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This study investigates emerging roles in social media work across a range of professions and organisations, and the transforming media and communications environment associated with digital technologies, big data and social media platforms. We use the umbrella term ‘social media industries’ to point to the emergence of a distinctive site of services, products, markets, audiences, professions and forms of labour that revolve around social media (Alberran, 2013). As a snapshot and ‘moment in time’ study, we examine job market data and report on in-depth interviews with 18 specialists in social media communications from 12 different organisations. To better understand the implications of these changes for universities we conducted focus group interviews with students. Our participants emphasized that this is a fast moving field and we acknowledge that this research must be ongoing. However, as well as informing media and communication curriculum design, the analysis presented also tells us a great deal about emerging contexts for what we might call social media work.

1. Key findings and highlights

- A large numbers of new jobs are targeting social media expertise, across a very wide range of industries.
- 21% of social media jobs in our data set fell into traditional Communications and Marketing fields, while 26% were situated within Retail and Hospitality
- The retail and hospitality sectors are employing social media specialists to expand promotions, build a brand and organise events, as well as to develop communities or ‘fans’. These roles complement the movement into online retail and away from bricks and mortar selling.
- Organisations are increasingly restructuring to incorporate social media work. This is particularly the case with media advertising agencies, where digital media and social media are the significant growth areas.
- A tipping point has been reached in turning toward digital and social media communication.
- Definitions of social media across organisations, and among students, varied greatly depended on context and the uses to which it was put.
- Media agencies in particular see the complexity and integrated or ‘ecological’ character of the media and communications environment, and emphasise the need to think broadly about what social media is.
- Organisations often struggle to negotiate and keep pace with changes to social media platforms, such as Facebook’s ‘pay-to-play’ model for organisational Pages.
- A range of free or high-fee commercial social media analytics suites are used to leverage the insights presented by social media use and engagement data. The specific analytics tools used is tied to considerations of budget as well as need.
- Social media specialists require a balanced skill set that go beyond traditional marketing to include multimedia content production skills, storytelling and communication skills, data analytics and critical analysis capabilities.
- Experience rather than qualifications is currently more important in making new appointments.
- Social media community management work requires a unique and diverse skill set, and is seen as 24/7 work.
- Crisis management plays a large part in the work of social media managers, but in a way that is highly valued by organisations who are able to converse with, rather than just broadcast to, customers or stakeholders.
2. Background

On Monday 24 August 2015 1 billion people used the popular social network site Facebook within a single day, a first since its development in 2004 (BBC, 2015). US data indicates that over the last decade, social networking use has risen to 76% among adult internet users and 65% of the total population, with some demographics (18-29) reaching 90% (Perrin, 2015).

Social media have become not just profile and networking tools, but complex and comprehensive platforms driving and structuring the way the internet functions (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2012). As a consequence, social media platforms are at the edge of innovation in organisational communication, brand management, advertising and market insights across a wide range of industry sectors and at the heart of new sharing economies. Social media are also intertwined with media entertainment and arts as well as community groups and organisations. The social impact of these developments includes, but also reaches well beyond brand management and advertising through digital marketing or advertising and public relations to include, for instance, health communication and public health campaigns, education, political participation and journalism and public communication in the management of crises and disasters.

These developments have been rapid. Organisations have to adapt and innovate quickly, as do universities. In this environment there is great demand from both students and employers across a wide range of professions and industries for skills and knowledge in social media use, content production and curation, community management, data insights and analytics. New professional roles are emerging for social media strategists with creative communication and media skills, across a wide range of industries and professions. Arguably, higher education curriculum design is lagging in meeting the demand for graduates with skills and knowledge in social media platforms, management, analytics and creative content production and curation.

What is becoming evident and most striking about these developments is that the need for creative and technical social media expertise goes well beyond traditional areas of professional or strategic communications and marketing insights, to also involve critical and creative media design and production skills, digital storytelling, community facilitation and data science. As part of the process of developing a new Social Media Major and evolving the Advertising Major within the Bachelor of Media and Communication and Bachelor of Arts, Swinburne University of Technology has sought to better understand the needs of industry, and perceptions of employers and students about where social media knowledge and learning might lead.

To date, where higher education has targeted social media expertise and knowledge it has been positioned primarily within marketing disciplines, and usually addressed within postgraduate diplomas and certificates (Meredith, 2012). Online learning and social media have been incorporated into learning and teaching in interesting ways (Kent and Leaver 2014; Gikas and Grant 2013; Hosein etal 2010; Hung and Yuen 2010). But social media expertise is not itself the goal of those initiatives. Digital media and design degrees offer essential content production and management skills, marketing and data science offer another important education framework for social media expertise. The discussion in this report details the need to expand and integrate social media oriented curriculum design from the undergraduate level, and position broad-based critical, creative and analytical learning within media and communications disciplines.

3. Research Design

We investigated the expectations and needs of employers and students, job market data and professional roles emerging across a variety of industry contexts regarding social media expertise, skills and knowledge.

The research was structured around the following questions:
• How are organisations from a range of industry areas changing, adapting to and leveraging social media?
• What are the emerging roles, careers and skill sets required in relation to these changes?
• How do students understand the social media communications environments and the skills and jobs relevant to it?

Job market data was examined by extracting a sample of 'social media' job advertisements through the employment platform seek.com.au. This data was extracted over a one month period in November 2014, and repeated in June 2015. The aim was to draw out information about the range of industries and organisations advertising for social media positions, the proportion of job ads across each of those industries, job titles, descriptions and pay ranges.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 industry representatives and leaders from a range of organisations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telstra</td>
<td>Telecommunications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alannah &amp; Madeline Foundation</td>
<td>NGO child safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Management Victoria</td>
<td>State Emergency Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swinburne University</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen’s Hill Estate</td>
<td>Winery – retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cohealth &amp; eheadspace</td>
<td>Health services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madman Entertainment</td>
<td>Entertainment media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxus Melbourne</td>
<td>Media Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isobar Australia</td>
<td>Digital Creative Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPY&amp;R</td>
<td>Advertising Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHD</td>
<td>Media Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOciETY</td>
<td>Social Media Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clemenger BBDO</td>
<td>Creative Agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participating organisations and industries

By talking to industry representatives, across a range of fields, about their needs for employees with skills in managing social media and developing social media strategies, the aim was to gather insights that can inform our students and our curriculum and learning design. But the interviews also offer significant insights into the disruptions and opportunities that social media has brought to the organisations examined.

