

Studies in social data: how industry uses social media for communications and research.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/04/02/studies-in-social-data-how-industry-use-social-media-data/

4/2/2015

*A series of meetups have been arranged for those interested in the use and applications of social data. **Farida Vis** provides a brief overview of the latest event on business uses of social data. Speakers reflected on principles for handling data, the need to collaborate externally, and how to look more closely at the full lifecycle of social data. Sometimes social data is specifically part of a 'comms' campaign and sometimes it's specifically 'research'. But sometimes it's both. Academics should consider how work in this area might be co-produced in different ways.*



Last night the first [Studies in Social Data Meetup](#) was held at Twitter London, attracting around 150 people who were all keen to learn, listen and contribute to discussions about various uses and applications of social media and social data. It was great to see a really diverse mix of people at this event from a number of different sectors. The organisers seemed visibly pleased with this turnout as well.

Although the original write-up highlighted a specific focus on the 'business use of social data', in the end it very much involved a cross-sector approach, both in terms of the three presentations as well as the audience. One of the sponsors of the event, [The Big Boulder Initiative](#) (BBI) was very much set up with this aim in mind. This relatively new US-based organisation (of which I am part) is focused on the social data industry, first and foremost from an industry perspective, but now very much reaching out beyond industry, making strong inroads to engage with academia for example. The BBI hosts an annual conference in Boulder (originally started by Gnip, a key social data provider in [2012](#). Since Gnip's acquisition by Twitter in 2014, the conference has been organised through the BBI). This [year's conference](#) will take place 15-16 June and judging from the speakers announced so far the commitment to cross-sector dialogue is clearly evident.



Image credit: [Jason Howie \(CC BY\)](#)

The three speakers all highlighted key insight from their own perspective. The first speaker, [Randy Almond](#), Head of

Data Marketing at Twitter, very much focused on what can be seen as unique and disruptive about Twitter data, what it might be able to tell you, for example seen through the lens of specific devices and applications. Randy highlighted two use cases from last year's [Twitter Data Grants](#) programme: one project from the University of Wollongong in Australia that uses GeoSocial intelligence to model urban flooding in Jakarta as well as a project at the Harvard Medical School that is focused on food borne gastrointestinal illness surveillance using Twitter data. Given his role at the Head of Data Marketing there was also a key emphasis on different brands using Twitter data to either work on specific campaigns (Dove) or better understand their customers in different ways. (Randy's presentation was also filmed on Periscope and can be accessed [here](#)).

The theme of food borne illness was continued in [Sian Thomas'](#) presentation highlighting work done with social data at the Food Standards Agency (FSA). Sian is the Head of Information Management and she made it clear from the start that the work she was presenting had been done by a team of people, including James Baker who in his Twitter bio describes himself as a 'Digital Media & Research bod at @foodgov'. This description seems relevant in different ways. What Sian presented, which included fantastic research on Norovirus, their award-winning 2014 Food Safety Week campaign around campylobacter, highlighted something important. Something about bringing more closely together people who are usually described as 'comms' with people who are usually described as 'research'. It seems that this is one of the key reasons why the FSA has been able to do such innovative work: there has been an early recognition that in order to do this kind of work well you need to collaborate with people beyond your own organization and internally look more closely at the full lifecycle of social data. So sometimes social data is specifically part of a 'comms' campaign and sometimes it's specifically 'research'. Sometimes it's both.

The final speaker, [Francesco D'Orazio](#) from [Pulsar](#), which is a new breed of social analytics platform, highlighted six principles for handling social media data. In a humorous, yet deeply insightful talk, full of GIFS, [hotdog legs](#) and highlighting various teething problems in working with visual content he set out the following key points (emphasis mine):

1. Social media is better at audience *understanding* than audience targeting.
2. Social media data is not quantitative data, rather qualitative data on a quantitative scale. (Original post highlighting that catchy quote [here](#))
3. Social media research is not about data mining, rather *data surfacing*.
4. Social media data makes more sense in *context*, not in a silo.
5. The more *focused* the data the stronger the insight.
6. *Visual social media* requires *visual social research methods and tools*.

[Wasim Ahmed](#), PhD student in the Information School at the University of Sheffield, has produced a great Storify that gives more context and info to all the talks ([here](#)).

Because not everyone can afford to travel to Boulder each summer and attend the conference, the Meetups offer an exciting and productive way for people working in social data or with an emerging interest in this area, to get together more regularly through monthly or bi-monthly meetings (similar Meetups are organised across the US, but this was the first UK one). This is a timely and interesting development, including for academics. If last night's event is any indication of the calibre of speakers and the kinds of issues that may be discussed more regularly and across sectors, then it is a very welcome development. Given that cross-sector dialogue in this area seems key in all sorts of ways, there are not many venues or events that are free (and open to all) that allow for such high quality discussion.

Overall, the event highlighted a number of things for me: the need for cross-sector dialogue in this area, which includes the need to talk about how we do research (what are our methods, what questions are we asking, why, in what context, for what reason, how do we think about privacy and ethics. All that stuff); how do we tackle cross-platform research? So whilst this first event was quite heavily focused on Twitter, the last presentation especially

highlighted the rise of the visual web and image platforms, which come with all sorts of new challenges. Finally, given the huge focus on impact and engagement within academia, it is worth considering how we academics can think about social media and social data in a more holistic way: as both communication as well as data. For me the FSA presentation highlighted some of the challenges and deep need for collaboration and thoughtful leadership very well.

On a very personal level, I have been involved in social media research for nearly ten years now and for the last four have been working very much across sectors. For the last 18 months I have been working with the FSA and last year I was successful in getting funding from the ESRC for a project, '[Picturing the Social](#)', that aims to better understand what it means for society when people upload as many as 1.8 billion images every day. That project involves a large, interdisciplinary team, a new research lab as well as an industry co-investigator, Francesco. So for me this event also highlighted the potential as well as a need for such collaborations. To not only recognise that to better understand social data, we need to work across the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities, but more than that: we need to work across academia. And not when we have finished the research, but right from the start and consider how work in this area might productively be co-produced in different ways. With those ambitious and challenging goals in mind, this new Studies in Social Data Meetup series could well become an important venue where such connections and ideas can take hold. I certainly hope so!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Farida Vis is a Faculty Research Fellow, based in the Information School at The University of Sheffield. During 2012-2015 her Fellowship focused on 'Big Data and Social Change'. The final two years of her Fellowship will examine 'The Futures of the Visual Web'. She is the Director of the [Visual Social Media Lab](#), sits on the [World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Social Media](#) and was recently elected to the Board of Directors of the [Big Boulder Initiative](#). She is a frequent public speaker and tweets as [@flygirltwo](#)

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.