

An Introduction to Social Media Monitoring

From Daryl Willcox Publishing – Comprehensive online services for media relations professionals

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Introduction

There is an unparalleled level of conversation happening in social media and with it potential opportunities for organisations to engage with consumers and generate brand loyalty. Subsequently a plethora of online monitoring tools is available on the web, from the free services which are often basic, yet functional, right up to the comprehensive, in-depth and expensive paid-for services. This whitepaper is designed to offer a brief explanation and appraisal of some of the online monitoring tools available.

Why monitor?

Some people still need to be persuaded about the value of social media monitoring, but if you want to *do* social media and do it well, first you need to listen, understand and only then begin to engage. Social media monitoring gives you the data to begin this process and it is best considered as the evolution of 'offline' media monitoring of print and broadcast media. The use of the phrase 'evolution' is merited as we now have a situation where clients not only want to know what journalists have written, but what consumers have said and importantly, how they can respond.

Limitations

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the conversation around brands, it is advisable to use a variety of monitoring tools in tandem, rather than relying on just one service. No company has yet to provide the definitive service, so it is only right to recognise this limitation and factor that into any findings.

1) Free Social Media Monitoring Tools

There are many free social media monitoring tools available on the web – this is a summary of some of the tools which monitor a range of social media.

Blogs

Technorati

Technorati is something of the elder statesman of blog search engines. Nonetheless, it indexes millions of blog posts in real-time and surfaces them quickly ready to be analysed. In my opinion this remains an excellent starting point for social media monitoring and is brilliant to keep track of breaking stories, opinions, photos and videos across the web. In addition, Technorati not only tracks the authority and influence, but offers an index of influential blogs too.

BlogPulse

BlogPulse is a well known free service from market research giants Nielsen and is best employed as a blog search engine. This tool contains a good level of data about blog activity and trends, which helps the analytical process. I consider BlogPulse to be a robust service with a good user interface that enables people to search for blogs and ascertain a moderate level of information about websites. In addition, users can track six months worth of data, as well as generic information about some of the biggest and most popular websites.

Forums

Boardreader

Forums are arguably the oldest form of social media and despite the often clunky user interfaces, they are still important hotbeds of online conversation and knowledge. Boardreader monitors forums and boards, enabling users to gain quality information quickly. It is an excellent tool for issue monitoring and identifying where conversations around particular brands are taking place. Boardreader also provides decent metric data as far back as six months which can be easily transferred for presentations.

BoardTracker

BoardTracker is an innovative forum search engine, message tracking and instant alerts system designed to provide relevant information quickly and efficiently. I've found this to be a genuinely useful tool and it is especially good at filtering out spam results which can often hamper the monitoring process. It is important to recognise that BoardTracker is a freemium service, nonetheless the free version is decent and certainly a useful tool in conjunction with others.

Twitter

Twitterfall

Twitterfall is a Twitter client specialising in real-time tweet searches. New tweets fall into the page and it has many features which enable easy real-time conversation tracking. Twitterfall is best employed to monitor conversation around a brand or issue. It is a fairly intuitive tool that gives the impression of a continuous drip of Tweets allowing users to keep track of trends as they happen. Twitterfall is best deployed as a monitoring tool around relatively small events or issues, as mixing Tweets from different sources and searches soon becomes difficult to digest.

Hootsuite

Hootsuite is a tremendous tool for trawling Twitter and monitoring issues. However, its primary usage is to manage multiple Twitter and other social media profiles quickly and effectively. In addition, users can measure, converse and analyse Tweets using this Twitter client. What marks Hootsuite out as a great resource is that users can easily monitor situations and then schedule responses across multiple accounts. It is worth noting that Hootsuite is a freemium service, however, the free tool is exceptionally useful. Hootsuite really is the Twitter client of choice for social media professionals.

Facebook

FacePinch

This tool is excellent for searching real time Facebook status updates. It will prove exceptionally valuable for users looking to undertake monitoring work or those looking to identify potential brand advocates. Being able to see how products, services or issues are perceived has huge implications for Customer Relationship Management. FacePinch also includes information on live trends so users can view the 100 hottest topics in real time. At present the look and feel of FacePinch is quite clunky, however the results are solid and it is most useful when monitoring issues amongst grassroots fans.

It's Trending

It's Trending lists the content that people share publicly on Facebook. Consequently, it serves as a type of Facebook zeitgeist for news, videos, technology and entertainment. While this service is genuinely insightful, users can only view what people publicly share, so it serves more as signpost for trends and qualitative data, rather than quantitative data. It's Trending has yet to launch its eagerly awaited 'Phase 2', but nonetheless, its present offering is a valuable insight into what people are thinking about products or issues.

Cross-platform

Addic-to-matic

Addic-to-matic is a decent buzz monitoring tool for studying issues around a brand or event. Essentially, it aggregates news and conversation across a range of social media platforms into a user friendly and customisable monitoring dashboard. The Hot Topics feature enables users to understand what issues are currently trending. However, I see this tool having most value for real-time crisis monitoring and taking an initial look at online conversation.

