

# Leveraging Social Media and Online Tools to Increase Research Report Distribution

*Tips and Lessons Learned from Mineta Transportation Institute*

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**H**ow many research reports did your organization publish in the past year? Did the reports contain usable information that would benefit a transportation provider, planner, policy maker, vehicle designer, or other critical group? Did the reports reach the intended users or sit on the website unused? If they reached the users, how large a percentage did they reach?

These are important questions. No matter how well done, research has no intrinsic value if it does not reach the people who could make practical use of it. In technology terms, it becomes “shelfware.”

But suppose the reports could reach a much greater audience, with thousands of copies read and applied not only in the local region, but also across the globe. Benefits would compound exponentially whenever media stories or professional journals quote data from the reports, or when the data are used for practical applications.

The Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI), a University Transportation Center (UTC) under the U.S.

Department of Transportation, has increased the downloads of its website documents approximately tenfold over the course of four years. Evidence indicates that the reports also have been leveraged for planning and legislation in the United States and abroad. The metrics corroborating the increased impact are continuing to rise.

## **MTI's Challenges**

### ***Upgrading the Website***

The first challenge for MTI was a website that was difficult to use, nonintuitive, and built on outdated code that was no longer functional. With a limited budget, the Institute purchased a template website for less than \$100 and adapted it. This provided a temporary fix but allowed MTI to post research reports and other information in a way that was easy to download and much more intuitive to find and use.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/>.

Improvements to the Mineta Transportation Institute's (MTI's) website and stronger social media outreach efforts have led to a tenfold increase in downloads of its website documents.

## Tracking Traffic

The Institute had tracked website traffic through WebTrends and kept this method of following monthly metrics in place.<sup>2</sup> The MTI communications team was most interested in metrics for visits, document downloads, and page hits, although the reports included much more data. Graphing the monthly metrics made trends readily apparent.

Discouragement set in, however, when the site's numbers suddenly dropped 15 percent. MTI is affiliated with San Jose State University, and the drop in website activity turned out to be typical during academic breaks. A comparison of year-over-year numbers revealed an uptick for comparable months.

## Distributing News Releases

MTI realized that document downloads also depend on high-quality, informative news releases with a wide geographic reach. The Institute had been sending releases on an irregular schedule, primarily by mail or fax to local print and broadcast media. The research documents, however, were valuable nationwide and required targeted audiences—not local music stations or general interest newspapers.

The Institute hired PR Newswire to distribute news releases throughout the United States, specifically to public interest markets.<sup>3</sup> The focus was on audiences interested in the reports. Each release included a direct link to the research report posted on the MTI website. Website traffic metrics rose.

## Connecting by Social Media

Soon after, MTI realized that social media were trending much faster than traditional media were and decided to investigate those outlets as a way to increase traffic and downloads. A blog was launched and aggressively promoted but did not attract an audience. After six months, a move was made to another venue.

An MTI Facebook page offered a built-in audience.<sup>4</sup> After establishing the page, MTI staff encouraged their Facebook friends to follow it. These contacts comprised the initial audience, which grew from there.

An MTI Twitter presence was the next logical step—links to the research reports could be distributed immediately to a growing list of followers.<sup>5</sup> Followers also could forward MTI posts to their own followers—which they did, increasing the potential audience by many thousands.

