

## Title

# Communication Studies Department Communication methodologies: A case study at SJSU

## *Introduction*

As a student enrolled in the Communication Studies major at San José State University, I want my degree to be as meaningful and powerful an asset as is possible. In this regard, I have put some amount of effort into criticizing the department (<http://goo.gl/qr8Vz> <http://goo.gl/4hfF5> <http://goo.gl/5QqDa> <http://goo.gl/IsJOD> <http://goo.gl/eiP6A>) for their lack of use of social media tools like Twitter, while they encourage those in the major to follow their account (@sjsucomm).

In my experience Social Media is an important tool; it's clear that the COMM Studies Department (CSD) understands this as most of the "new media" classes I have taken speak to these media directly. Studies abound on the use of various SNS's. Hence, it seems crucial that the CSD at SJSU be not only literate in the use of these media outlets to benefit those in the major, but also so that as a University in Silicon Valley, they are seen as leaders in the field, just as SJSU is so recognized for their Computer Science majors.

This study seeks to verify the import of SNS's to SJSU students enrolled in the Communication Studies major. My research questions I sought to answer were:

RQ1: How do students perceive the effectiveness of the SJSU Communication Studies department online communication practices for those enrolled in the major?

RQ2: What are the most effective online methods of communication the SJSU Communication Studies Department uses to reach students enrolled in the major?

The hypotheses I set out to prove or disprove were:

H1: Students perceive effectiveness of major online communication practices based on timeliness and specific utility to their own needs.

H2: Social media is the preferred online method of SJSU COMM Majors to receive information on department events and activities.

## *Literature Review*

Studies for this specific topic eluded me, hence my search for literature found some perhaps unexpected sources. To help introduce the topic, a study by Schwalbe (2009) that speaks to the media consumption habits of those identified as being "Millennials;" that being people born from about 1982 to 2002. This generation is the first to know only a world that has ubiquitous compute resources, cell phone technology, digital music, all connected via the World Wide Web. Waisbord, Shimp, Ogden, & Morry (2010) conducted a study which frames the import of having a solid effective communication strategy that evaluates communication methodologies for eradicating polio in the world. This study

supports the importance of a communication strategy that accounts for FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) in planning and executing a communication strategy.

In further supporting the effort to highlight the additional need to have a broad based and effective online presence, Will & Callison (2006) present a study which was one of the few papers that was specific to academia, indicates the import of the web presence for universities in that this will often serve as a campus visit for many perspective students. In this vein of research, Barker & Stowers' (2005) study speaks directly to university teaching strategies that focuses on the idea of professors being open to learning from their students, which in today's environment would be keyed around social media; as Millennials are the bulk of a given student body, understanding their habits and preferences in communication is key. Revere & Kovach's (2011) study details some of the specific social media tools in use such as Twitter, which of course is key to social media as this facility is favored by many over other more "standard" SNS's like Facebook. Likewise, the study by Gerlich, and Westerman (2011), speaks to the different learning styles needed by students which includes social media; this is important in that this supports the idea that multiple communication outlets offers the ability to reach a variety of preferences for communication.

Additional support for the use of social media is found in Bojonova and Pang (2010), which speaks directly to the import of knowing how new technologies, may be rolled into current curricula; this is again important in the vein of seeking creative and effective modes of engaging students by offering alternatives vis-à-vis technology. The study by Meredith (2012) stood out in terms of recognizing the import of social media in the business world. Meredith proposes to create an MBA course specifically around the strategic use of social media as part of the objective for building graduates who are ready for the world of business and being part of a prepared work-force.

Gombeski, Taylor, Piccirilli, Cundiff, & Britt (2007) build support for the import of using a business style strategy methodology towards building a social media strategy at a University and support for the need to market strategic efforts. It is clear that part of the work a department must do to build it's reputation for existing students as well as for recruiting students will be a marketing effort, and this paper helps to build the case for also having measures by which such a strategy may be utilized; it's hard to know how effective your strategy is if you don't track it by some measure. Key to a successful strategy will also be to review or evaluate the success of the strategy on a regular basis. Finally, Duran, Kelly, & Keaten's (2005) study focuses on the use of email in the academic environment and helps detail how all of these technologies come together; as email is a key communication outlet of the SJSU CSD, it is important to understand how email is typically used and perceived. The paper details motives in the use of email by students and faculty, which is a bit different that is found in the current study.

