SM Just to start with, what’s your role and how did you get there?

IR My role is called Social and Digital Media Officer, soon to be Digital Content Manager in a slight restructure. I am broadly responsible for all the social media platforms in what we call digital, which in effect just means ((film?)), logs, any kind of online apps, that sort of thing as well. I don’t really deal with the hardcore website stuff, so it’s more like the additional bits and bobs that we do, which are quite nice and for various campaigns quite lightweight.

In terms of social media, I look after our central social media channels. We have a Facebook account for the university which has got about 70,000 followers. We've got a Twitter account which has got 40,000 followers. We have two LinkedIn accounts, 70,000 and 12,000 or so I think for each of those. We have a presence on Instagram, it’s quite new. We have a presence on Google+, not particularly active. We also have a [Social media platform 1] account, the Chinese platform. I don’t speak or write Mandarin Chinese so we have a Chinese student, and we hire them year-by-year, who act as an ambassador for us and basically do a few hours every week engaging with our Chinese community in [City 2] and also back in China as well. And obviously on YouTube as well, a bit of Vimeo and Youku, which is the Chinese. Because Chinese students back in China can’t really access YouTube so we have to find ways of providing content to them, which is Youku. We’ve just written effectively a Social Media Strategy for the university as well.

The challenge that I sort of face on a daily basis, I suppose, is that as a university it’s quite disparate in terms of the way the governance works. There are layers on governance throughout the university and actually departments have quite a lot of autonomy, so they have their own marketing people, albeit they might be actually academics who are just taking on a role, a part-time partition of their role is for marketing activities, or they might have full-time people doing it. It varies from department to department. But there is that sense that they have that control. They are responsible for their own recruitment figures. They are responsible in part for their own marketing. So they have their own presence.

The challenge is, that given we have 50 academic departments who all have autonomy, and we also have probably if not more service departments as well, so we have Library who have their own marketing people and their own communications’ people in the Library, we have Computing Services who have their own communications and marketing people there. So you get the picture. For everything that we have we have that kind of sense that they all have autonomy, which basically means that we have a lot of social media.

We did a bit of an audit about three or four months ago and we found that the university has over 500 social media accounts. ((?)) but also mention the fact we have research groups of course who also have their own platforms as well, and projects have their own accounts, and various initiatives like green environmental sustainability. So when you look at it all we have over 500 different accounts. The challenge that we have, especially given that we come from a relatively corporate part of the university, is how do we create that sense of unity throughout the university but without a sense of being too authoritarian with it and basically being top-down with it? Because actually we want people who feel that social media is a space where people can explore and be experimental and try things, and they don’t need to worry too much about the corporate image of the university. So we need to find the balance. And actually when you start thinking in that way, more questions need answering at that point.

So one of the challenges I am faced with is, how do we create something which everyone feels that there is a sense of unity and a community feel to the whole university, without us saying you’ve got to use these colours, you’ve got to use this tone of voice, you’ve got to have this approach, that sort of thing. It’s a balance basically, and part of that is how do we evaluate what we do? If I’m going off on too many tangents let me know.

SM The evaluation is what I’m interested in.

IR At the moment we very much look at evaluating the means of what we do. So when we have a campaign for instance, an awareness raising campaign or our all-round presence that we have, we will tend to evaluate the number of clicks, the reach figures that you’re given by social media, the amount of people who are engaging with things, responding, the amount of conversations we’re having. But that’s all in effect the means not the end. The challenge there is that how do you evaluate what you’re ultimately trying to actually do? What we are we ultimately trying to do? That’s where things start really getting almost a bit philosophical and a bit meta. But the challenge is, how do you make sure that it’s not just this philosophical thing, actually that you use that as a way to evaluate your performance.

We have an overall strategy for instance, and we have a series of activities, almost think of it as pillars of our corporate strategy, we have six different components. Our internalisation is one, for instance, our student experience is another. So we have those things. How then do we marry up the means and the things that we’re doing with the overall aims of the university? My challenge and the thing that I’m wanting to do increasingly is, in the way that we evaluate we need to be assigning ... In the same way, do you know much about what’s called activities based costing, which is an accounting principle?

It’s effectively the principle that you assign the costing based on the activities that you’re doing, which then basically means ultimately you can see if we put this amount of cost into this activity we understand how much benefit we’re going to get from that. If you don’t do activity based costing you don’t really know, all you know is that you stick in £3m into a marketing department or into an academic department and you get some broad levels of different output. That’s all you know. So what we’re trying to do is, we’re trying to really sync up the activities with the output.

There are a variety of different ways of trying to do that, and one of the ways is by tagging specific activities that we’re doing with something connected to this output, and then at the end evaluating the whole holistic view of the output, if you see what I mean. But doing that in our team is challenging enough, but then trying to get the whole university to try to do it-

SM So how do you do it? Talk me through an example.

