

Beyond the "Cool" Factor: The Challenge of Making Alternative Metrics Indispensable

Wednesday, October 9,

11:40 a.m.

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Good morning, I'm Rebecca Welzenbach, the research impact librarian at University of Michigan. I proposed this talk with a particular question in mind: when introducing users on our campus to Altmetric & Altmetric Explorer, how do we get beyond that initial "oh, cool!" response, to seeing altmetrics be adopted as a core component of our research evaluation workflows.

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At U-M, we have been using Altmetric for Publishers since 2014, and Altmetric for Institutions since 2018. We've committed one year at a time, and so far keep extending our arrangement year by year--but haven't yet made longer term plan. It feels like we've been "experimenting" for years. But as the lead for this tool on our campus, I'd like to see our university's engagement with Altmetric move to the next phase.

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This is Whistler's Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket, which is held in the collections of the Detroit Institute of Art. This painting, which illustrates a rocket flaming out, is also famous for the backlash it received from the art community: John Ruskin described it as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

I don't know if any of you ever feel this way....but I often feel that when I do instruction and outreach related to Altmetric, there's a lot of enthusiasm and excitement, but then we have no idea whether that outreach made any difference in the long run. I'd like to think that my Altmetric instruction sessions amount to more than flinging a pot of paint in the public's face....but I do sometimes wonder if I'm shooting off fireworks that are forgotten as soon as the show is over. For example,

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In 2018, we offered a number of Altmetric training sessions. When we first launched the tool, we welcomed staff from Altmetric to our campus for 2 days packed full of training sessions across our whole campus. Then, over the course of the year, we offered the following additional opportunities to more than 12 additional specific audiences, ranging from our College of Engineering, to our institute for social research, to our school of Environmental studies. In these schools we typically met with a range of research managers, administrators, and communications folks. We also offered sessions for targeted librarian audiences. Toward the end of the year when I followed up with these audiences to ask how they were using the tool, I got a lot of answers like these:

“Unfortunately we haven't been able to incorporate its use as I would have liked, but we recently brought in an intern who I hope can help us in building out our community and the use of these resources more!”

“I look forward to spending the remainder of the year further exploring the tool and implementing into our tool chest.”

“I can say there are plans to try to use the badges, perhaps in tandem with some other services, to highlight research pertaining to news content we might produce. Additionally I think we're (or I am) ruminating on how we might use the API itself to pull and display information.”

I should be clear, these weren't the only answers we got--a few others had something a bit more concrete to say. But “We'd like to but haven't gotten to it yet” was a common theme.

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Also toward the end of 2018, I worked with the team at Altmetric to get some detailed usage statistics. We discovered that 58% of the total use of the tool (77 of 76%) was coming from the top 10 most active users, including, well, me, and a handful of known colleagues. And all in all, of the known users--that is, those who had logged in--70% logged in fewer than five times. Now, 10 power users could actually be enough--if they're the right users. Users in high places, putting the data to vital use. Most, though, were....other librarians. aRe WE the power users? I'd have to think about that.

We decided to renew for another year in 2019, with the knowledge that it might take time to gain traction, and because also for a few reasons in the first year our implementation of Altmetric Explorer wasn't quite as robust as we'd like it to have been, and this hampered a bit what we were able to do. I came into the renewal year very focused on the question that forms the title of this talk: how do we get folks beyond thinking this is cool, to really using it?

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Meanwhile, in spring 2019, Altmetric offered a new feature that really changed how I was able to engage with this question. Previously, I was requesting usage reports on a sort of ad hoc basis. But in this spring, an easily accessible and readable report became available (by way of Google Data Studio, a tool that I've found super helpful for usage reporting in my own work, by the way).

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As I worked on this talk, I dug into the top visited pages. I exported all of the top visited pages to a spreadsheet. First, I did this for a three month period, from July 1 to September 30. Then, I realized that might not be granular enough. I went back and limited the time frame to a week at a time, and then with a better sense of the whole, backed out again and worked from the whole three month window. And I discovered: although the the data studio report does not identify individual users, but looking at the most frequently visited pages, we can make some inferences about how the tool is being used--and particularly when usage has become part of a regular workflow. So rather than openly wonder how to get people to adopt the tool....I actually can observe places where it's been adopted, and see what's going on. I feel like I've really just begun to scratch the surface, and I need to spend more time with this data than I've yet been able to spend--but let's take a quick look.