## ***Method***

***Definitions.*** For the purposes of this study, social media is defined as being those websites, facilities, programs, apps, applications, and media that users of the Internet utilize to communicate socially with each other (as accessed by digital media [computers, smart phones, tablets, etc.]); communicating socially being the sharing of personal events, thoughts, updates, location, and photographs of current user activity. For the purpose of this study, the focus applications and web sites are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs (generically), and email.

Lexical density is an indicator of how easily text is understood; “texts with a lower density are more easily understood... lexically dense text has a lexical density of around 60 – 70% and those which are not dense have a lower lexical density measure of around 40 – 50%” (“Lexical Density,” n.d.).

Fog Index is an indicator of the years of education theoretically needed to comprehend the given text; “for reference, the New York Times has an average Fog Index of 11-12, Time magazine about 11. Typically technical documentation has a Fog Index between 10 and 15, and professional prose almost never exceeds 18” (“Fog Index,” n.d.).

To conduct this study, three methods were selected, a survey of SJSU students enrolled in the Communication Studies major using SurveyMonkey.com, interview follow ups with 4 students who completed the survey via Skype / phone, and content analysis of the top 3 communication sources identified in the survey via UsingEnglish.com.

## **Survey**

To first identify SJSU student preferences for the tools they currently use, against which of the SJSU CSD online facilities they access, a survey of 86 SJSU students enrolled in the communication studies major was conducted; as there are 511 students enrolled in the Communication Studies major, this survey result represents only 16.83% of those enrolled in the major. A few of the things the survey sought to discover:

- How connected to the internet students felt they were
- What portable devices were favored by students
- Which SNS's were preferred by students

The head of the Communication Studies Department, Dr. Stephanie Coopman, created the survey in its final form and sent the SurveyMonkey.com link to all students enrolled in the major. Access to the survey was only available to the SJSU CSD, with results sent to me for analysis in this study.

The coding scheme for qualitative data drawn from the open-ended questions in the survey were drawn out of the data itself; certain patterns were easily identifiable due to the commonality of the results. The coding scheme was drawn on repetition of feedback in the survey free form responses; top-level categories included ideas like convenience, ease of access, methodology of access, and more. Quantitative data was easily compiled and identifiable.

## Interviews

Follow up interviews were conducted via phone and Skype directly with 4 students, Robert Ash, Bricieda Concepcion, Colleen Shjeflo, and Patrick Wilkus, who agreed to be contacted via the survey to gain better depth on their response to the survey. Questions asked included:

- How many of the CSD communication sources did you know about before you took the survey?
  - o Did you explore any of those after the survey?
  - o Did you find any new ones you liked?
- Which of the sources do you most prefer?
  - o What about that source appeals to you?
  - o What has been the most important thing you learned from that source?

The interviews conducted did not add significant understanding to this research; the interview questions did not revert to the research questions or the hypothesis, hence the results are not considered significant to the final conclusions drawn in this study.

## Content Analysis

The focus of the analysis of the content from the top three preferred sources identified in the survey, department web site (<http://sjsu.edu/comm/>), the Communication Center web site (<http://commcenter.sjsu.edu/>), and one edition of the weekly department email newsletter sent to all students enrolled in the major is drawn from the Lexical Density and Fog Index as calculated via UsingEnglish.com.

A non-member use of UsingEnglish.com allows entry of up to 10,000 characters, which are then analyzed for a number of components, including word count, total unique words, number of sentences, average sentence length, number of paragraphs, “hard words” (words with three or more syllables), lexical density, and fog index (both defined above). The facility also lists word length by count of letters and how many of each are used as well as represented in graph form.

## Study Design

This design was selected to facilitate access to students via online facilities. As this study is focused on how the Communication Studies Department communicates to those enrolled in the major, the audience to query was easily identifiable; contact to all students enrolled in the major was done via the department itself through their email facility. As such a study is of value to the department, the survey was required to be vetted by the department chair, Dr. Stephanie Coopman. This was done as well as the final survey to be sent to students was implemented by the Communication Studies Department directly, not by myself as much of this data is private and not accessible by myself or other students.

## ***Findings and Discussion***

This study asked the following questions and had the following results:

RQ1: How do students perceive the effectiveness of the SJSU Communication Studies department online communication practices for those enrolled in the major?

ARQ1: Students enrolled in the Communication Studies Major have a positive perception of the communication methodologies used by the department.

RQ2: What are the most effective online methods of communication the SJSU Communication Studies Department uses to reach students enrolled in the major?

ARQ2: The weekly department email newsletter is the overwhelmingly preferred choice of communication method for students enrolled in the major.