IR Sorry, the other thing about that is you can then test that as well, so you can then actually test whether that has actually had the desired impact that you want. Which is through an additional study, for instance making sure that we can see holistically that we have done all of these different activities that we believe are aimed at our internationalisation agenda, and we can see it in its fullest form in a single area and we can see the evaluation of that, but now we can test whether people actually believe that’s true, for instance. So we could test students whether we feel that what their attitudes are about us being a multi-cultural university, or whatever thing we decide.

SM So you’re communicating a message we’re a multi-cultural university, and you test whether you successfully achieve that by asking students whether they perceive you in that way.

IR It could be that, yeah. As I say, the way that these six pillars work are that it’s not just that we say we’re a multi-cultural university, it is that when we write press releases, when we do research, when we do any kind of communication at all, the whole point of having the Corporate Strategy is that everyone’s facing in the same direction, everyone understands that there are these key things that fundamentally the university is based on. So the university is fundamentally based on the fact that we are an international institution, and that’s something that we wholeheartedly all agree on and that we all want to make a big deal of. There are other things as well but to be honest they’re a bit generic truthfully.

If you asked any ((?)) university they’re pretty much the same, but regardless they’re the things that it’s been decided by the senior management that we want to be championing. Therefore regardless of what you’re doing, so it might be that we’ve got some kind of new collaboration in a different country, or it might be that we’ve got some new study abroad scheme or the Erasmus initiative that we’re doing, all of those different things though add to this sense of us being an international university. At the moment you just have everyone in their little pockets all over the place doing their own little things, but there is in a sense a hole there as well, and it’s kind of like can we create some our ((paths?)) type measurement? Whereas at the moment it’s just incredibly sporadic, we have no real idea what we’re doing internationally across the whole university.

SM So the ideal is to be able to measure various activities that are contributing to that image of the university.

IR Basically, yeah.

SM But it’s not happening yet because it’s not joined up.

IR No. It’s not joined up in any way at all actually.

SM So where does social media analytics and insights come into it? You’ve told me you’ve got a lot of activity going on, on a range of platforms.

IR Well truthfully it’s kind of like it’s the spearhead for it, because the challenge with brochures for instance, is that you don’t get the inherent analytics. You can say we’ve printed 10,000 brochures and we’ve sent them across the world to career services, fairs and various other things that we’re doing in China, Indonesia and various places, and that’s it, you don’t know how many people have read it, you don’t know what people think about it, that’s the end.

The thing with social media – as I’m sure you’re aware – is that obviously you get a lot more immediate response to things, so you can have a qualitative sense of the impression that people have of it because people tend to speak their mind on it. How you record that though is challenging. But more so, you do get really powerful quantitative measures of the amount of people, just basic things like likes and comments and shares, just in the purest numerical form. But as you say, when you join that up across the whole university, you start to see something a bit more than just these individual-

SM How do you join that up? Do you use tools to join that up?

IR Yeah. It’s going to be a challenge, don’t get me wrong. One of the things I want to try and do is to actually integrate a number of tools that will help us do it, one of them being Hootsuite. With Hootsuite we have an enterprise package in the university, which is quite expensive actually, but it does allow for us to do a number of things including tagging messages with certain things. For instance, if we do have the six key messages and key themes that the university is built upon, international being one of them, that for every message that we engage with, for everything you send out and also everything that’s said about us, if we then basically tag said message with ‘international’. Hootsuite can divide up the analytics on each message individually, so you can see for instance that for international, over the course of the last six months all the messages tagged with international have got this amount of reach and this amount of engagement, likes, re-tweets and things. Likewise the student experience. It’s not an automated process per se, it does require the people who are doing this to tag.

SM To tag before they send the message out.

IR Yeah.

SM What about things that are being said about you? Because you can’t ask those people to tag.

IR You can’t. So you would tag those.

SM You tag it.

IR Yeah, again.

SM And then Hootsuite classifies it and puts it in a group.

IR Yeah.

SM So that’s a manual process.

IR It’s a manual process, yeah. It can be quite quick, because once you have assigned your set tags all you need to do is click the tag button which is one click, and then you see the list and you just click it. Hootsuite does make it reasonably painless. But ultimately we’re not probably talking about a full far reaching thing, we have to accept that. At the moment we have nothing so it’s better than nothing!

SM Just to clarify, if a Malaysian student tweeted ‘just graduated after a fantastic three years @[Uni 2]’, then Hootsuite would see that ‘@[Uni 2]’ or whatever it is, as being relevant. Or you would see it. How are you identifying what other people are saying? Are you doing it manually by looking at-?

IR With Hootsuite we have a number of things set up there. With the dashboard that Hootsuite provides, obviously for anyone that tags, say, @[Uni 2] into the tweet, it comes through into our mention stream, so we will see it effectively.