The interviews explored the following questions:

• How does your organisation use, manage, monitor and capitalise on social media?
• What professional roles does your organisation allocate to social media management?
• What qualifications, skill sets and attributes do those roles require?

Focus group interviews were undertaken with media and communication students at Swinburne University of Technology (two groups, 12 students in total). In addition to broad discussion around the questions below, the students were shown a job advertisement for a social media officer position as a prompt for discussion.

• What is your understanding of social media and the kinds of professional roles and employment contexts that require social media expertise?
• How do you think social media can benefit commercial, public and non-profit organisations?
• What knowledge, skills and understanding do you feel you have in relation to social media work?
• What do you feel are the gaps in your knowledge, skills and understanding regarding social media?

By talking to students about their employment ambitions in relation to social media communications, and their learning experiences, knowledge and skills in this area, the aim was to map curriculum and learning gaps, and areas of interest in order to enhance Swinburne’s programs.
4. Job Market Data

The need for graduates with social media expertise has begun to permeate across a wide range of industries and areas of employment. Our analysis of Australian jobs advertised in December, 2014 shows that while there is a concentration of social media roles advertised within communications and marketing organisations, retail (19%), hospitality and tourism (10%) and technology companies (7%) also dominate amongst a diverse range of industry areas looking for social media experts (Figure 1). The large number of jobs in retail, hospitality and tourism was to some degree a surprise, but indicates the way social media expertise is now seen as an essential part of the marketing and communications teams even for small and medium enterprises.

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of 242 jobs advertised in Australia in a one week period (Dec 2014) that require social media expertise as a part of the position description. The graph shows a high proportion of those jobs categorized within media and communications industries, but also demonstrates the wide array of additional industries seeking social media specialists.

The market for social media jobs can be described as highly lateral, as reflected in the breadth of organisations advertising dedicated social media roles. The proportion of the job designated as social media work varied also. Those positions with more explicit social media job titles, or communications titles, placed greater emphasis than those otherwise named; for example, in events management or retail (Table 2).

The roles advertised range in career level, from graduate entry positions as community managers, to senior and executive level positions focusing on social media communications strategy. This is encouraging for undergraduate students looking to develop social media communication knowledge and skills, and who are looking to apply these skills across a diverse range of industries.

From position descriptions, social media coordinators are expected to take on a range of specific roles such as:

- Generate social media content
- Monitor and moderate social media conversations
- Management of all social media campaigns
- Produce insights and recommendations by analysing the performance of campaigns
- Organise and initiate competitions and prize distribution
- Manage budgets and reconcile monthly spend

And taking on the role of ‘Creative Social media Strategist’, for example, might involve:

working with senior stakeholders across the business to develop and deliver a social media strategy that captures the needs of the entire organisation, reflecting consistency and driving brand awareness. You will integrate this overarching strategy across all areas of the business applying your knowledge of content development, governance frameworks, and measurement tools to define success as well as exploring new, innovative ways of using social media channels to deliver commercial outcomes.
Figure 1: Social Media Positions within Industries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Job Titles</th>
<th>Related Job Titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ad operations specialist: social media</td>
<td>Communications officer, assistant, coordinator, manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative social media strategist</td>
<td>Customer experience specialist, consultant, officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data driven social media analyst</td>
<td>Digital content coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital/social media officer</td>
<td>Digital campaign manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and social media coordinator</td>
<td>Digital content coordinator, specialist, designer, marketer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and social media coordinator</td>
<td>Digital marketing coordinator, specialist, executive, manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media account manager</td>
<td>Digital media strategist, marketing officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media and digital marketing coordinator</td>
<td>Marketing &amp; communications officer, coordinator, executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media assistant</td>
<td>Marketing officer, coordinator, director, manager, executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media community manager</td>
<td>Online engagement producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media coordinator</td>
<td>Online marketing coordinator, manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media manager</td>
<td>SEO manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media specialist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media marketing internship</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Job titles associated with social media expertise
The study participants represented organisations of varied size and structure, ranging from Telstra as one of Australia’s largest corporations, employing around 32,000 people, to a comparatively small non-profit organisation in the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, and a local vineyard employing one part-time social media officer. These differences were reflected in the capacity for engaging with social media and employing specialists; but this also depended, of course, on the kind of organisation and how central social media is to the business conducted. Social media agencies like SOCIETY or integrated digital creative agencies such as Isobar Australia involve a whole career path and an organisational structure around specific social media roles. Isobar Australia, for instance, supports:

- junior community managers,
- community managers,
- senior community managers,
- lead community managers,
- a whole bunch of strategists,
- our office planners and senior planners right through to associate directors.

Outside of the dedicated social media agency, organisational structures and roles associated with social media have oscillated greatly:

- since social media started in companies eight, ten, 12 years ago, there’s always been, in lots of organisations, this fight as to which department owns social media. Is it the marketing team, is it the corporate affairs team, is it the HR team, is it the customer service team, the brand team, the product team? There are seven or eight different teams who can own it.