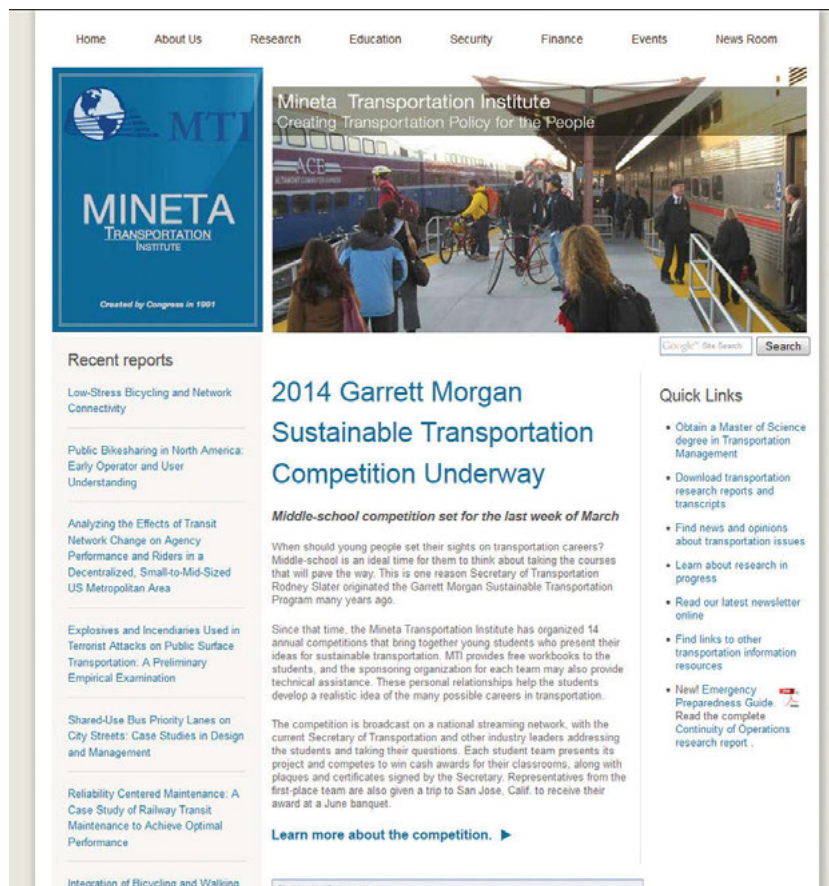
MTI maintains two pages on LinkedIn—one for

<sup>2</sup> <http://webtrends.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.prnewswire.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MinetaTransportation>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/MinetaTrans>.



MTI followers<sup>6</sup> and another for students and alumni of the graduate education program.<sup>7</sup> Joining other LinkedIn group pages that have similar audiences allows the posting of news on those sites, as well.

## Assessing the Metrics

User statistics decisively prove the Institute's success in social media marketing. For fiscal year 2006, the Institute recorded approximately 2,088,000 annual visits and 60,000 annual document downloads. By the end of calendar year 2013, annual visits had jumped to 3,644,640, and annual document downloads reached a record 1,121,892.

In some months, downloads exceeded 10,000 and occasionally 20,000 for individual research reports. This allowed MTI to determine which topics were of greatest interest and, therefore, the better choices for funding.

These initiatives increased the workload, but the results have demonstrated the value of concentrating on online promotions, especially with social media. Almost any research organization can do the same.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=1859350&trk=anet\\_ug\\_hm](http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=1859350&trk=anet_ug_hm).

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.linkedin.com/groups/MTI-MSTM-Alumni-Association-3777547?trk=myg\\_ugrp\\_ovr](http://www.linkedin.com/groups/MTI-MSTM-Alumni-Association-3777547?trk=myg_ugrp_ovr).

When MTI targeted press releases about its research to public interest markets nationwide, its website traffic increased.



PHOTO: RON WISSEN, FLICKR

University students glean most of their information from social media and mobile device applications, creating a new and rapidly changing market for research distribution.

### Changing Media

In the past, publicizing a research report meant distributing a news release to the press. For the most part, the recipients were limited to newspapers and magazines or journals, and the news releases went out in hard copy by fax or postal mail. Today, the media comprise every communications venue, including broadcast and digital media and no longer are referred to as the press, which implies only print outlets.

Digital media are growing rapidly, increasing in influence through their appeal to users who want

news in quick summaries with links to more information in digital forms that can be saved and searched and that are accessible through a variety of communication devices.

The variety of media available today may be daunting—not only websites, but also social media such as blogs, Twitter, Google Plus, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Short Message Service or SMS, Rich Site Summary or RSS—also called Really Simple Syndication—and much more. This variety, however, also offers many distinct advantages over traditional media.