SM And then you can tag it.

IR And then we can tag it. On the other hand with Hootsuite, we also have lists that we create ourselves of our students and of partners and things like that, of people who are relevant who we’re seeing much more content from. Also, we have streams where we’re actually picking up key words and search phrases, because not everyone will tag @[Uni 2], they will just say had a great time at [University 2].

SM So there’s phrases.

IR So there’s phrases. So we’re also tracking quite a few key words and phrases. Also, when we run specific campaigns, for example the We Are International campaign which is something that actually I think is [University 1] is signed up to actually, but it’s something that we’ve been running from [University 2], which is a big campaign that I wouldn’t quite say lobbies the Government but it sort of tries to get the Government to see that international students shouldn’t been seen as immigration figures. That’s the whole point of that campaign, we’ve been to Parliament a couple of times, we have over 100 universities who are supporting the campaign. It has its hashtag. So we could say we’re looking at that hashtag as well, we’re counting that towards our international ... Of course there are debates, ultimately this becomes an issue of what is international coverage and what isn’t. That’s the challenge.

SM So should you include that as part of your international thing, or is it separate because it’s a broader campaign.

IR Because it’s a broader campaign it doesn’t have the university’s name on it like stamped all over it, it’s more of a subtle thing. And ultimately that’s the decision not really of me, it’s the decision of whoever’s at the top, and quite frankly – I should probably be careful what I say now.

SM It’s all anonymous and anonymised.

IR But you do get the sense that certainly in some organisations, possibly here as well, that people like good news actually. For me it’s about benchmarking, it’s about improvement. Without knowing what we’re doing overall, it’s very difficult for us to assess year-on-year whether we’re improving or whether we’re getting worse and things like that.

SM So people like to hear that campaign went well.

IR But that’s true.

SM Is that what you’re saying?

IR Sorry, I’m saying the point of this is not for that purpose, it’s for us to genuinely evaluate what we’re doing.

SM This didn’t go well or we could do better.

IR Exactly. Precisely. But we work in a political bureaucracy in a sense, as do most organisations, and ultimately as I say people like good news, and when you’ve worked on a project people like to say that that project was great, and if they can substantiate that with numerical evidence that we’ve reached 50,000 with that message and we've had 1,000 people respond back to us about it, then that fulfils some kind of sense of requirement. I think it’s area of research that probably already exists actually, but the sense that there is a magic about numbers.

SM There is interesting research about that, yeah.

IR Almost it’s like once you’ve passed 1,000, that there’s no sense of scale anymore. I wouldn’t want to criticise anyone especially in the university, but I don’t know whether it’s got links to the fact that there is a general low level of numeracy. It’s deeply scented in people whether numbers aren’t meaningful to them perhaps above a certain threshold. Or whether, as I say, there is some other kind of sense of psychological magic about this. If we can say thousands of people have done this, there is kind of sense of but we’d expect a million people to do that, a thousand’s low! I know a thousand’s not low, a thousand’s a thousand, a thousand’s a lot.

I do wonder sometimes whether people have that inherent perspective of numbers past that threshold. Which, as I say, consequently means that as long as you can say your campaigns have thousands, maybe tens of thousands of responses or whatever, that almost just guarantees it to have been a success, in a weird way.

SM You’re talking about Hootsuite sort of identifying relevant conversations, but it doesn’t do a lot of the analytics, does it? So are you bringing in other tools alongside it?

IR It depends what you mean by analytics, but if you’re meaning just the numbers-

SM I mean a bunch of things really, like what platforms are people talking on, who are the most vocal commentators, what kind of sentiments are being expressed?

IR You can use it for most of those things. You can’t use it for sentiment. With our package obviously we have a lot of monitoring set up so we do see wider conversations about [University 2] happening. There’s a difference, I suppose, between what happens on our own platforms and what happens wider in the world, so I suppose there is that sense of us being able to capture quite-

SM Do you have to tell Hootsuite what platforms to look at?

IR Yeah.

SM So there might be conversations on other platforms that you’re not capturing.

IR Absolutely. Undoubtedly, yeah. That is one of the challenges with Hootsuite, and actually generally. There are other programmes out there that are more of a listening tool. We actually use one specifically called GnAtterbox which is something which they actually curate their own lists of journalists and politicians. I think it’s just journalists and politicians. They might also have business leaders in there as well. What they’ll actually do is they’ll send you alerts every time that your organisation is mentioned by those figures.

Because there is seen to be, I suppose, a weight, that if a journalist or a politician has mentioned you on the variety of channels that they track, probably mainly Twitter to be honest, but if they mention on Facebook as well, that actually they will then send you an email usually. I think you can set it to do other things as well, but I just have the alerts coming through email, and it pulls it through and it says so-in-so MP has said this about [University 2]. Which is quite handy. We also more manually do things. There’s the Student Room.