Media agency PHD Australia describes the fluid nature of the organisational structure around social media work:

We do have a social media area with social experts. It’s interesting. We don’t necessarily have a social media department. We don’t have “the social guys” on the door over there anywhere. But, within client groups, where we have a heavy emphasis on the need for social, we’ll employ social experts to sit within those teams, and even their roles differ dramatically. (PHD)

But in a time of rapid change, agencies agree that a tipping point has been reached:

last year expenditure in digital exceeded expenditure in TV, from an advertiser’s point of view, so we’re beyond that tipping point. There’s going to come a time where you’ll be serving courses that are highly digital, and social is going to be a massive part of that, and a side bar to that is going to be traditional media. (PHD)

Like the other media agencies we spoke to, Isobar reports that they have had ‘significant growth over the past three or four years especially in terms of the number of employees, our revenue and our client base.’ Moreover,

a lot of that growth has been to us actually developing and changing the services that we offer and the way that we do business and social media has played a part in that in terms of us having to change our knowledge and the way that we actually offer certain things to certain clients. (Isobar)

Participants from SOCIETY, a specialist social media agency, note that:

the appetite for social media has grown. It used to be a bolt-on activity that they’d tack on a post or two on top of one of their other campaigns but now it’s become a full integrated part of a number of our clients’ marketing programs for the year. That’s not in every single case but it’s definitely growing and growing. (SOCIETY)

There seems even an exponential aspect to that growth for Mark Coad, CEO of PHD Australia:
If you look at the pace of change in the last three or four years, and you could probably nearly double it, it’s not about how you keep up, it’s how you jump ahead of that wave, because by the time they hit the workforce they’re going to want to be valued for their skills. (PHD)

There are, however, other organisational factors at play in how this translates to resources, roles and workplace activities. Independent Digital Consultant, and former Head of Digital at Clemenger BBDO Ben Shapira emphasises the relevance of the budget and the size and type of business, whether it specialises in digital and social channels, or more integrated channels:

I think the smaller businesses tend to hire more junior staff. They tend to be more push focused on their engagement so they’ll post images or content through Facebook and Twitter more as a push, as an informational tool more than anything else. While as you have larger budgets you can have people who are engaging your channels on a longer basis every day. But it also means that you can afford to have someone take that extra step and engage with your customers directly as they post content. (Ben S.)

Across other organisations, institutions and industries, communications has evolved in similar ways, but there is some significant variation. Within large public institutions such as a university, organisational structures and decision making plays a major role. Central and peripheral faculty and department marketing teams have gradually attempted to coordinate social media communications strategy, and most central social media teams have grown over the past few years. An ex-Swinburne University marketing manager explains these shifts:

There was a push from the central marketing area to start building more of a focus, I guess, on social media and that came out to the faculties. Having said that, by the time they started approaching us and wanting us to work more closely with them, we were already undertaking our own social media activities. (Swinburne)

Even at the scale of Telstra, where although it has a team of around 30 social media specialists engaged in service and online support, along with an Executive level Chief Social Officer, a standalone professional role is still relatively rare, but there’s more people who have--particularly at the community manager level, there’s quite a few of those, or the data analytics role, but it’s still moving around. I see people debating that they’re splintering out and you’ve got to be one or the other, but it’s so dependent on what the needs of the business are. (Telstra)

There is a general sense of imperative urgency that organisations get involved in social media. As participants from the communications team at the Alannah and Madeline Foundation (AMF) put it there is a general ‘realisation that you can’t not do it’; for senior people in the organisation, there is a sense that ‘we can’t afford not to be there’. (AMF)

Development of better communication systems was one of the key recommendations of the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission (2010) after the ‘Black Saturday’ fires in 2009. Coordinated social media crisis communication and mobile apps were targeted as addressing distributed communication and information sharing needs as well as leveraging potential for better and faster systems. Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) was set up in the subsequent years to oversee management of emergency services and communications during crises and has driven innovation in social media integration. As a relatively new, but now crucial part of the work of EMV, social media is divided into two responding and communication roles, and two monitoring, intelligence and insights roles.

there’s a section called ‘public information’ that accounts for warnings, community and media. In the media unit there is a social media unit as part of that. … social media
sits in as part of that unit but is part of the broader public information section (EMV)

At a very different scale, and representative of the widespread uptake of social media among small to medium enterprises, a business like a winery can benefit greatly from developing a dedicated community around its products. For Helen’s Hill Estate, a single part time communications worker has taken on multiple roles and incorporated an expanding use of social media within the business to amplify sales strategies and build branding processes: ‘They knew they needed someone to help them with their Facebook and Twitter accounts’, ‘When I started there, I was just doing Facebook and Twitter and my role sort of expanded since’ (Jess G, Helen’s Hill Estate), and came to include web design and content production work alongside community management.

For some organisations, a social media team offers a crucial and strategic role in the real time flow of information. Despite the notion of ‘global connectedness’ that the internet carries, location has also become vital in relation to time zones and access to, for example, Asian markets. At Internet Service Provider iiNet, for instance, Jess M. describes the social media team adopting a “follow the sun” method. So they had their Cape Town team, their Auckland team, Sydney and Perth to cover all the relevant time zones. EMV also discuss collaborating with volunteers in New Zealand during critical bushfire periods, who can do some of the analytical work in the early morning local time so that insights are available at first light.

The pace of change in embedding social media roles across organisations and businesses has left students with significant knowledge and skills gaps. In discussions with media and communications students about social media within large organisations and small businesses, there was a clear lack of knowledge and understanding: ‘I think everyone’s going in blind and hoping for the best in some ways. I don’t know, maybe there are actually some people that actually know what they’re doing.’ (Student Group 1).

Defining social media: What is it, and what does it mean for your organisation?

As with the academic research literature, definitions of social media vary and are to some degree contested amongst our industry participants. Moreover, social media means very different things depending on the goals and media work within a specific organisational context. Digital agency participants see the complexity and integrated or ‘ecological’ character of the media and communications environment, and emphasise the need to think broadly about what social media is. We discuss in more detail in a separate section below the sense in which Telstra has come to position itself as a ‘social enterprise’, also indicating the ‘ecological’ nature of social media communications within an organisation, and outside it, in relation to social media platforms and technologies, and through its workforce.

Mark Coad, CEO of media agency PHD explains this point as follows: ‘I don’t see social as a channel or a platform, I see it as a discipline or a capability that you could apply to any media channel’, and ‘Social will not sit as a line item on our media plan. Social will just be the way in which we deliver some of the impressions for AV or radio or digital.’ ‘…it’s not even a channel or a platform, it’s almost like a capability that sits across everything we do’ (PHD).

