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The amazing Twitter list race

Michelle Carr Hassler

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mhassler3@unl.edu

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TNT
21
2013

Top submissions to
Teaching News Terrifically
in the 21st Century

Vol. 2

Newspaper and Online News Division
Association for Education
in Journalism and Mass Communication

About TNT21

This booklet shares teaching ideas honored in 2013 in Teaching News Terrifically in the 21st Century, the teaching ideas competition of the Newspaper and Online News Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. TNT21 was founded in 2009 to publicly acknowledge good ideas for foundational journalism courses: newswriting, reporting and editing.

Ideas are accepted in three divisions:

- Full-time faculty members
- Adjunct professors
- Graduate-student instructors

The competition awards prizes of \$100 for the best teaching idea from each group and gives certificates to others whose work is honored.

Deadlines for contest entries typically are in the summer, to allow instructors to enter materials outside the rush of fall/spring semesters, and are announced on the Newspaper and Online News Division listserv and on the JOURNET listserv. Teaching tips submitted should be suitable for use in newswriting, reporting or editing

courses, though they may be tailored for specific versions of those courses. For example, tips for teaching newswriting across media would be welcome, as would tips for teaching a specific type of reporting, such as public affairs reporting, business reporting or environmental reporting.

Tips can address practical skills or conceptual knowledge, showing, for example, how to teach students to report ethically or edit to avoid libel. Tips that help professors address the challenges of teaching in a world where technologies are rapidly changing are especially welcome.

Ideas are judged for their originality, innovative nature, ease of application, completeness, writing and whether they would work in more than one course and/or at different types of schools.

TNT21 has been administered since 2009 by Susan Keith, an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., and one of the Newspaper and Online News Division's teaching chairs.

2013 judges

Erin Coyle, Louisiana State University
Joel Campbell, Brigham Young University
Patricia Dobson, Eastern New Mexico University
Pamela B. Fine, University of Kansas
Kyle Heim, Seton Hall University
Kevin Lerner, Marist College
David Loomis, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Mitchell McKenney, Kent State University
John Oudens, The New York Times
Craig Paddock, University of North Carolina Charlotte
Bill Reader, Ohio University
Scott Reinardy, University of Kansas
Chris Roberts, University of Alabama
Lisa A. Romero, University of Illinois
Carol Schlagheck, Eastern Michigan University
Robert N. Spicer, Millersville University
Leslie-Jean Thornton, Arizona State University

Third place, full-time faculty division (tie)

The amazing Twitter list race

By Michelle Carr Hassler
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Types of courses the idea could be used in:
newswriting, reporting

Target level: sophomores, juniors, seniors or graduate students in a professional program

What is the goal of the assignment or exercise?

The goal of this assignment is to show students how curating lists on Twitter can help them discover news sources, monitor what is happening in their community and develop story ideas. They complete the assignment as part of a friendly competition in which each student tries to develop a Twitter list with the most news sources.

Students often do not follow local news closely and struggle to come up with strong story ideas. This assignment helps them focus by creating one place where they can keep current on events and be inspired.

How does the assignment or exercise work?

To prepare students for the assignment, I demonstrate how Twitter lists work and show examples of how beat reporters use them. I discuss how students can mine social media for credible sources in several ways: by using search applications such as Listorius, WeFollow and Twellow; by identifying valuable sources and examining who they follow; by monitoring pertinent hashtags to see who tweets to them; and by “raiding” other people’s Twitter lists. I also give them examples of viable story ideas that I culled from my own local news Twitter list.

The assignment requires students to compile in a Twitter list as many valuable local news sources as possible. To make it fun, I pitch it as a contest in which students compete to gather the most sources by the next class period. To get them thinking about specific sources, I designate class time to brainstorm ideas of followers from different facets of the community.

When class reconvenes and they return with their lists, we compare them and talk about the quality and helpfulness of sources. We also discuss the importance of monitoring their lists so they can

periodically weed out unhelpful sources and replace them with new ones.

How is the assignment innovative? What makes this idea good for teaching in the 21st century or preparing 21st century journalists?

While students use social media for personal reasons, they often don’t realize its potential for reporting. By creating a Twitter list of credible sources, they discover how easy it is to monitor breaking news, keep track of events and spot trends – all in one place. With a tsunami of information to sort through daily, today’s journalists need to know and use strategic curating techniques.

This assignment gives students a concrete example of how Twitter can help them as journalists. Now they can see the potential and may be inspired to develop other ways to use social media for journalistic purposes.

How do you overcome pitfalls?

So they don’t simply copy sources they’ve seen by looking at each other’s lists, I ask them to keep their Twitter lists private until class time. And to avoid having students “stack” their lists with meaningless accounts, I warn them that the quality of sources will be closely scrutinized by me and the other students during the class discussion. I suggest that students be prepared to defend why they added each source.

What is the impact of the assignment or exercise?

Students said the lists helped them learn more about the community and develop better story ideas. I noticed improvement in a subsequent assignment that required them to propose three story ideas gleaned from their Twitter lists.

After the exercise is completed, I encourage students to share the sources they’ve found so they can build even better lists. In essence, they develop “super lists” that they can tap into for future assignments in this class and others. And their new understanding of how to use social media for reporting and story development will help them someday on the job.



Michelle Carr Hassler teaches multimedia and online journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she has been a faculty member since 1998. She regularly teaches the journalism capstone course and recently created and taught UNL’s first social media course for journalism majors. Before coming to UNL, she was a reporter and editor for 16 years at newspapers in suburban Phoenix and Lincoln, Neb. In 2011, she and colleague Sue Burzynski Bullard won third place in the Teaching News Terrifically competition. Another of Hassler’s teaching ideas was recognized in 2013 by Journalism Interactive.