SM You just look at what’s being said there.

IR That’s just a case of searching for keywords, manually again. As far as I know they haven’t yet implemented anything which enables some kind of automated mining if you like of those mentions, other than just a search box. So that again is a manual process, and to be honest again that’s a relatively ad-hoc and inconsistent process from my point-of-view. Particularly with the recruitment side of things. I don’t want to get into this because it’s probably going to derail your research, but as organisation, or especially something like a university which has a lot of heritage and a lot of legacies if you like in terms of the way that the departments are all structured, we despite us being marketing, don’t actually get involved in student recruitment, that’s a whole separate team with a separate budget and obviously separate goals, separate things that they’re measured on. So even though we control social networks, it becomes a little bit convoluted and clouded as to who’s responsible for certain activities on social networks.

Which is the other challenge I’m facing and the other reason why I’m trying to ... The Social Media Strategy there is this tendency, I think, for people to put up walls and you cordon off your own little areas and things like that. Whereas I’m trying to break them down and say well actually we want to have more people involved in what we’re doing with social media. The other thing about that is, and this is again where the Strategy comes in and where some of the analytics come in, because we need to be able to say not only are we doing a great job but actually these people are doing a great job through us and through our channels, and being able to again provide a report, which is something that we do.

We do a monthly report which has a load of analytics in that we’ve taken from a variety of sources, so that’s mainly Hootsuite but also the native platforms themselves. Also things like Google Analytics as well for website stuff. We will provide this monthly report which goes to anyone around university who’s interested in social media. We have a forum set up with about 150 members who are all interested in social media. It also will go to all of the people involved in marketing around the university, and it goes to the senior management as well. It’s just one of the things that we do.

But that report has a certain power about it, because actually aside from just showing your analytics and showing your data and what things have worked, how things compare, we also benchmark ourselves against other organisations in it, so we have other universities, and I think [University 1] is probably one of them actually. But also it’s an opportunity for us to politically say this is great, or well done to this team who have managed to get this number of views and things like that. So it’s almost an interesting political tool that enables us hopefully to collaborate more.

Because one of the challenges I suppose if you were another team in the university coming through our channel, is that if they’re not getting the credit for it and they’re not being evaluated or able to evaluate their impact on it, it’s difficult for them to justify that time. Whereas if we can say they’ve actually been fabulous, our Unit Support Team through our own channels have communicated with 200 students this month, and we’ve had this number of replies and they’ve been re-tweeted and all the other various things that we can say, actually we can then send that up to senior management which reinforces the fact that they’re able to collaborate with us.

SM Have you mentioned most of the tools then that you use that cover the main-?

IR The other thing about dividing things up into themes around, say, international and other things, is that what’s great about that is that it doesn’t have to be exclusive to social media. Our Media Team does a lot of analytics as well as they have a system called Vocus, which is a media monitoring tool. Increasingly there’s this shorter divide between the media and social media anyway. Actually what you can then do is, they can then tag up their coverage, the media coverage and things like that, so we can say this is the amount of ... Also, we can do that with Google Analytics as well, we can also say these web pages are web pages that we have decided reinforce our international presence and our international reputation if you like, and we will include these sub-set of web pages in our figures that support our international agenda.

So actually the great thing about running it through themes gives it meaning, so then by having a meaningful theme we can look at the Google Analytics, we can look at the Hootsuite provider, we can look at the stuff that GnAtterbox provides us, we can look at the stuff that media monitoring provides, all within a single place, which gives us a much more rounded sense of our achievements. We could even then say actually we have also produced 20,000 brochures that have been sent around the world, let’s include that as well because it still contributes. That’s what I like about having something that’s more meaningfully around a subject rather than looking at things in isolation.

SM Whether it’s through a medium or something like that.

IR Yeah.

SM Is there any resistance to the analytics’ side of things for any reason? Are there any sort of barriers that make it difficult for you to do that work effectively?

IR Time is probably one. I actually suggested as part of my Social News Strategy proposal, which is a bit naughty of me, that some other people in our team, if they want to, have their roles potentially re-designated.

SM Are you the only then at the moment?

IR At the moment I have one other person working on social media with me. But actually there are people within the wider team. We have actually a section in our Marketing Team called Marketing and Insights. It seems to be kind of anonymous now because we are talking about internal politics, but I think that actually there is a justifiable role that someone from Marketing Insights can stop looking solely at marketing insights but actually could take up more or less the proposal that I’m setting out, to actually be the person who is able to collate this data more holistically across the university.

SM So that’s separate from the Media Team and separate from the Digital Team as well.

