Big Data Or Small Meaning? Learnings From Large-Scale Sport-Related Social Media Research

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Aim

The aim of this contribution is to provide methodological insights and learnings from conducting large-scale social media research and to invite a discussion on advancing research methods in this still relatively new social communication space. A cross-European football-related research project is used as main reference.

Background

Social media has become a vital communications tool and for managing organizational/individual reputation: for example, about half of the European population are active social media users, and growing; football-related content is the single major driver in the growth of online discussions; and most European professional/amateur football organizations maintain a presence on social media platforms.

Filo, Lock and Karg (2015, p.167) define social media as "new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations and individuals." User-generated content has led to 'beliefs in organizational omniscience' become something of a rarity (Kim, Soo-Yeon & Kang Hoon, 2015) and, potentially, adding to pluralization and organizational legitimacy (Etter, Colleoni, Illia, Meggiorin & D'Eugenio, 2017).

In addition, social media has the potential to 'predict the present' if seen as a two-/multi-way communication space. Knowing what the public or a relevant sub-community is talking about is a crucial precursor to understanding what their opinion is of any given topic. Therefore, it is no surprise that a variety of indicators from social media are already starting to enter common parlance and changing media and communications fundamentally. For example, newspapers and TV news programs routinely report that a topic is 'trending' on Twitter. In summary, 'unlocking' online content and conversations promises academic and managerial insights.

Methodological considerations

Since 2008, towards one hundred journal articles have been identified in the field of sport and social media, with the vast majority being content-driven and largely employing existing sport management research techniques (Filo et al., 2015). Many studies are rather small-scale to remain manageable and meaningful for individual researchers or small teams when utilizing mainstream research strategies, e.g. manually coding content. Any social media research faces significant methodological challenges. For example, how to capture and code large-scale social media data; how to acknowledge for the turn of social media to become more visually-driven rather than text-based; and the extent to which sentiment can be measured and if it can be attributed to real people and 'meaningful' communication (Etter et al., 2017).

In this specific case, the aim of the sport-related study has been to capture authentic conversations and dynamic views from European publics and (online) communities across ten languages related to the role of football in society. The combined number of data sources across the ten languages include 57k forums, 95k blogs and 1,715k news sites and will have been monitored for more than half a year. A commercially successful social media monitoring system has been used. In a nutshell, the data collection method for online 'community research' and especially 'extended netnography' based on user-generated content ("online practice of anthropology"; Kozinets, 2006) works along data retrieval and query management (based on theory-driven text analysis, see e.g. Mayring, 1993).

Discussion and learnings

General findings about the extent and value of social media communication in the context of the given study will be mentioned as a proxy for appreciating volume against topical focus of social media data. However, without data of the empirical study being analyzed at the time of writing (and, therefore, related pitfalls), issues around exploring sport-related content and implementing the evaluation system have become evident. Some may be not entirely new considerations in the history of science philosophy and social science research methodology, but they appear to require a rethink in the context of the still new social media phenomenon.

For example, while user-generated data is available in great excess and often perceived as 'information freely and easily available at our fingertips', it is very untidy raw material for any structured inquiry. Any

research on a larger scale needs to strike an efficient balance between qualities and quantities of available information. While we seem to have established accepted means of researching complex social interaction and mediated information (mostly through using gatekeepers as a pre-filter or by direct/primary inquiry), the diversity and relative fast changing nature of social media platforms/channels/formats cause concerns.

Consequently, with shortcomings in research designs and methods for large-scale social media enquiries, it appears as if yet several 'compromises' are required and that researchers should invest efforts into advancing social media research techniques (and their understanding thereof), but also designing inquiries beyond and outside current mainstream methodologies utilized in sport management.

References

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