### Digital Media Advantages

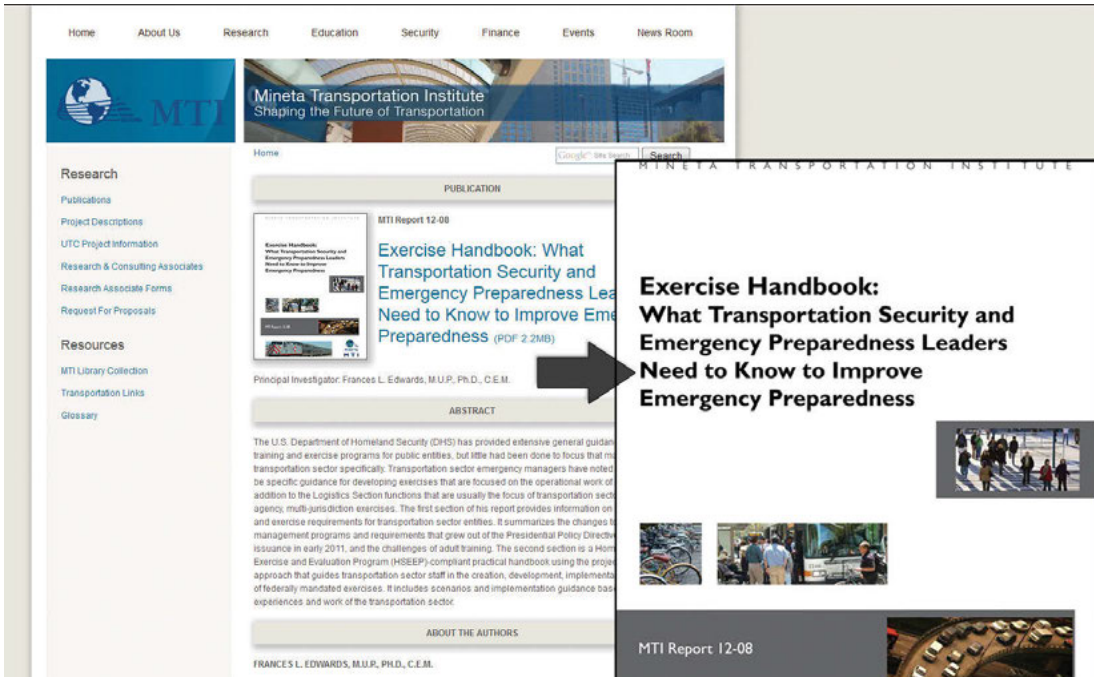
A primary advantage is that communicators no longer need to go through the reporters and editors who once functioned as gatekeepers, deciding which news to include in their publications. In fairness, these publications required large staffs to write, prepare, produce, and distribute each issue; covering these costs limited the number of stories that could be published.

In contrast, digital media reduce or eliminate many of these costs, allowing publication of an almost unlimited amount of content. In addition, digital media often are accessible directly, without gatekeepers. As a result, communicators can deliver stories directly to the desired audiences, avoiding filters and misinterpretations. An organization can refine the intended audiences to connect with the desired targets.



PHOTO: RASDOR PHOTOGRAPHY

The TRB Standing Committee Communications Coordinator Council assists committee representatives in developing communications priorities.



Research reports posted in PDF format on an organization website are most accessible to a wide range of site visitors.

Digital media are as simple or as complex as staff talents allow and can involve a few hours a week or a full-time assignment. At MTI, the communications position includes approximately two hours a day for managing digital outreach and requires the assistance of a part-time webmaster.

Digital media are immediate. There is no waiting for tomorrow's newspaper or next month's newsletter. Information can be posted as it becomes available.

Audiences also can respond instantly, so that metrics and reactions are immediately apparent. Digital media can be adjusted or changed at any time; traditional print media are permanent at publication.