More than this though, social media is:

- quite fragmented, it’s a big landscape, there’re a lot of different elements to it. […]
- It’s an ecosystem and I think to be able to manage communities you need to understand what ecosystem fits in as a part of what drives it as well. (Maxus)

As is often pointed out in the academic literature (e.g. Spurgeon, 2007), there is a reciprocity that’s seen as essential to what social media is for an organisation:
I think social media’s one of the few forms of communication in the advertising space that’s bi-directional. And that is sort of one of the unique qualities about it. In as much as that is a positive and a negative. Primarily very much a positive. (Ben S.)

The kinds of use and the level of understanding of the potential of social media has for building communities very much depends on the organisational context. As an almost wholly online media company specialising in Anime media and cultures, Madman has a greater capacity than most to build communities and fans around its social media pages. The social media manager of the Anime Lab (and former Telstra and iiNet social media manager) explains through an example:

Someone sent us a picture of the doge meme last night. So I replied with a random pic of doge’s face on a stack of donuts. They replied with, ‘Ha, that’s why I love you anime lab.’ You’re able to joke around with the community and it’s totally fine because it’s almost what they expect from a brand like AnimeLab or Madman... but if you’re doing that from a brand like Telstra or iiNet, it has a higher chance of backfiring. Often that community will often see it as an opportunity to start complaining about their internet issues. (Madman)

There is clearly a sense in which social media offers organisations another, albeit more dynamic, channel to build and communicate a brand and keep targeted audiences informed and engaged with products, events, causes or services. Social media is thus described as: ‘a means of distribution’, a place to ‘tell a story and have a point of view or [for] a brand to stand up for something, and also tell its own story.’ (Maxus). It has an ‘intrinsic value’ for brands (Ben S.), and a ‘piece in the puzzle’ for building a campaign (GPY&R).

For Telstra its use must fit into one of three categories: ‘we can serve you, we can inspire you, we can entertain you’ – if it doesn’t, ‘you’ve got to question why you’re doing it’ (Telstra). But extending the notion of communication channel, building a community was commonly seen as vital to what social media offers organisations. For many participants, this also meant offering a sense of intimacy and access, ‘letting people in a little bit closer, it’s a bit more intimate’ (AMF).

One of the stronger themes coming through our interviews was that social media work does not just have to be about marketing, and the distinction between traditional marketing or sales-pitch communication and social media was an important one for many of our participants (including students):

I don’t know if it just has to be a marketing thing. Because they have a very specific goal which is more people will learn about it and then they’ll buy the product or access it, but it doesn’t have to be that. I think it would be interesting to see how other organisations, like health, or you said, the political parties, how they use it. What are they using it for? Because obviously they would use it very differently. So, it doesn’t have to have to be just marketing, and it’s a tool and opportunity to get people involved in behaviour change in new ways. (cohealth)

You need to have a defined voice outside of marketing, because if you had a marketing person in there they’d want to sell stuff 24/7. It’s not about that; it’s about building a relationship with everyone (Helen’s Hill Estate)

Almost counter-intuitively for an advertising and brand management agency, Natalie Giddings from SOCIETY says that: ‘You cannot just advertise on social, it’s almost like a one for one component where there has to be a story told, whether it’s video or blogs and so forth; a story told alongside the advertising’ (SOCIETY). The use of social media as a channel for ‘storytelling’ was a common theme among the participants. In addition, most placed great importance on the role of visual media particularly as it feeds into ‘reach’ and visibility in relation to the way platforms like Facebook prioritise images, video and links over text posts. AMF see visuals as ‘really
important’, even on Twitter where ‘you look at the engagement stats and whenever you share a photo engagements are always going to be higher’. In addition, ‘I would rarely do a post [on Facebook] without a photo’, ‘I can’t think of one without a photo’.

For organisations, understandings of what social media is varies quite a bit. One thing that students and organisational users of social media could each relate to was the point made by participants from Maxus Melbourne who tell their clients that: ‘social media, it’s like a puppy, it’s cute when you get it, but then you’ve got to keep it alive.’ Very unlike organisations, students focus on the more personal and social aspects of social media:

I define social media as modern services that are designed to connect people and network people in a way that is inherently social.’ (Student group 1) ‘I’d define it as a platform for sharing information, communicating, posting aspects of your life that you can share with other people. (Student group 2)

In that sense, students are of a mindset where social media is ‘all about your reputation and who you want to be and what you want to look like to other people’ in addition to being ‘more of a thing to communicate with people’ (Student group 1). The connections with brand management and identity are strong and well understood by students who comment on the increasing commercialisation of social media platforms and environments.

Students are also positive about the service possibilities for social media, the access to help that it offers, as well as the fine line between marketing and genuine conversation. They see their role in driving this area of business and enterprise: ‘I think that’s the real advantage that we have being young people, that we’re sort of like digital natives … I think that’s a real advantage that I think the university and education in general really needs to capitalise on’ (Student group 1).

The value of social media platforms: negotiating a complex media ecology

All the professionals within the organisations we spoke with were highly strategic about the social media platforms they targeted, and in how they used them. Understandably, Facebook dominated in this regard; however, its shift toward a ‘pay to play’ model frustrates most, where achieving reach increasingly cost organisations significant capital. That is, posts from organisations’ Pages don’t automatically appear on its fans’ (those who have liked the page) newsfeed. ‘Organic’ reach can still occur for popular content that achieves quick engagement. But actual page impressions for a post can be as low as 5 to 10% of the total fan-base. ‘Facebook is no longer an engagement channel; it’s an awareness channel because you have to pay for reach now. You have to pay for likes, you have to pay for views and impression’ (GPY&R). And even with the communication budgets of Telstra, this is cause for concern: ‘you look at the Facebook environment and basically, as a corporate now, if you don’t pay you don’t see’ (Telstra). Maxus sees this as a fairly significant change:

Facebook want to incentivise organisations and advertisers to spend more money to push their brand messaging. And I think that’s going to really change the dynamic of how a lot of the Facebook messaging and brand communication is going to be managed. So it will require someone like a media buying and planning agency to distribute that content. (Maxus)

Instagram and Twitter followed Facebook as the main platforms organisations used. LinkedIn was also widely used, but specifically for recruitment, business to business engagement and communication.

