

Romancelandia on Twitter: Designing a Digital Humanities Research Assignment for First-Year Writing Students

A presentation at Researching the Romance 2018

Courtney Milan tweeted on March 7, 2018, “Every author I’ve seen say ‘don’t take political stances online’ has taken political stances online. They just firmly believe their stance is neutral.”

This semester, Heather taught a freshman writing seminar on Love and American Culture. George Washington University is easy walking distance from the White House and the World Bank, and traditionally attracts students who fantasize about working as politicians; since the last election, student interest in politics has only intensified. This dovetailed nicely with the increasing number of romance writers in recent years tackling political and social issues in their work. With that in mind, Heather designed an essay assignment exploring politics in popular romance.

As part of our freshman writing program, a librarian is embedded within every section. And in a happy coincidence, Ann is a huge fan of romance. The two of us decided to devote a library day to a class experiment with research on Twitter, which we saw as a perfect platform for combining romance and politics, particularly since so many romance authors are active tweeters. Librarians at GW have created an open source social media data collector, called Social Feed Manager, that allowed us to “scrape” several months’ worth of tweets by and to specific authors and use that in a digital humanities project.

Why the focus on data? Because libraries and first-year classrooms are working to incorporate both digital humanities and data literacy, and we wanted to explore both on an experimental scale. Libraries are also uniquely situated to find raw data sets for students to begin using those skills, as data and information literacy are entwined, implicitly if not explicitly. Citizens in today’s world need to understand how Big Data uses them; also, we in the humanities need to learn how to take advantage of these new research resources. The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education adopted by Association of College and Research Libraries argues that, “Students have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically” (ACRL 2015). In other words, figuring out how to conduct research with Twitter data would be useful for everyone in our library session, including Ann and Heather.

We designed the session using an approach from Problem-based Learning. Originally developed in the 1960s for medical students, Problem-based Learning was designed to turn the classroom from a passive place of rote memorization and practice to a dynamic space where students working in small groups could not only tackle real-world problems but figure out *how* to tackle them. Since then, it’s become something of a gold standard in professional education. If you haven’t heard of it, that’s probably because humanities courses already have many other methods for fostering student engagement and critical thinking; also, literary scholars don’t tend to think of our field as solving problems, in the same way that, say, engineers might. Still, this approach has real advantages for a first-year class, where students often expect knowledge

Heather M. Schell, Assistant Professor of Writing, George Washington University, schellhm@gwu.edu

Ann K. G. Brown, Research and User Services Librarian, George Washington University, agbrown@gwu.edu

to be dropped in their laps; problem-based learning makes it their responsibility to figure out how best to find answers. This was a perfect fit for a library workshop in which we ourselves weren't sure of the best approach.

When we first embarked on this project last fall, we requested the Twitter feed from a somewhat random assortment of romance authors, some of whom are very political on social media and others who are not. They are: Ilona Andrews, Suzanne Brockmann, Alyssa Cole, Elizabeth Hoyt, Eloisa James, Jeannie Lin, Courtney Milan, and Sherry Thomas.

The dataset was enormous, so Ann created a smaller "sandbox" of data for the students to interact with. She also identified three politically-charged events in Romancelandia that took place during our data collection period:

1. Hillary Clinton's November 28, 2017 Washington Post interview, in which she stated, "The whole romance novel industry is about women being grabbed and thrown on a horse and ridden off into the distance."
2. Courtney Milan's #metoo revelations (December 2017)
3. A preeminent romance novelist's provocative comments about diversity on the Romance Writers of America's (RWA) Published Authors Network (PAN). (August 2017).

We chose the PAN forum comments, as the messiest and most ethically complicated of our options. The most obvious complication is that, somewhere along the way, the author's words on this private forum were leaked to the public. On top of that, as internet ethics scholar Michael Zimmer explains, many people believe that their "anonymity [is] guaranteed . . . by virtue of [their] public tweets being hidden in plain sight among millions of others" (2010); he calls this "privacy via obscurity." The romance authors on Twitter were engaged in a painful conversation that they kept somewhat under the radar by subtweeting, and they presumably assumed this was invisible outside their community. These factors made the situation excellent material for a classroom research activity.

However, this is messy, ethically complicated material for a conference. In writing this paper we argued back and forth about whether to name the author. In the classroom, our students lacked the background to know who this author was, let alone to understand her long, prominent history in the genre; that is obviously not the case here today. Because the specific novelist and her intentions are not the point of this presentation, we won't go into more detail.

Students came to the library session with no advance preparation other than a reminder to bring their laptops. At the beginning of the session, we briefly explained the data set and gave a bare bones explanation regarding the controversy. Although the RWA's ongoing issues with race and diversity have recently become more public, at the time this controversy was mostly invisible to anyone outside the romance writing community. It was the students' job to see what traces they could find using our data set and any other online sources. We encouraged them to think about the ethics of this whole event, including the research we were doing that day. Then the students worked in pairs to uncover the timeline and whatever specific details they could find. You can find the full prompt and context on our supplemental handout.

At the end of the session, the class discussed what they'd found and how they'd found it. They talked about the ethical implications of leaking data and of using it, as well as the strategies that they'd seen people use when discussing the author on Twitter. As a follow-up, each pair was asked to write 2-3 paragraphs about the incident and their research process. For extra credit, they were invited to speculate about the ethical issues regarding privacy, especially when it came to research. We asked them, "Is it okay for us to write about texts that were never meant to be shared?" Students were also encouraged to incorporate some aspect of their Twitter research into their first research paper, due approximately three weeks later.

From this preliminary foray into trying to teach data literacy, we made an interesting discovery having to do with student ideas about ethics. Twitter is one of those public places that, to many of its users, doesn't *feel* public, and the posts from the RWA forum definitely weren't intended to be.