IR Yeah. But I think they could work together with us, and our colleagues in the wider university too actually too, to do that. Sorry, just going back to Hootsuite quickly, we can have numerous seats in Hootsuite. It does cost us more money. At the moment we have seats for three members in our team, but we also have seats for our Student Support Team. We have seats for our UK Recruitment Team, we have seats for our Computer IT Support Team, and we have seats for our Accommodation Team as well. The thing about that is, again if we have them all working through Hootsuite tagging the things that they’re doing with the appropriate themes if you like, and the more different people who can work through our Hootsuite account, that helps us all the more to be able to provide a more holistic picture. The key, I think, for that is trying to get people to do the work.

SM So how do they feel about that? Do you know?

IR As long as we can incentivise it. Our power comes from the fact that our department is seated relatively highly in the university’s structure. We’re very close to the university’s Executive Board, we’re very close to the Vice-Chancellor, we’re close to a lot of Pro Vice-Chancellors. So there is a sense that our department has sort of an authority about it. Whether people choose to accept that or not is a different matter, but it is kind of true, we do have a sort of power. Therefore in terms of us being able to recognise other teams’ work, that can be quite a strong incentive. For us to go to the Executive Board and say that another department’s been doing a great job, is very beneficial to them.

SM That’s good, but what about saying another department should be doing more of this?

IR We don’t do that.

SM But you want the Marketing Insights’ people to get more involved in a more holistic approach, so that’s kind of like doing that.

IR Except they’re within our own team actually. It would just be something where we’d negotiate that internally. That’s not the sort of thing that we’d go to the Executive Board about.

SM Is it the case that some of you can see the valuable of investing time and effort in this kind of analytics and insights’ approach, and some people can’t, or is everyone onboard with the value?

IR It’s difficult to know. I couldn’t speak on everyone’s behalf because I don’t know the attitudes necessarily. But I could say that perhaps you might say that the emission of it right now could tell you something. As I say, people like good news, and the things is when you really embrace analytics and you really embrace evaluation, you embrace the bad news as well, and one would suspect that people would rather that be unnoticed and swept under the carpet, rather than arguably the consequences of the bad news, because I don’t know what the consequences are. I’m not saying that there would be consequences, but people might perceive there would be consequences to that, albeit probably just the fact that they’ve got to resolve the issues and get things sorted, which might mean more work for them. I don’t really think people would be worried about their job security for instance, but I suspect they might just think it’s a hassle.

SM The emission of it might also just be a question of timing in that this is the time when people are starting to contemplate these kind of activities and wondering who should do them and how they fit in already ongoing activity. The story you’re telling isn’t an unusual story, the new methods for knowing what people think. There are people in all sorts of organisation who are right now in the process of considering how much to do them, who should do them and so on. So it doesn’t necessarily tell the story of a reluctance, it could be telling the story just of its newness.

IR Although I have seen this, it’s not necessarily true, but I think that universities as a whole are probably a little bit behind, partly because what do you evaluate a university on? We do have a bottom line but that’s not really seen to be the thing we would want to evaluate ourselves on.

SM Which is what? What’s your bottom line?

IR We have a bottom line as in we have an income, but it’s not the thing we would-

SM Know how much money you’ve made.

IR Exactly. It’s not the thing we would actually want to assess ourselves on. Obviously there are people who need to worry about that kind of thing because they need to worry about making sure we can pay our staff year-on-year and do the things that we want to do. But as an overall objective, that’s obviously a kind of secondary objective that supports our main objective, I suspect. But with a company you don’t really have to worry about that quite so much.

SM So when you say you think universities are behind, do you think compared to commercial companies?

IR Yeah.

SM You think they are more ahead in terms of using analytics effectively?

IR I would suspect so, yeah. I would suspect as I say partly it’s because it’s been more obvious what they would analyse. For us that’s one of the challenges. There’s been analytics’ tools for a while, certainly media monitoring and things like that, and we have been doing it, but to what purpose? You do wonder whether that sort of thing can just be a gentle reassurance. The fact that there is a media monitoring email that goes out every single day to all the senior people in the university with our list of different media mentions that have gone on, if that email doesn’t come up one day, or increasingly so that email’s getting shorter and shorter and shorter, that might lead to some kind of form of action perhaps, or certainly questioning. But I think that some of this stuff nothing’s done with that, it doesn’t really lead to any strategy or any strategic change or anything, it’s just there.

SM There’s two things there. I wonder how common in universities is the story that you’re telling? You’re sort of suggesting that you’re quite reflective and almost philosophical in your department about what a complex thing it is to measure, are you ((measuring?)) success or effectiveness? I wonder if all university media or digital departments are like that, or not?

IR To be fair, I don’t think that many of my colleagues are like that, but I think because I’ve thought about it for a long time. I did a Masters on it recently.

SM What’s your background? You never said at the beginning.

