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Teaching Artifact- Assignment: Writing in a Digital Age: #Trending Analysis

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Teaching Artifact – Assignment: Writing in a Digital Age: #TrendingAnalysis

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Instructor Commentary

I developed the #TrendingAnalysis assignment for “Writing in a Digital Age,” an elective focused on how new media shape reading, writing, research, and interaction. This assignment came late in the course, following a short assignment that asked students to live tweet an event and create a brief Storify. Prior to the assignment, students also read texts including Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together* and selections from Henry Jenkins’s *Spreadable Media*.

The primary objectives of the assignment were for students to (1) assess Twitter as a discourse community and (2) transfer their academic writing skills to a new media platform. I wanted my students to engage with the question of how they can make critical, well-supported arguments in digital environments. Storify is a good platform for these objectives because it is easy for students to drag and drop examples from Twitter and link to sources across the Web.

The assignment was most successful for students who chose political or social hashtags, including #blacklivesmatter, #gamergate, #yeswetan (the hashtag about President Obama’s tan suit), and #MakeItHappy (the Coca-Cola hashtag that was trolled following the Super Bowl). These topics led students to develop arguments about the role of Twitter in shaping civic discourse as well as the potential for that discourse to break down in quickly spreading online environments. Another benefit of this assignment was that students used Twitter for backchannel conversations to help one another with the project. For example, they tweeted strategies for searching and organizing large Twitter streams. Limitations of this assignment included the massive amount of data that students had to sort through. In future iterations, I will work with students to develop clearer strategies for selecting representative tweets and categorizing the tweets they choose to study.

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Writing in a Digital Age: #TrendingAnalysis

Overview

Now that you've had the opportunity to practice using Twitter and Storify, it's time to dig in to a specific topic on Twitter and think about what that stream can tell us about the way people interact on social media. For this assignment, you will analyze the tweets using a hashtag that is trending on Twitter. You will then compose a digital essay, which will have some elements of an academic essay, on Storify.

Assignment Objectives

As a result of this assignment, students will be able to

- Evaluate Twitter as a discourse community
- Analyze the communication practices people and corporations use on Twitter and their motivations for communicating via Twitter
- Compose a critical essay that makes a scholarly argument in a digital environment, capitalizing on the affordances of new media

Requirements

1. Log in to Twitter and keep an eye on the topics that are trending. (Twitter provides a list for you on the left-hand side of your screen when you're on your laptop.) Choose a trending hashtag that is interesting to you and that you believe will produce interesting points for analysis.

2. Compose an essay on Storify that analyzes the tweets that use your chosen hashtag. Your essay should make an argument about why that topic is trending and how the tweets using that hashtag are contributing to the overall popularity of the conversation. Your Storify should include

- A title (Headline)
- A thesis statement that makes a clear argument (Description)
- An introduction that provides context for understanding the hashtag (Text)
- Topic sentences that elaborate on your argument (Text)
- Example tweets that support your topic sentences (Tweets dragged and dropped)
- Concepts from course readings (Turkle; Jenkins; "Viral" readings) that help you make or support your points (Text or Links)
- At least three additional items from the web that support or illustrate your claims (anything you can drag and drop)
- A conclusion that addresses what we can learn about Twitter or social media by studying the stream you chose

3. Post your Storify to your blog by Monday, Feb. 9. (A draft of your Storify is due in class for peer review on Friday, Feb. 6.)

Assessment (See rubric for more details.)

This assignment, worth 20% of your grade, will be assessed using the attached rubric. Successful Storify essays will focus on a few of the following questions that are most relevant to your topic.

- What is the context surrounding this hashtag trending? What is happening to make people interested in this topic?
- What do the tweets using the hashtag have in common? Which tweets stand out and why?

- Which tweets are getting the most attention, replies, or favorites? Why?
- Who seems to be tweeting using this hashtag? What might they be trying to accomplish? What's their motivation to participate in this stream?
- Does the stream seem to get off track? How and why? Once it gets off track, how do others respond?
- What do you notice about how people are using language? How is the language use related to the topic or context?
- In what ways are corporations or organizations trying to capitalize on the stream? What effect does that have on the conversation?
- What, if any, outside sources are tweeters bringing into the stream? Which seem to be most accepted by others? Which seem to be dismissed?
- Does the stream devolve into trolling, racism, sexism etc. at any point? What effect does that have on the conversation?

#TrendingAnalysis Rubric

Argument

The essay has a clear title and description (thesis statement)

that make an argument about why the chosen topic is trending and how and why tweeters are using Twitter to talk about that topic. Each section has a clear topic sentence that guides the reader through the examples. The writer uses transitions—either textual or visual—to bring points together into a coherent argument. The essay has a conclusion that offers the reader a greater understanding of social media specifically related to the writer's analysis.

Outstanding	Very Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory
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Analysis

The Storify draws on course ideas to conduct a thorough analysis of the stream that goes

beyond the obvious to uncover insights into why people are taking to Twitter to talk about the topic and how Twitter is shaping the conversation. The analysis considers both individual tweets and the stream as a whole.

Outstanding	Very Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory
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Content

The analysis is supported by specific examples of and descriptions of tweets. The

chosen examples and their interpretation demonstrates an awareness of the key features social media and Twitter. The analysis includes three additional items from the web that enhance the argument.

Outstanding	Very Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory
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Application of Course Concepts

The analysis cites concepts and

Outstanding	Very Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory
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terms from class readings accurately, appropriately, and consistently. The essay demonstrates a mastery of course concepts.

Style/Mechanics

The analysis is clear, focused, and free of errors. The analysis

makes creative use of the Storify platform to achieve things that a typical essay could not.

Outstanding	Very Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Unsatisfactory
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Comments:

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