Strategies developed around specific platforms reflect the variety and heterogeneous nature of the complex ecology of social media. Keeping up with changes and shifts in attention and use patterns has become an important aspect of an organisation’s social media strategy. As Jane, an ex-Swinburne marketing
manager explains: ‘I think Facebook is still pretty key. I know it shifts and changes, it’s like the old Myspace, and probably there’ll be new kids on the block and there’ll be something new and it’ll shift and change and I think it’s about on top of that and aware of it’ (Swinburne). This level of strategizing and negotiation of platform use features as part of the key decision making that more senior members of an organisation undertakes:

The Instagram community is a lot broader and there’s less chatter and connections than there is on Facebook. If you think about something like Snapchat, you’ve got a lot of friends on there but that’s really personalised one to one. (Maxus)

Again, resources and labour capacity play a part in these decisions: ‘trying to keep on top of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, that’s just one part of my job. It would be impossible to try to do everything and I think it’s much better to do less and do it well.’ (AMF)

We then have Instagram. It had been created quite some time ago but dormant for a long time and we used a campaign last year which was called Stand Up for Our Kids which was based around a footy match, we thought that would be a really good way to relaunch Instagram for two reasons. One, you’ve got a broad reach in the members of the footy club and a lot of people interested in footy and two, it lent itself to telling a story visually. […] It’s also a lot more informal and so I think it’s a bit more playful and engaging, you can tell behind the scenes stories so people get to know who we are, not just as a Foundation but who we are as people in this organisation behind these walls, the story of us. (AMF)

Chasing attention and building active communities or audiences, along with search engine optimisation (SEO) play a central role in social media strategy. For Jess M. at Madman, despite its low page views and engagement, ‘I do want to keep Tumblr there. The other thing is I want to use it to help drive the blog’ (Madman). Similarly Google+ seems a popular platform for organisation mainly because of its benefits for improving search optimisation: ‘I have a Google+ account only because it gives me SEO value. I don’t actually use it. Just literally opening one gives you SEO value’ (Ben S.). ‘We use Google+ … more to improve SEO, but I actually kind of like this… it works really well with YouTube’ (Madman).

Platform changes in this sense represent an ongoing difficulty and challenge: ‘Facebook keeps changing the way they measure things and it makes life exceptionally difficult because we constantly have to be changing the metrics that we’re looking at’ (GPY&R). There is clearly great value in social media for organisations, but this value is best realised not just in the multiplication of communication channels and media forms, but in the data-driven insights and analytics that social media introduces.

Discussion about social media management and analytics software was very interesting. While all would agree that in this area, change is most rapid and hence many of the platforms and tools discussed here will have been replaced before long, we have included the discussion as a snapshot of the evolving analytics and data science side of social media work.

All of the organisations used commercial software and the most commonly mentioned and most desirable of those tools was Radian6, now part of the Salesforce cloud computing suite. As Independent Digital Consultant and former Head of Digital at Clemenger BBDO Ben Shapira explains: ‘What it allows you to do is just to measure brand sentiment; to understand the brand mentions and how it impacts on the brand itself.’ Like other high end analytics tools, Radian6 provides comprehensive monitoring, media management and statistics across a number of social media platforms, with a sentiment analysis function, content management system and benchmarking or comparative analytics.
All organisations used the native platform analytics for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as basis for monitoring and analytics. Simply Measured and Social Sprout are two of the prominent social media management and analytics platforms and these were used by some of the participants, along with simple monitoring and team management tools like Hootsuite, and Geckoboard or free tools like Tweetdeck and others. Cost was a significant factor for smaller organisations, and the more powerful the software, the higher the annual subscription fee. As only a part time social media position, Jess G. at Helen’s Hill Estate only uses the basic platform analytics: ‘Only the stats that I get fed through Facebook. The stats that I get fed through the blog and then monitoring how many more Twitter followers we have’ (Helen’s Hill Estate). By contrast, a well-resourced digital agency will use high level customer relation management (CRM) software and social media analytics tools to manage, monitor, measure and adjust social media campaigns:

So Facebook, they have their own tool for managing large campaigns, Editor, but we often use ALCHEMY which is a big management platform for big, involved campaigns. That’s probably the one we use. In terms of monitoring, there’s quite a few like social media listening tools are really important. So we tend to use Radian6, Socialbakers; Socialbakers is amazing. […] Hootsuite a little bit. […] Hootsuite, yeah, a little bit. So those kind of things. I think that’s about it. We use Nielsen in terms of numbers, just audience numbers. (Maxus)

There is also a level of expertise involved in making use of these kinds of management and analytics tools. Natalie G. from SOCIETY explains her early use of Radian6 in this way:

I played around with it about five years ago and I’m not a hugely technical person on that side of it but I’ve had to learn it because really there’s no one else in Melbourne that could do it. And I’m glad I did, it’s a phenomenal piece of software. And being able to benchmark the numbers of conversations that people are having either about their brand or about the topic in general and then seeing how much of a share of voice that you have on that and then aiming to grow that is phenomenal. (SOCIETY)

Such high-end, integrated management, monitoring and analytics tools are considered essential for social media specialist agencies. SOCIETY uses the commercial suite offered by Simply Measured for social listening and benchmarking or comparative tracking and analytics. Knowledge and skills regarding social media analytics has become increasingly important. Digital media consultant Ben Shapira talks about the need to understand and make use of the tools available:

Understanding how to use Open Graph for Facebook and for other…there’s a lot of other programs that are using Open Graph. Understanding how you can use Google Tag Manager and Google Analytics in a social space. (Ben S.)

But there is not always agreement at media agencies as to the best methods for providing insights and analytics, or the value of the expensive commercial tools available:

we’ve looked at Radian6, Oracle and a couple of other smaller ones and even Free Tools and things like that. We’ve looked at everything. […] And it’s just not at the point where you can reliably say that 100% this is what we know is the sentiment. At the moment I would say, if we had the time, it would be more reliable to manually calculate the sentiment (GPY&R)

We found that among the professionals we spoke to there was a great deal of targeted use of management and analytics tools and strategic uses of social media to meet changing needs. Jess M. explains this in relation to her work prior to, and at Madman Entertainment:

when I started here, I really wanted Radian6. I relied quite heavily on that in the past but
now I've sort of—I don’t feel it’s as important. Every time we need something, we find a way around it. So I do a lot of manual reporting here. So we use Geckoboard. (Madman)

Other tools used at Madman include Mention, where 'anytime anime lab is mentioned on--anywhere online, we get a little notification', which is useful because ‘a lot of the community in Reddit are taking the posts from Facebook and sharing them on Reddit, which helps with our stats’. Also used are TweetDeck for scheduling tweets (Madman).

