available by Google. When these data are combined with information on the most popular search queries for a given topic,

a powerful picture can be built up of the information landscape on offer to the public on a particular issue.

According to Bright et al. more conversational social media such as Facebook and Twitter provide another angle. By looking at the type of links people post when they are talking about particular topics, we can see both who is talking about something and what information sources they rely on. The people talking about a certain topic can also be a valuable resource in and of themselves; a variety of studies have shown how social influence operates in subtle but effective ways in social networks to distribute information and inform people of what is going on.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at exploring the ways in which data generated by social media platforms can be used to support research in the humanities. This work combines a general review of all the possibilities generated by social media data with an empirical exploration assessing the feasibility of some solutions, focussing in particular on the role of social media in humanity research and analysis. However, caution is needed in interpreting the results of social media data, or generalizing from these data to the public at large. The science behind many of the social media methods is still developing; and major questions remain how to employ them properly. Overall, this study suggests that all social media data be benchmarked against other data sources as most indicators developed through social media processes can be difficult to interpret in isolation.

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