The hypotheses I set out to prove or disprove were:

H1: Students perceive effectiveness of major online communication practices based on timeliness and specific utility to their own needs.

AH1: This hypothesis was supported.

Students indeed perceived that the Communication Studies department communication practices were effective and reached them in a predictable and timely manner that was consumable in their preferred methodology of accessing this communication.

H2: Social media is the preferred online method of SJSU COMM Majors to receive information on department events and activities.

AH2: This hypothesis was rejected.

Students are heavily invested in Facebook but do not typically utilize this medium or Twitter, or most of the other outlets available to them to receive department communications.

Research into this topic yielded good data in terms of what could be expected of the likely majority of college students, being those considered the Millennials as these “are the first generation to grow up with cell phones, personal computers, camcorders, digital music players, and the World Wide Web” (Schwalbe, 2009), they are also known as “digital natives” (Browning, Gerlich, Westermann, 2011 p. 2). This generation of students is noted to be highly connected to the Internet and highly prone to multi-tasking (Schwalbe, 2009). This was borne out in the data from the survey where Communication majors indicated that 45.9% felt like they are almost always connected to the Internet, 40% felt somewhat less connected, and 14.1% in the middle range; survey values of 1, “I feel like I’m almost never connected,” and 2, only slightly connected, were not selected by any respondent.

The question of how a department communicates is key in that a failure to communicate can have significant repercussions; in the case of physicians looking to eradicate polio from the world, researchers note the criticality of communication for the completion of the immunization series (Waisbord, Shimp, Ogden and Morry, 2010). These authors also note that due to campaigns used to discredit proactive polio immunization programs, e.g., FUD, this was successful where “effective communication strategies, led to widespread rejection of immunization...” (Waisbord, Shimp, Ogden and Morry, 2010 p. 11). The key here is that having a robust communication strategy for a critical

program is required. From the interviews conducted in this study, it was found that some of the respondents were not aware of many of these other outlets or “don’t read blogs or use Twitter” (C. Shjeflo, personal communication, November 11, 2012). Hence, a spectrum of communication outlets that provide consistent information is critical in a robust communication strategy.

Indeed, the web presence of the CSD was one of the top preferred outlets utilized by students. The department web site, <http://sjsu.edu/comm/> was the site 83.5% of students selected in the survey as having been accessed by them. The Communication Center web site, <http://commcenter.sjsu.edu/> was the third most selected source with 58.8% of students indicating they had accessed this site. While research indicates that university websites typically target “prospective students,” which suggests that “postsecondary institutions view their Web sites as a promotional or recruitment tool” (Will & Callison, 2005 p. 182), the research in this study contradicts that finding; when asked to rank how useful the SJSU CSD websites were for them, it ranked second with 51.2% of students selected the department site ([sjsu.edu/comm/](http://sjsu.edu/comm/)) as useful (5 of 5 on a Linkert) and the COMM center website ([commcenter.sjsu.edu/](http://commcenter.sjsu.edu/)) was ranked 4 of 5 (on a Linkert scale) by 37% of respondents, which was the third of the preferred communication methodologies.

Further, it is posited here that an effective departmental communication strategy is bolstered by the faculty being open to learning from their students what technologies students prefer and adapting teaching methodologies accordingly. Research found that professors might benefit; “keeping your ‘professional radar’ attuned to information in the classroom environment allows you to adjust as needed. Ignoring that information, however, also communicates to your students” (Barker, Stowers, 2005 p. 482). Barker and Stowers indicate that by assuring that they understood their students facilitated them communicating effectively what was being taught (2005). This of course requires that professors take into account the differing learning styles of their students. In light of the findings in this study, that students are effectively always connected and highly engaged in interactive media (SNS’s), today’s students have different learning styles and expected outcomes from their educational environment than the generations that came before them (Browning, Gerlich, Westermann, 2011). The key finding in the research by Browning, Gerlich, and Westermann, in my opinion is as they state,

The lack of significant difference between males and females in all aspects of this study demonstrate that relative parity has come to not only internet usage, but also that of social media. While it is possible that males and females utilize these two for different reasons (and in different ways), the fact that both genders are using them in fairly equal (and large) amounts presents opportunities for educators. Social media are a tool to be leveraged, not avoided (2011 p. 6)

This is supported by my study where we see the top three preferred SNS’s selected by students were Facebook (85.7%), Instagram (35.7%), and Twitter (26.2%).