In addition to using popular commercial tools like Sprout Social, Emergency Management Victoria has collaborated to develop customised monitoring tools: so we use Geo Feeder quite a bit and we use Signal, a monitoring tool that was built by people in New Zealand in partnership with people from the US and UK. So they’re paid monitoring tools that you can set up campaigns. The value of both of those, Signal has only just got it recently, is the Instagram monitoring obviously. […] We actually have another section in here called ‘intelligence’ that gather information and they use these monitoring tools, Signal and Geo Feeder, far more than the public information section. (EMV)

New social media roles: Expertise, skills and expectations

To adapt to changing media environments involving social media platforms, communities and the data they produce, organisations have had to develop or take on new kinds of expertise. Social media platforms and tools for monitoring and media content management described above require specific knowledge and expertise. This knowledge and expertise is evolving, and new roles are emerging. For Telstra: ‘because things change so quickly we’re trying to bring more analytics in and research but add that to the creativity and the critical thinking and the questioning side of things’ (Telstra). The balance must be there, though, between analytics and critical analysis capabilities. Jason Laird explains that ‘I need people who can stare deep into [the data] and give me insights that I don’t have’, because particularly when we’ve had crises running and you see that volume worm go up, your instinct is "get out of there, fight it, fight it," and it’s like “hang on, just watch,” and then it just comes down again […] had you gone in at the 60 minute mark, which feels like an eternity when you’re seeing it go, you could have self-harmed. (Telstra)

At the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, storytelling is emphasised above all else, though measurement and analytics are also important: ‘I see this as a storytelling role and helping people to understand who we are and what we do and why we do it and that can be broadly about the Foundation and it obviously depends on who we’re talking to.’ (AMF).

Small organisations don’t always know what they want when they employ a social media manager. This was Jess G’s experience at Helen’s Hill when she was hired in a part time capacity. Her role morphed overtime, mainly depending on what she was able to do and included web design and webpage management, and some aspects of marketing which she saw as outside of her role:

they’ve finally realised that that’s what they need, on top of me. Like, I can do communications and write a million Facebook posts promoting things, but when it comes to pushing people through the cellar door, all I can actually do is expand their potential audience. I can get more people to like us on Facebook, and I can interact with them. But I can’t… I don’t have any strategies in place to make sure that they actually come in.

I write 90% of the content and occasionally someone else will come in, one of the vineyard hands will come in and write something really technical about what’s going on in the vineyard or I’ll get the winemaker to give me a short quote on something, but
they’re really hard to motivate so it’s mostly just me and I have to read up on wine knowledge or something, before I actually talk about it. (Helen’s Hill Estate)

As would be expected, media ad agencies are far more specific about the kind of roles, skills and expertise they require. The role most specifically designated for social media work is that of the Social media community manager. When we asked about the skills associated with this kind of work, across all of our participant organisations, the discussion was diverse and detailed. Above all, the social media community manager was seen as essential, involved new kinds of skills and abilities, and was sometimes contrasted explicitly with roles involving social media strategy and direction:

Between one community manager in a day they might manage three different clients so if you’re having conversations as a shopping centre, then a car maker, then an airline you need to be able to jump into that mindset, the tone of voice, know how they speak, know the brand character and then know all the processes and products and services (Isobar)

A community manager needs to know more about creating content, what’s engaged in creating brand guidelines, and those type of elements. I do believe the industry is headed towards the going back to a full service model, so I think in time we’ll see more and more people doing community management as well as looking after the advertising element. We’ll start to see those roles mashed up, and I think a lot of smaller players will do that, they’ll try and do it in-house or they’ll try and go to an agency that can provide the one service under the one roof. (Maxus)

Community management is a really tough one because it’s quite expensive for the client and so what they tend to do is take that in-house. They take it in-house because if it’s a large client they need lots of them and so it just becomes a project that’s not sustainable to pay someone else to do it, it’s much cheaper to put full-time people on it internally. So there’s not as much demand with community management, it’s very hard to run; we do it and it’s great. (SOCIETY)

One of the defining features of social media community management work, and something that our participants raised often in our discussion, was the relentless, ‘24/7’ labour required of social media work. A large organisation such as Telstra has been able to leverage its workforce to achieve 24/7 service via social media and other channels: ‘that concept of, “We’re on right around the clock,” a lot of people have come to copy it later and have realised that to do it around the clock is a big deal. So, I think a lot of the impetus around our social presence was around, “Wow, I can go on at three in the morning and you guys will respond,”’ (Telstra). Less well-resourced organisations may feel the need to match that level of service and contact, and there is an expectation with social media that this is possible; however, it is not always practical:

I think there was an expectation that that person would be available 24/7 to respond to a crisis or be available to tell a great good news story. And there wasn’t really that understanding of how to manage that and how to have someone kind of on the ground ready to go at the drop of a hat. And one person can’t do that seven days a week. (Swinburne)

The smaller the organisation, the more difficult is the process of managing expectations about 24/7 social media communication. When the role falls to one person, this creates additional pressures and challenges:

If something crops up when I’m not there, I have to manage it, that’s part of the nature of it. So, one of the lovely things about Facebook at least is that you can schedule posts to pop up when you’re not at work. So kind of my job day to day is to put up a post when I’m there and schedule maybe
another one or two on Monday or Friday, to go out when I'm not there. (Helen's Hill Estate)

However, this is not always perceived as a negative when it comes to things like having a voice as a community manager, or maintaining a particular strategy, as Madman’s Jess M explains of the Anime Lab social media community:

We pretty much work 24/7 here as well, but I almost feel like if there were more people, it wouldn’t work as well because you sort of become the community and you know all the people who comment regularly and have those conversations. For us it’s a very personal experience without becoming intrusive, although this is bound to change as we grow larger, as it’s not manageable.