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Thus far, I've mostly been looking at the pages that had been visited many times over this 3 month period. We're going to work sort of from the outside toward the middle here. First of all, 641 distinct pages had been viewed only once--so there's probably not recurring activity happening here, although if I broadened out the time scale even more, perhaps we'd see it: the time frame I chose might obscure a quarterly check, for example.

Now up to the top: 4 pages have been visited more than 100 times, and these were the ones you might expect: The “All highlights” and “All outputs” views--in others words, general browsing behavior. These are the pages you land on when you enter the site. The saved searches page--huzzah!--this suggests an ongoing and regular engagement--folks are going back to view searches they previously saved. And, we had one particular outlier, an extremely active faculty member who seems to be monitoring her alerts multiple times every day. I reached out to her, and this behavior seems to be real--she uses the tool to closely track media engagement with her work, unfortunately because her research is high profile and on a fairly sensitive topic, and she sometimes received negative attention and even threats. Altmetric Explorer helps her manage that and it's part of her daily life.

25 pages were viewed between 21 and 99 times. These tended to be individual authors, in particular one extremely engaged journal, and specific publishers, usually ones already known to us (such as Michigan Publishing).

268 distinct pages were viewed between 3 and 20 times--this range struck me as a particularly interesting one to dig into deeper, because it suggests some regularity--perhaps monthly or weekly engagement.

I made one observation that struck me: as we can see there were hundreds of pages viewed only once. And there were many pages viewed exactly three times--116 to be exact. There were zero pages that were viewed twice. Now, maybe that's just a coincidence? But since I was looking at a three month period, it stood out to me: people looked at a page once, or they looked

at least monthly. This is a bit of a leap--but I'd be interested in trying to follow this trend going forward and see what happens.

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So, a few more takeaways from this data so far:

We still see usage dominated by our known power users: one particular journal, one publisher, and one particular institute in our medical school. I will say that this last was one of the ones that was eager to engage, but hadn't yet done much, last year. So we're seeing that in time more adoption is happening.

The most consistent regular activity has to do with monitoring individuals or custom-build groups of people, departments or research outputs. In other words, following engagement with known work that's already been done.

I noticed also that people might be looking for the same results, but approaching it in a difference way. For example, maybe once they browse by department, once they search for a verified department, etc. This can result in different URL structures, making it look like a different page, when the results are the same. A deeper analysis *might* reconcile these? Or--might leave them in order to follow how people are navigating the tool. I'd need to think about that.

We do see keyword searches and field of research exploration, but these are much more likely to be one-offs. A couple of keyword searches were frequently repeated but most were not. So

that kind of topical exploration or benchmarking is not yet happening on a widely implemented scale.

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The big takeaways for me were beginning to identify some of the signs of a regular workflow:

Signals of integration into regular workflows(?):

- Consistent behavior over time: the most popular pages viewed are visited steadily over many weeks--not just a few big spikes. This is what I was looking for when I first broke down our data from a 3 month time frame to a week at a time--I wanted to check for a big spike of data--perhaps at a demo with a large audience--as opposed to sustained behavior over time. But it was really the latter that I saw most of!
- The “saved searches” page one of the most frequently visited --people are setting up searches and returning to them
- Do return visits to an Altmetric details page suggest an email alert on?
- Six & three were common frequencies--signal of a monthly or bi-weekly check?

There are also aspects of Altmetric engagement--perhaps the ones that would signal the most regular use of all--that we can't glean from these data usage reports. Things I'd like to know in order to fill out the picture even more include:

- Are people visiting shareable report links?
- Are people incorporating the API into web pages?
- What about embeddable badges--what role do they play?

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So, I proposed this talk really with the intention of sharing some of my frustrations about--I thought!--challenges with encouraging adoption of the tool. But as I dug into the data that has become available just in the last few months, I learned that in fact there was a lot of usage going on that we weren't even fully aware of!

There are some known areas that I'd like to explore further. I'd also like to better understand what we mean when we say a tool is or isn't heavily used--I want to compare usage of Altmetric Explorer with usage of other semi-comparable tools like Journal Citation Reports, or InCites. If there are other tools that you think of as analogous that I might compare against, that would be really valuable!

I'd love to hear feedback from you about other ways you might look for patterns of usage that suggest incorporation into a workflow, and regular usage.

This image is from Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry mural at the Detroit Institute of Art.

I guess my takeaway for today is--where I felt like I was shooting fireworks into the void and watching them fade fast--in fact, there was a lot of work already going on--we just need to attend to it, look for the patterns, and make those visible.