IR Sorry. I don’t really know. I’ve worked at the university for quite a long time now, about seven years maybe. But the last two and a half/three years I’ve been doing an MBA part-time as well at [University 2] at the Management School here, which I’m sure you’ll probably visit at some point and probably be involved with in collaborations, because it’s part of our Social Sciences’ Faculty. But they’re very reflective and very much not like your typical Business School, they’re much more academic. Which has been great because it means that I’ve had a chance to actually think about my job in a sort of relatively deep way. I don’t know whether my colleagues would have that same philosophical approach. Some of them probably do.

SM What undergraduate Degree did you do?

IR Biology.

SM And then what work did you do-?

IR I had my own company for a while.

SM And then when you started working here, what-?

IR Relatively low level. I finished university and started my own property company, which was going great until the recession hit and then it went terribly wrong. Now I have an investment company effectively with just a load of property I couldn’t sell! I love the university. I studied here and I really loved the environment particularly. I like being part of a university, I think it’s a really great environment, loads of great people. So I started working on the prospectus. But at that time we hadn’t even got a social presence – we’re talking about 2008. We started our social presence in 2009, and that wasn’t actually started by me although I was supporting it, it was started by one of my colleagues. But over time I took it over, so I’ve had ownership of it if you like for nearly three and a half years now, something like that.

SM I don’t want you to talk ill of your colleagues or anything, but you’re suggesting that maybe you are being reflective because you’re doing this MBA which is kind of reflection on your job. Is it the case that other people are like measure, measure, measure and not thinking like you’re thinking?

IR People in general think about themselves – it’s a completely unfair assessment to make – and I think that people will want to measure when they feel there is a need to measure, and I think that that generally is where they want to know what they’ve done wrong. We’re very much a campaigns orientated kind of department, so that’s one thing to note, so we have things going on all the time which have a relatively concise timeframe, it might be two or three months, and at the end of that there is an expectation that we will be able to say look what we’ve done. So that is when people say that. But as I say, I don’t think it would be unfair for me to say that it’s rarely done with the sense of us really wanting that to be effectively more like a self-critical debrief, it doesn’t fulfil that role.

SM But it also sounds like what’s not happening, which is refreshing is, let’s just measure for the sake of it. There does seem to be a reason for it, even if it is generally to prove the value and the success of something.

IR We tend not to measure for the sake of it. You might question the social dashboard that we put together, as I say a monthly dashboard. I did actually have a few emails from my colleagues saying what’s that about? Truthfully, there were a few reasons for it, and actually we have genuinely found patterns and interesting things. From my point-of-view the MBA’s helped a lot, but I’ve become much more reflective as a reflective practitioner. My colleague who we recruited who now helps me, he’s only been here for less than a year and so it was a one man team until really quite recently, maybe less than six months ago, he luckily is also quite reflective, he’s quite young in his career and he’s very much about self-improvement, he’s quite ambitious. So there is a little cluster of us who are quite keen on knowing what’s going on and what’s not, and actually we have learned some things from our dashboard, but there is ultimately the ulterior motive of it, if anything recognition that we exist!

SM So the measurement can be used to prove the value of what you’re doing.

IR Yeah.

SM Something else that you brought up a couple of minutes’ ago was the question of what changes occur as a result of the measurement that’s taken place, what action happens? Because you imply that stuff gets sent out, like the media monitoring calls get sent out and no-one pays much attention to it, that was not the case. Would you say that the picture generally is that it’s purely for information purposes that these kind of analytics and measurements get shared? Or is it ever or sometimes the case that concrete action happens as a result of it?

IR No. It’s FYI. It’s very much a sense, I think, of making people feel that they’re in the loop first of all, that everything’s just ticking along. And for information purposes, because there will occasionally an article that might ((improve the media monitoring?)) which someone’s like, “Hang on, what’s that?”. So there will occasionally be a response to it. But it’s very micro, it’s extremely micro level. If for instance there’s been a press release gone out that hasn’t been quite right and someone’s taken exception to it, there might be something where they come back to us and say I don’t like that, I don’t think that’s right, or something.

They might even escalate that up the chain somewhat so we get it perhaps in the neck. Someone relatively senior might say something to us and say, “Oh by the way someone’s raised this as an issue and I think maybe you need to look into it”. There might therefore be micro adjustments. But it doesn’t happen regularly, that’s someone’s really done something that’s relatively controversial and we might look at that and think about it, and we might try and avoid it happening again, for instance. But it’s not done as an active thing, it’s very much a reactive thing.

SM And no-one’s saying give me the numbers, where are the measurements, give me the statistics, you’re providing them regularly.

IR We provide them regularly. The only people that will do that, and this is more media than social media at this point, is academics might say can I have my figures?

SM For mentions of me or my department.