Additional research as it pertains to pedagogy found that “through integration of technology with traditional pedagogy, an inline learning environment can grow to its fullest” (Revere and Kovach, 2011 p. 114). The details in Revere and Kovach’s study is key; they indicate that students today are seeking more technology to help in many areas, including building relationships and facilitating the process of education (2011). Their study highlighted that while introduced in 2007, Twitter is still a relative newcomer to the SNS table; Twitter allows for engagement with experts and facilitates knowledge of current events (Revere and Kovach, 2011). As the group studied in this research indicates that 78.8% of them use smartphones, Twitter and Facebook are key tools students can take with them.

Following the pedagogical thread, my research supports creative application of facilities, including Twitter; Bojanova and Pang (2010) indicate that due to the broad use of SNS's by celebrities, newsmakers, and notable politicians is cause to include this medium in class. Indeed, analysis of the November 6, 2012 election indicates that spending by the successful Obama campaign was at \$47 million for this campaign, and that "the Obama campaign believed from the start that digital was an important new area, and really had an almost evangelical feeling about signing people up to register to give money through Facebook and Twitter" (Suracz, 2012). Meredith (2012) views application of social media in a pedagogical context; Meredith proposes an MBA class with a focus on social media from a perspective of communication, noting the "explosive popularity of social media platforms" (Meredith, 2012 p. 89). Meredith (2012) notes how important it has become for businesses to fill their roles with positions focused on social media, and the lack of talented candidates in this specific area.

In seeking to support a Social Media Strategy for the department, I found a study that detailed how to execute an effective communication strategy to market an organizations' value (Gombeski, Taylor, Piccirilli, Cundiff, & Britt, 2007). Free market methodology has an opportunity to introduce proven effective methodologies to academe for the sake of improving messaging methodology. Identifying the elements of strategic communication, taking advantage of the business communication model, may do this as well as leveraging brand enhancement methodology (Gombeski, Taylor, Piccirilli, Cundiff, & Britt, 2007).

Finally, and key to a central finding in this this research, was the importance and preference for email communication from the CSD; the SJSU CSD weekly email newsletter was the second ranked choice of students enrolled in the major at a rate of 80%. The weekly email newsletter was ranked first in terms of how useful students found it to them, ranked 5 with 58.5% selecting this communication from the department. While in some quarters email is seen as an "impoverished mode of communication" (K. Kerber, personal communication, June 14, 2012), in the context of the SJSU CSD, this is the most effective communication outlet the department utilizes. As this channel has "been in use for about 5 years" (Dr. T. Coopman, personal communication, November 1, 2012), it has a basis for being known and expected by students and faculty. In addition, research found that multiple methods of communication, including email, "by providing an accessible, easy-to-use channel of communication, may be opening the door to much greater levels of out-of-class communication between faculty and students" (Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005 p. 160). This was supported in this research by interviewees; "I like the information, it has a list of pertinent information that is available, it is a good communication method that department sends to students, with data about internships, job fairs, summer trip to China. I use it for availability to talk to advisers, etc." (R. Ash, personal communication, November 11, 2012), "Outlined really well, index at the top – you can go down and read more" (C. Shjeflo, personal communication, November 11, 2012), and "it's email, I don't have trouble accessing it. I've never gone on the other websites; I have always used that one (source)" (P. Wilkus, personal communication, November 9, 2012). The support for the email letter in the survey was likewise overwhelming. The coding for this result in the survey indicated feedback like:

- It's what I use or check the most
  - o It's the only source used
- I check my email more than websites
  - o It's easy
  - o Convenient

- Especially with my smart phone
- Informative
  - Well organized

Clearly, with the portability of smartphones that have ubiquitous access to the Internet, hence connectivity to email as well as web resources, the email newsletter was the hands-down best medium for communicating to those enrolled in the Communication Studies major at SJSU.

### **Content Analysis**

The content analysis of the department websites focused on the top three ranked communication methodologies used by the CSD as selected by students in the major as identified in the survey. Focusing on the Lexical Density and Fog Index for these sites, the weekly newsletter was by far the most approachable for the reader while the COMM Center web site (<http://commcenter.sjsu.edu/>) was the next most readable resource; while the lexical density was considered very dense, the fog index was average. This model generally held true for the other pages in the COMM Center site. The main CSD web site (<http://sjsu.edu/comm/>) was found to be dense with a below average fog index. However, as a reader passes through the various pages, the density of pages was found to be dense in a couple of cases (About Us & Degrees), and average in others (Advising, Programs, and Groups & Events). The fog index was found to be high for most of the pages (About Us, Degrees, and Advising), and average for the others (Programs and Groups & Events). Site improvements could be made to have the sites be a bit more evenly matched in terms of readability and comprehensibility.