IceRocket

IceRocket is an internet search engine that has expanded into searching popular social networks such as Twitter and MySpace, as well as allowing searching of news sites and the web. Its Trends tool allows users to enter several terms and see how they have trended over time, complete with useful 'buzz' stats. I'm a big fan of IceRocket and it seems to display the most up-to-the-second results. In addition, the Big Buzz feature is exceptionally useful to view the latest blogs, Tweets, news, video and images.

Social Mention

This is a great tool that searches news sites and social media platforms for conversation. It also suggests keywords around the issue or brand which can help the construction of search taxonomies. In addition, Social Mention also gives a list of top users, platforms and hashtags, which are all insightful for the user. Overall, Social Mention provides an intuitive and easy to use social media dashboard, as well as trying to offer some sentiment and reach analysis. You can also sign up to receive social media alerts and embed the Social Mention widget on to your blog or website.

2) Paid-for Social Media Monitoring Tools

There are many paid-for social media monitoring tools which have spent extensive periods of time in development to justify their fee. Here I summarise a few of these tools.

Radian 6

Radian 6 is a comprehensive tool that allows users to trawl back through a lot of data and then drill down into an impressive level of detail. It has a fairly easy to use dashboard and contains features such as a River of News, Conversation Cloud and Topic Trends for each key word. Although Radian 6 does offer sentiment analysis, sadly, it is all too often inaccurate. Nonetheless, Radian 6 is one of the most detailed tools on the market and is well worth trialling or booking a demonstration.

Sysomos

Sysomos is an easy to use package that enables users to monitor a great level of conversation around a brand or issue. Another notable feature is that Sysomos allows Boolean search, which means complex searches can be created easily and quickly. It surprises me how often this feature is omitted in other services. The main strength of Sysomos is that it allows users to see the range of conversation in easy to digest graphs which can be investigated further. Sysomos seemingly offers a broader level of data in comparison to other tools, but unfortunately in less depth.

Brandwatch

Brandwatch is a great tool to conduct monitoring with and it also incorporates the exceptionally useful Brandwatch Answers section which categorises common queries - for instance, where the most conversation around a brand takes place. The tool does return a good level of detail on topics, such as back-links and ranking information. However, Brandwatch is unable to drill down and investigate peaks in graphs, which is a common feature of other tools and an important part of social media monitoring.

3) Future Social Media Monitoring Tools

The social media monitoring business is going to continue growing for the foreseeable future and we will see more and more monitoring tools, both free and paid-for spring up as new platforms and technologies emerge. Here are two to watch out for:

Tattler (app)

Tattler (app) is an open source social media monitoring tool which is still in beta testing. It mines news, websites, blogs, multimedia sites, and micro-blogging sites to find mentions of the issues most relevant to a journalist, researcher, advocate or communications professional. Interestingly, it is built and distributed on open source platform [Drupal](#), allowing users to easily filter, organise and share content gathered from the Web. The open source nature means that Tattler (app) can be improved upon and modified by the community. I look forward to seeing how this innovation develops into 2011.

Google

Some of the tools that Google gives away for free, namely, Insights, Analytics, Alerts, Trends and Blog Search are astounding – and are widely used by professional marketers on a daily basis. Subsequently, these great tools coupled with enhanced Real Time search, as well as macro and micro demographic and search data, would make one excellent social media dashboard. It would come as no surprise were Google to make a play into the social media monitoring space.

Conclusion

We have reached a tipping point where organisations quite simply must monitor social media. Consumers are already talking online about your brand, so it pays to be actively listening and when appropriate, engaging or creating the community for consumers to be having these conversations with like-minded enthusiasts.

There are some wonderful free tools available for everyone. From people looking to dip their toes into monitoring for the first time, right up to multi-national organisations that want to monitor every online conversation around their brand. Generally speaking, the free monitoring tools allow you to do just that. But if you want to look back over a period of time and mine down into greater detail, it is often the paid-for tools which are more useful.

As someone who uses a variety of tools on a daily basis, the race to the top is yet to be won. There isn't one definitive package that I'd recommend. There is no silver bullet. At present, the different tools all have different strengths and weaknesses and subsequent uses. Whatever future tools may look like, they will not only have to deal with an ever expanding internet, but will have to include more sentiment and influencer analysis and more web and search data. It's going to be exciting.





About the Author

Ben Cotton is an award-winning blogger who currently works for Edelman Digital. On a daily basis he uses a variety of social media monitoring tools to help brands listen, understand and engage within social media. He is also an Associate of the Centre for Public Relations Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University and in his spare time undertakes pro-bono work as Digital PR Adviser to Supporters Direct, the Family Holiday Association and his local independent councillor. Ben has previously worked in a busy press office, PR research centre and famous sports club.



You can contact Ben about speaking, consultancy, business opportunities or guest blogging via [Twitter](#), [Linked In](#), [Slideshare](#) or his blog, [Social Web Thing](#).

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