IR Yes. Me actually. Because what they might do is they might put that forward as a promotions case. So they will then ask the Media Team, because they’ve got the system already in place and they can search through it, and they might say yes we’ve looked through it and you’ve generated 15 pieces of international coverage and 30 pieces of national coverage.

SM Or zero and zero!

IR Well, yes. I suspect they wouldn’t ask if they didn’t think that it would be pretty good.

SM That there was a number there!

IR Yeah. They can then take that information and use it as a case for them. This is probably going to bore you now, I think about this stuff way too much. The challenge again is that we don’t formally recognise. We have an entire department dedicated to reputation. That’s what we’re here for really and in some way of another it ties into reputation, albeit we don’t create reputation but we more like amplify it and we try and spread it. But academics aren’t really rewarded for that at all formally. There is no HR process I don’t think really that recognises the fact that someone has appeared on television or has appeared in the media 50 times. We’re recognised for it but they aren’t.

Actually in some ways you might say that hopefully people see more benefit in it than just their pay anyway, but in terms of being a performance measure it’s not, and you might argue it could even work against them because obviously being involved in the media can be a time consuming process and even eat into your personal time as well.

SM What about through the increasing emphasis on impact, that creates some more space for those kind of things.

IR Perhaps. I think it does to some extent. I think you’re right. I think the challenge is that there are some people out there who are very much on another level with the media work that they do, but it sometimes can’t make up for other things. For instance – rightly or wrongly – one of the things that a lot of the pay I think is linked to, is academic income, so if you’re bringing in large research grants to the university that is your number one case for promotion. Maybe that’s right, I don’t know. But for someone who’s working in a relatively low cost environment where most of the things that they can do don’t really cost much money to do, and they’ve worked in that way quite efficiently, you can almost be punished for that and as I say not consequently rewarded for their activities.

SM I just want to ask you one more set of questions about analytics and data mining kind of processes. The concerns that people express about them are ethical concerns about whether it’s invasion of privacy to look at what people are saying in The Student Room or on Facebook or on Twitter, and the kind of blurring of the fact that even though this information is public technically people don’t always feel like it is, they feel like it’s a private conversation. So there’s those issues around privacy. And I think related to that are issues around transparency, that the platforms themselves could be more transparent about the data mining that they do. Does the university or your team take any measures to communicate to people anywhere that we do these kind of analytics and data mining activities for good reason? Do you try to be transparent about that? Do you think about those kind of privacy issues?

IR No, is the short answer! The slightly longer answer is, I don’t think we ever do anything where I’d say that we’re infringing on data protection. Rather than worrying too much about privacy we do obviously put out messages particularly around security/privacy, around good practice. Not so much about ourselves, we don’t tend to warn people off of our own stuff. Our computing department is quite strong at keeping students aware of good practice in terms of general personal online security measures and things like that. More security than privacy I’d say, but they are kind of linked in some ways.

We do actively post, especially when there’s things going around, scams that happen, a lot of things like that, we are quite good at communicating that. We don’t really say to students, “Hey, we’re looking at you and you might want to be aware of that”. I suppose from my point-of-view we don’t collect names, we don’t do anything that I would say is compromising any kind of data protection issue, and we’re all reasonably well versed in that so we make sure that we don’t accidentally do it.

SM The issue is always whether the law is enough?

IR Oh no, that’s of course true and of course we don’t want to just be within that. But yeah, it’s an interesting idea. I suppose when we feel that we’re looking at numbers of responses and generally speaking mostly quantitative data.

SM But not always, because you did say you can get good qualitative stuff from what people actually say as well.

IR Yeah, that’s right. We wouldn’t be looking at names and saying this person has said this and this person has said that. That’s interesting though because when you’re talking about social CRM, customer relationship management stuff, and actually Hootsuite does allow this, you can start making notes about people. Actually Hootsuite’s been relatively slow at this, but there are a number of other things like Hootsuite, which we don’t have – and I think Hootsuite are implementing it – where you can see your entire relationship history with individual accounts, and that’s automatically stored.

SM And who is more vocal. You can target people even if you’re not collecting names you can say @[handle 1] doesn’t stop going on about [University 2].

IR Yeah. It’s an interesting idea actually because it’s not something I’ve properly thought of. My feeling is, because I don’t see us doing anything negative with that ... I think we could do. That’s the danger of course with all of this stuff around privacy, what could you do and is there the trust that you wouldn’t do it? So I think that’s always the concern, if there is this data available. Arguably we could look at all the students that slag us off and what could we do with that information?

SM ((Chop?)) them up in some way or other.

IR Yeah. That is extremely dodgy grounds, isn’t it.

SM Yeah.

IR As I say, my conscience remains reasonably clear because I know we don’t do that.