Such improvements would serve to make the pages more accessible to a broader audience and those seeking to enter the program. This would be dependent on the strategy held by the department towards seeking out those that would easily be able to parse these higher density or Fog index pages, versus those that may not be able to parse them. This also brings consideration to how these sites may be updated to help draw students in the major to them, if this is the objective of the sites examined. Such a review of these pages may also consider what could be done to adapt the pages to serve the needs of students enrolled in the major.

### **Summary**

The CSD at SJSU is considered by those enrolled in the major to be effective at communicating to them and their current preferred method is via the weekly email newsletter the department sends out. While students are highly connected to the Internet primarily by mobile phones, they prefer to keep, at least Facebook, for personal matters; they don't really want to see department notices in their newsfeeds / walls.

However, as the department had not been highly active on Twitter until recently (Fall 2012 – subscribers total were 48), this has to be considered a new channel. The same can be said for Facebook. Until these channels are established and viewed by a notable subscriber base as being reliable and providing desired content, these channels will continue to be alternates to the weekly email newsletter.

As for the web sites used by the department, There may be an opportunity to improve readability and content based on the target audiences; college web sites appear in general to be targeted at the Alumni base, ostensibly to help draw in donations. However, as a communication methodology to all audiences, particularly one that may inform students of opportunities for classes, options in the major,



etc., the sites can be seen as a whole and addressed so that they have a common voice and intent. Also, by directing students, prospective students, and alumni to the social media channels as well as notice of the weekly email newsletter, may help provide an awareness of not only the channels in use by the department, but also be evidence of knowledge and depth in these media. This sort of evidence may be key for prospective students, as well as serve to notify the alumni base that the CSD is ever growing and engaged in the constantly changing field of communication.

## ***Limitations and Future Research***

The primary limitation of this survey is that of gender; in the survey, 63.1% of respondents were female, whereas enrollment in the major is much more balanced at 237 males and 274 females are currently enrolled in the major. However, the study conducted by Browning, Gerlich, and Westermann (2011), found that there was no disparity between males and females in a university setting in their use of the Internet and social media sites. Also, class representation was imbalanced with only 3.5% of respondents with a class standing of sophomore.

The survey was not statistically significant with 86 total responses (1 incomplete), out of 511 students currently enrolled in the Communication Studies major.

Future research would benefit by performing a focus group instead of a content analysis. In this study, the content analysis was broken out instead of integrated into the rest of the data, as it was in effect incongruent; while interesting, it did not further the question notably, though does serve to help consider an area for improved readability. The content analysis method was selected purely due to my inability to take time for a focus group due to family needs, work needs, and the existing demands of the class from which this study was assigned. I did not have preconceived notions of what this part of the study would indicate, though the observations found were interesting and relevant for the department in its internal view of the modes in which it communicates with the students in the major.

Where coding is concerned, there may be additional consolidation among the areas studied (main site, email newsletter, and the Communication Center) to be more compact; there is an amount of similarity; however, by consolidating data, differentiation between the facilities may be lost.

Based on the idea that up to now the department has not had a social media strategy, in time, the study would bear repeating to find if students begin to branch out into social media outside of their personal lives to include media such as Facebook and Twitter into their information consumption models.

## **Conclusion**

While students enrolled in the Communication Studies major at SJSU have spoken clearly that the weekly email newsletter is their preferred source today, that will be a topic to continually monitor; as well, the intrepid educator will consider that “these data suggest a strong potential readiness exists for social media applications, one which educators could leverage for maximum impact within the context of a college course” (Browning, Gerlich, Westermann, 2011 p. 6). Further, “educators can nurture this non-linear mentality by presenting material in short bursts or in a non-linear fashion rather than (a) step by step in a linear process” (Schwalbe, 2009 p. 60). Schwalbe predicts, “educators will deliver course content to cell phones or other mobile devices” (Schwalbe, 2009 p. 62). That 3 year-old prediction is within reach based on the latest smart phone models as well as excellent tablet compute devices. Additional predictions are seen for Twitter due to its ability to connect every person (or student), with the expert of their desire (Revere & Kovach 2011). The future is here and social media is here to stay; a department looking to stay ahead of the curve and offer its students the leading edge in technological innovation, particularly in the heart of Silicon Valley, could make a name for itself by innovating and imagining what could be done by robustly utilizing all available channels to reach out and engage students.

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*Please place in alphabetical order. Place an \* next to all required scholarly sources.*

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