I find I work first thing in the morning, the middle of the day, last thing before bed and everywhere in between really. I use Feedly a lot to help me with that. I’ve signed up to RSS feeds for all major sources of anime news. I often find the Japanese sites and blogs are best (even if I have to translate), as they tend share announcements and news before the English sites. (Madman)

In this case, managing the social media side of a predominantly online media entertainment company, with a highly defined fan-base devoted to anime and manga, also involves having very specific cultural knowledge and even (Japanese) language skills.

Where these rhythms of social media work do have a great impact, however, is for media ad agencies that incorporate or specialise in delivering social media campaigns.

it’s 24 hours a day. If you’ve got a fair dinkum proper community role, you’ve got to be across it. If it was genuinely your responsibility and you weren’t just someone contributing content but you were the manager, you would have to have in place someone’s monitoring it over the weekend, think about it, some of the brands we work

with dead easy, their biggest time is over the weekend. We get phone calls asking us to change media on the weekend. So social, you’d have to be all over it and would have to be contracted into your hours, absolutely. (Maxus)

With a brand or campaign, overtime ‘would be written into contracts that you’re expected to be on call and you’ll be compensated for that, or you’re expected to write X number of posts over the weekend.’ (Maxus)

Yeah this is 7 til 7, 24/7. Two shifts 7 til 7 … there’s four people. Well actually it’s interesting because the media unit actually does three shifts over that because they do 5 til 2 and then they do 2 til 10 and then they do 10 til 5 if that’s required […] and with media you can’t hand over at 7 o’clock in the morning, it’s a nightmare. We’ve tried it and it doesn’t work, so they have to start at 5. So often the overnight shift, very rarely the 10 til 5 overnight shift, is very rare. But the speed with which the media stuff occurs, they actually have three shifts and we’re looking at whether or not we do that with social media, at the moment they are 7 til 7. They’re still structured 7 til 7. (EMV)

A large part of what makes social media work a 24/7 activity is Crisis management. Crisis management is what media ad agencies specialising in social media campaigns and communities are most specifically seen as responsible for. Having a strategy for dealing with negative comments and conversations, or using tools to monitor and find negative social media activity for clients, these are vital, time consuming and labour intensive parts of social media work. Crisis management also requires considered strategy and skilful management.

... crisis management in particular, that is a 24/7 reaction, particularly if you’re out there representing a brand, you have to be there fairly quick or redirect to the brand, to know the brand. […] we now have 24 hours
to moderate something on a client’s Facebook page so we always do one check-in on the weekend, all of us, on every single page that we manage because, that was when VB got caught out and the ACCC ruled. (Isobar)

Comments is probably the most labour intensive thing, I mean that and managing those internal expectations. Actually we’ve had a few comments quite recently in the last week or so since we’ve launched the digital license. Basically there are several types of comments which we would respond to in different ways, we’ve got a set policy for comments and they could be also inbox messages through Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, where someone’s been bullied or is in a situation where they’re expecting violence because people hear about the work that we do and then they feel like we’re a safe place to ask a question or a safe person to ask. So the protocol’s generally to go to one of the program managers relevant to the issue at hand, present them with the issue, they’ll draft up a bit of a response, we’ll basically review it in comms, get that signed off by the general manager of the programs and then reply. (AMF)

Case study: Telstra as a ‘social enterprise’

The different roles for social media work at Telstra reflect the many departments and complex structure of the large organisation, but since it implemented a comprehensive ‘Digital First’ program in 2011. Through this program Telstra developed an innovative 24/7 frontline social media support system through Facebook, and offered digital first support through its mobile app and the dedicated forum CrowdSupport as well as LinkedIn for B2B support. The Telstra 24x7 Facebook page has over 570,000 likes and employs about 40 people, but community management work is also done out of the communications team of about 20 staff. Alongside this centrally managed workforce, a team of 6 manage local Facebook pages for the hundreds of Telstra stores around the country, and so social media roles permeate outward through all aspects of the organisation. Telstra is the largest user in Asia-Pacific of Microsoft’s internal social communications system Yammer.

One thing that became clear in our interviews is that senior leadership and direction are central to whether an organisation places resources and emphasis on social media. At Telstra, the direction of (former) CEO David Thodey has played a central role in generating a ‘digital strategy’ for the company since 2011, and established a senior role of Chief Social Officer in early 2014. The aim has been to mobilise the organisation and workforce around social media platforms and tools: ‘we’ve got 32,000 people so if you could even get 10% of them posting content’. The idea is that ‘every staff member is a help desk’.

And For Jason Laird, Executive Director of Communications and Chief Social Officer, ‘it parallels nicely with the advocacy journey we’ve been on and this idea about customer focus not just being something you say at meetings but actually being relentless about it.’ The recognition here is that as an organisation, and as employees:

we’re communicating through social channels more and more, this is not going away, it’s not some fad. The idea that you can empower our employees to make a conscious decision to represent the company in a way that you would be proud of them doing... I mean that’s amazing, and particularly with our size, so imagine if Wesfarmers did it. (Jason Laird, Telstra)

Jason Laird says that ‘what brings it all together in the brief with the CEO [then David Thodey] was to create a social enterprise’. Laird sees this as a total and integrated philosophy where digital technologies and social media platforms enable a more diffused, less hierarchical organisational structure, one that leverages the size of the workforce and its ability to be responsive to customer needs at every point. A dedicated app was created (Snapp App), which allows any employee who has a conversation with a
customer experiencing problems with their service or device to report it to a dedicated team that prioritises a resolution. This approach represents a shift in the nature of work in the digital economy, where social relationships, trust and intimacy become vital resources for an organisation, and social media tools and mobile technologies stand at the interface.

Another strategy for leveraging the extensive workforce through social media lies in Telstra’s use of Facebook Pages for its local stores:

The local Facebook page is the new local paper, and the activity through that has been amazing. The ROI, you could look at it from an NPS perspective and say, ‘Well that’s fantastic,’ it’s always an ROI discussion though. We think it’s amazing, McDonalds in the US have just introduced a plan to do the same thing for 14,000 shops; Starbucks is trying to do 16 and a half thousand outlets.