SM Generally people are dealing with numbers not in names, and generally are doing these kind of activities to improve the service that they offer, whatever that is. In that sense it feels harmless or in fact productive and helpful. Lots of studies with consumers or users of social media, they generally all point out that people would like more transparency about these things happening on the one hand, and also would like to consent, to opt in. Not even to opt out. Opting in is more extreme than opting out because people won’t bother to opt out, but if you have to make an active decision to opt in. It sounds like these things haven’t come up for you in your work because they’re quite new practices, as you’ve said you’re dealing anonymously with numbers and you’re doing it in order to do better at the service you offer.

IR Yeah.

SM One of the things, talking about impact, that I’m interested in doing when I get further with this research, is reporting back to people who are doing these kind of analytics and data mining, things about what consumers and users are saying, and that that might inform-

IR Yeah, that’s interesting. The challenge of making something like opt in, is that Facebook has no functionality to divide people out like that. So the problem that you would have is it’s kind of like saying, if you don’t want us to measure you, you have to stop following our page, you just have to disconnect yourself from the list. That’s of course the challenge that you would say.

SM That’s a thing for the platforms and it’s a kind of infrastructural thing that you haven’t got the power to do anything about. Folks like you in media departments, what you can do is include more information about what you’re doing so people are at least aware of it, and then they might opt out in certain ways like talking code on The Student Room or something like that, or not talk on The Student Room because they don’t want to be watched or measured.

IR Yeah. It’s interesting. Ultimately I suppose one would say that because the internet ... I suppose a point I would make is that it sort of relates to norms really, because you have a system where the internet is open. Well, it can be, and you know I think broadly speaking when you’re speaking openly on the internet. In a public space that is public information, albeit there are data protection issues with the ways that people store it and use it. But with public information I suppose certain organisations may sign up to something like a code of practice of what they do and what they don’t do, but I suppose that the information is ultimately there for anyone to use however they want to use it.

More of an issue is that users are more educated on the ways that their data is used, and that actually even though one organisation has been quite forthright with how it might use it and that they may have opted in or out of that, that’s irrelevant because a thousand other organisations could be using it in a different way. So I suppose that’s where I see that as a challenge. That’s where I see that education ... and I’m glad to see that schools are being better at doing that now, although of course it’s all very well with young people but there’s plenty of people who are older people who are relatively unaware about that.

SM I think that’s true what you say, that greater transparency is part of the education, isn't it.

IR Yeah.

SM Because education doesn’t all happen in a formal educational institution, so statements on all sorts of organisations’ websites-

IR One of the things we have considered which might help with this is, we have considered publishing our reports anyway so people can see if they want to what the information looks like it when it is published, so they know then, or could feel perhaps somewhat more reassured in the way that we are using it. Again, the thing with that though is that could then go, “Is that all the reports that you’re doing on this?”. That’s the other thing, you can say-

SM Is there more than this that you’re doing?

IR Is there more than this, yeah.

SM Is that what has made you decide not to publish them then, or are you still mulling it over?

IR No. Mainly the reason why we’ve decided not to publish them is because we use them to provide genuine insight to our people to try and create competitive advantage against other universities, quite frankly. As much as that might sound as not in the spirit of higher education!

SM It is a competition, yeah.

IR Yeah. We’re trying to use it to try and better ourselves, and by bettering ourselves we mean in comparison to our competitors. I suppose the reason we’ve been a little bit non-forthright about publishing it, is just because – not without sounding arrogant – we are one of the best universities for social media use. We’ve been told by a couple of our competitors. Actually Birmingham have said all they do is follow us and they just try and do whatever we do but try and do it better!

SM Where’s that measure coming from that you’re one of the best universities? Just from within the sector or the universities commenting like Birmingham, or-?

IR There have been third party studies done on it and we’re invariably quite high when it comes to our engagement model.

SM Studies by whom?

IR There was a study that was released at Heist. There’s a company called [Company 5] who did a study.

SM Of higher education?

IR Yeah. UK versus America actually, and they basically used it to show that the UK was terrible compared to America, except [University 2]. They said that we were the only university that they measured that outperformed their reputation if you like. There is an expectation that Oxford will have a high level of engagement just because they’re Oxford. We were the only university that effectively excelled where we were placed in rankings. There’s been other things. [Media org 4] held a conference, for instance, where they used us as their example of perfect practice for the use of [Social media platform 1]. They showed us in comparison with Yale and some other British universities and said this is what you should be striving for.

So we think that we’ve got it right. Well, close to right. As I say, we’ve had people come from Birmingham who try to fish out the sort of stuff and things. We’ve even seen them steal quite a few of our ideas as well, which is quite funny! So there is that sense of us not wanting to give away too many of our secrets.

SM That’s a sensible decision, yeah. I’ve come to the end of my questions so I’m going to turn this off, if that’s okay.

IR Yeah, it’s fine.