In a recent study published in *Social Media and Society*, Fiesler and Proferes surveyed Twitter users about their level of comfort with the idea of their tweets becoming research material. Although Twitter's privacy policy explicitly grants researchers access to their public data, participant responses suggested that the majority did not realize that tweets might be used for research (5), and over 40% believed that researchers were not allowed to use tweets in research without permission (6). Participants' discomfort with the idea of researchers accessing their public data held true regardless of age, suggesting that 'the stereotype that "young people don't care about privacy" on social media is inaccurate (9).

At the same time, our students have grown up in a world in which naïve adolescent sexting can result in discovering one's naked body plastered across the web. This generation has repeatedly been told to be cautious about any material they share online. Perhaps it's not surprising that our students almost universally insisted that the author should never have expected privacy online, despite the private forum; she had only herself to blame. In other words, they were placing the author in the framework they'd been taught as a form of self-protection: with a worldwide web and a vast audience, all it would take is one malicious person to expose their vulnerabilities to the world. Ann raised the idea of the "right to be forgotten," but the students seemed very skeptical.

Yet students definitely appreciated the potential for serious consequences. When asked about the ethical implications of leaking the author's comments, all three sections of the class mentioned potential damage to her reputation among writers and readers, with repercussions possibly including a drop in book sales.

The follow-up assignment asked students to imagine themselves in a different position: as researchers who had gained access to private material that the author had never intended to share. With time to reflect, students' ideas about the ethical implications became substantially more nuanced. For instance, one student wrote that the PAN forum where the provocative comments had appeared was the most appropriate place to continue the discussion about diversity; however, the student added, if that did not occur, then the rights of those facing discrimination trumped privacy rights on the forum. Some wrote about the problem of words

extracted from a private forum being taken out of context, in a way that could not easily be verified. Still others drew a distinction between the original leaking as a violation of privacy, in contrast to the conscientious Twitter discussion among romance writers, who didn't name names. Many students suggested that ethical demands might have a higher standard than legality. Because we didn't provide any additional instruction or reading about research ethics, other than the writing prompt itself, these responses suggest that the active learning experience of the library session continued afterwards in the writing they prepared outside of class.

We want to leave you with a few additional things we've learned: First, Twitter is an excellent place for students to witness the romance community in action, as authors build ties with readers and other authors, and also challenge limits to that community. We'd highly recommend that those of you who teach romance try this with your class.

Second: even if Hillary Clinton never disses the genre again, there will always be something interesting going down on Romance Twitter for students to explore.

Third: For a research session like this one to work, it's not at all necessary that you or your students have much previous experience with Twitter. That's especially true if you have the opportunity to work with an awesome librarian.

Thank you!

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Heather M. Schell
Assistant Professor of Writing
schellhm@gwu.edu

Ann K. G. Brown
Research and User Services Librarian
agbrown@gwu.edu



Social Feed Manager (SFM)

(<https://gwu-libraries.github.io/sfm-ui/about/overview>)

Social Feed Manager (SFM) is an open-source tool designed for researchers, archivists, and curious individuals to collect social media data from Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, or Sina Weibo.

Twitter user timeline: Collect tweets from specific Twitter accounts.

Twitter filter: Collects tweets that mention these authors from a stream of tweets in real time.

Who did we scrape?

@AlyssaColeLit
@courtneymilan
@ElizabethHoyt
@EloisaJames
@ilona_andrews
@JayneAnnKrentz
@JeannieLin
@kresleycole
@sherrythomas
@SuzBrockmann

The Data

We considered three distinct episodes within Romancelandia that. We carefully discussed the pros and cons of each incident and how it worked within the broader context of the class.

1. Novelist's provocative comments about diversity on the RWA PAN Forum (August 2017).
2. Courtney Milan's #metoo revelations (December 2017)
3. Hillary Clinton's Washington Post interview where she stated, "The whole romance novel industry is about women being grabbed and thrown on a horse and ridden off into the distance."

(November 28, 2017)

Due to the more limited nature of coverage, we went with #1. Another layer to this incident was the intersection of romance authors as fans.

Setting the Stage

We introduced the assignment in the library session which occurred in the 3rd week of class. We explained the data, why we collected it, how we collected it, and touched a bit on the ethics of social media. The SFM designers make sure everyone participating understands that there is such a thing as letting a social media post be forgotten.

At the end of the session we did a 3-2-1 Assessment, 3 things you learned, 2 things you found interesting and want to learn more about, and 1 question you still have. Interestingly, the most of students didn't have questions about how to do the assignment, but rather, whether or not the author's reputation and market rate was affected.

Assignment Prompt

1. What we know

- August 26, 2017, on the PAN Forum of RWA
- (redacted), a romance novelist of note, wrote an inflammatory post(s) regarding diversity within romance.

2. Issues/Ideas:

- This is a private forum that is not publicly accessible even within RWA
- Subtweeting happened (ie don't ctrl-F for (redacted) name)
- You may use outside resources, especially for background data, but you must use the twitter data

3. Our data

- Scraped twitter feeds from multiple romance novelists and a second feed of people who tweet at them
- Covers August 26-September 30, 2017

4. Your group needs to write two paragraphs (the third paragraph is extra credit).

- In the first paragraph, explain your process. How did you find information? How did you use the twitter data (you must use the twitter data)? What strategies did you use when searching? What did you explore beyond our data set?
- In the second paragraph, tell us what you found. What actually happened? What were some of the major themes in people's responses? What did they have to say about RWA? Do they think this will/should affect (redacted) readership?
- Bonus third paragraph: What do you see as the potential ethical issues here regarding privacy? What about researchers' ethics—is it okay for us to write about texts that were never meant to be shared?

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