(Jason Laird, Telstra)

With these kinds of strategies in place, Telstra is able to multiply the channels and points of contact with customers or potential customers, as well as manage relationships day-to-day. Facebook functions in this context as a kind of ‘written talkback radio’, ‘we’re getting credit for being in there, people know that they can talk to us and not agree with us and give us stic, and that’s fine, but we’re in that conversation’ (Jason Laird, Telstra). Many companies are beginning to innovate in this area. ‘Sales and service through a social medium is an increasing role for many organisations. In some, eg Whole Foods in the US, the sales and service function and community engagement function reside under a single senior leader’ (Jason Laird, Telstra).

What’s expected of graduates now?

When asked what they expect of graduates and what skills, knowledge and qualifications graduates need to have to fill emerging social media-oriented roles, our study participants emphasised above all else, experience with platforms, analytics tools and software. They emphasised a mix of creativity, critical analysis and technical analytics ability. Across the board our participants asserted that the requirements for social media work went beyond marketing, advertising, PR, web design, and traditional media and communications. It seems that there is an increasing expectation that undergraduates combine degrees or majors to develop a broad set of knowledge, critical and analytical ability and technical skill to perform the kind of work needed in the new complex media environment. Most of the study participants indicated that this went well beyond their own qualifications and study, but that there was a strong need to develop new programs to match new roles and kinds of work.

There are traditional media and communication skills that remain essential: ‘definitely communication skills, verbal and written is an absolute must, if you can’t spell, you can’t think quickly on your feet and can’t write then we don’t really want you’ (Isobar). And as discussed above, participants placed a strong emphasis on storytelling skills across multimedia forms and platforms. For Emergency Management Victoria social media work involves a particular ability to cope under extreme pressure in times of crisis, and often to be able to cope with distress and trauma.

Opportunities abound for those who have motivation and drive to learn and experiment: ‘you need to have that hunger, like every agency I’ve ever worked at you have to have that passion, you have to care about what you do’ (Isobar). The underlying capacity that our participants noted as essential to social media work is analytical skill:

Analytical skills, you have to be able to join content to results and especially in our field there’s a lot of hesitation around well how does this help my business, how does this go to results so you have to be able to have the numbers to back it up or something to back up your idea so it’s kind of analytical as well.

(Isobar)

The difficulty often lies with the pace of change, and so adaptability remains vital:
I think it’s really important probably to teach, to look at or learn, every feature that each channel has. And the problem with that, of course, is that the channels are changing so quickly because every time we learn something about Facebook, they change the algorithm or they change the advertising analytic software, so we need to expect and always be ready to adapt to changes. (GPY&R)

When we asked our students what they felt they needed to know to enter into different forms of social media work, their answers varied. There was uncertainty related to a lack of experience in workplace settings. However, many also expressed anxiety about the sorts of technical skills they might need to know (but haven’t necessarily learnt well enough):

[I need to know] more about SEO, because I feel like that would be really easily, that you’d apply to that a business sense, whereas so far in my degree, it’s kind of been mentioned, but not actually being able to put it into practice. I know how to use Facebook and the back end of Facebook and same with WordPress or Tumblr, all of that, but Google analytics is something that I don’t know how to use and I feel like it would be important.

I wonder if graphic design skills would be important because all the jobs that I’ve looked at for social media, are just like Photoshop and InDesign and things like that skills.

And web design.

Web design, exactly. So, yeah, and I’ve only done the first two subjects digital design where we, I hated that and I hated Photoshop and we never really went through the basic techniques, it was kind of like, “You have to do this and find out a way to do it type thing.” (Student group I)

6. Discussion & Summary

The developments discussed by our study participants indicate that this is a dynamic and also opportune time to be skilled and knowledgeable in social media. Large numbers of jobs are targeting social media expertise, across a very wide range of industries. Most significantly, beyond media, communications and marketing, the retail sector is employing social media specialists to expand promotions, build a brand and marketing capacity, as well as build communities or ‘fans’ around that brand, and to complement the movement into online retail and away from bricks and mortar selling.

There are major organisational changes taking place, and this is reflected across the media agencies we spoke to, within Telstra, as well as across smaller organisations and enterprises. Social media work has emerged in a very short period of time to become a significant area of employment for media and communication graduates. But our graduates have to be prepared for the dynamism of this evolving environment in which social media and data analysis are becoming central to all communication.

Despite their lack of knowledge and awareness of what might be required of them in undertaking social media work, students are enthusiastic. As future employees and innovators, media and communications students need to graduate with a range of new skills that combine creative media content production, effective communication skills, critical thinking and social media platform-awareness as well as technical skills in data analysis.

We have seen a growing research literature examining the use of social media within higher education for learning and pedagogical purposes (Kent and Leaver 2014; Gikas and Grant 2013; Hosein et al 2010; Hung and Yuen 2010). This literature emphasises the need to leverage students’ near ubiquitous use of social media, and the need to extend digital literacy skills. In addition, our research has implications for how we conceive, plan and
implement a new, relevant undergraduate and postgraduate degree curriculum toward producing social media specialists.

A number of Australian universities have begun to innovate in this area, and a new Social Media Major within the Bachelor of Media and Communication at Swinburne University has been developed on the basis of this research to address the needs of Industry and students. The design of the new degree and its placement within a Bachelor of Media and Communication, rather than within Marketing or Business, as it is elsewhere, reflects our arguments, and the evidence from our research, that social media industries reach well beyond the specific purposes of marketing and business, even if they are closely entwined. It is our conclusion that graduates require crucial, creative, contextual and technical knowledge to be effective in entering into social media industries. In addition, we see innovation as essential to success in this field of work. These are attributes traditionally aligned with a Bachelor of Arts, and are the emphasis and strength of media studies and media and communication degrees generally. However, there is more work to do in readying our students for the social media work described above, and further research required to understand the unsettled dynamics of the social media industries.

7. References