The down side is that the sheer breadth of social media can be confusing and discouraging. Which outlet is right for your organization? How can you determine where the targeted users are? What if your choice is wrong? Most transportation organizations do not have a budget for professional market analysts, but this does not mean that communication policies must be formulated in the dark.

## Getting Started

First, an organization should assign at least one person as communicator. The communicator should have some knowledge of social media—of Facebook and Twitter at the minimum. The staffer should have sufficient time to keep the communications moving out, because lapses reduce traffic on social media pages. Posting messages all day, however, is not necessary; too much information can be annoying for recipients.

If the organization does not have a webmaster, it should hire one. Although a student can fill that role, a webmaster should have direct training in building and managing websites. Hiring a trained and experienced webmaster can make a difference and is preferable, for example, to hiring a student of software engineering.

The webmaster should post research reports on the organization's website, including previously issued reports not already posted. Ideally, the reports will be in portable document format (PDF) and optimized to reduce download time. Site visitors may not be willing to wait two minutes for a large document transfer and may not have the necessary storage space, especially on a handheld device. Optimizing eliminates the problems of size and speed without sacrificing document quality. The MTI website provides an example of posted research reports.<sup>8</sup>

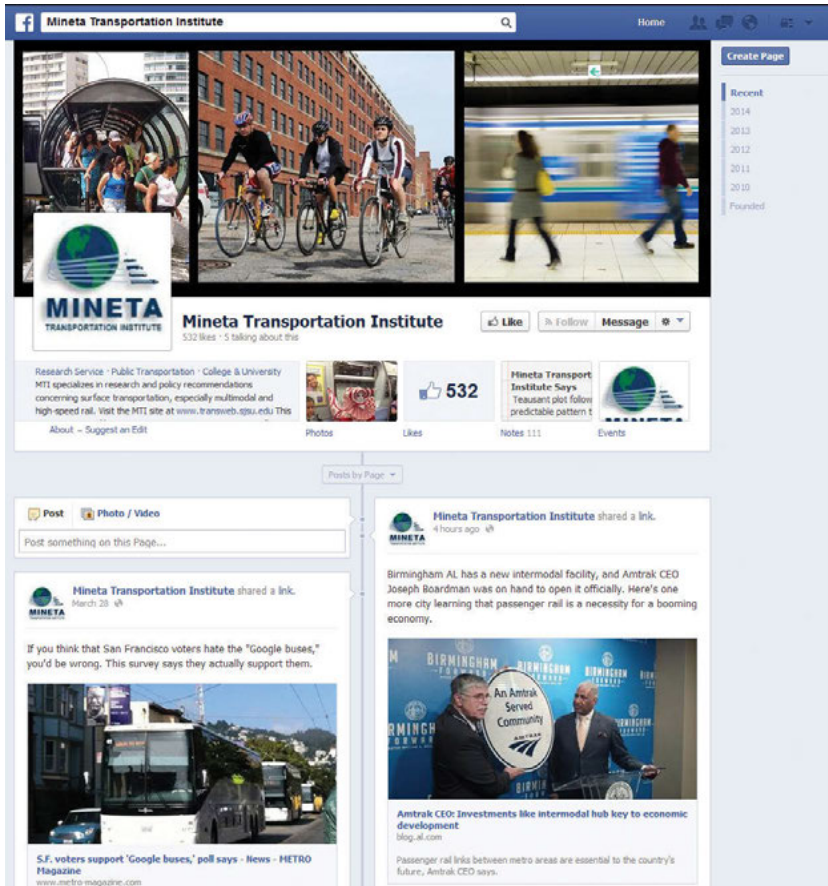
Once posted, the reports are ready for promotion—do not send out news releases before the documents are posted to the site. Website visitors will arrive immediately—do not lead them to an empty page.

## Distributing News Releases

The news release is a key tool for generating traffic to the website. Your organization can subscribe to PR Newswire, BusinessWire,<sup>9</sup> or another news distribution service that will broadcast the release to the chosen markets. Most services charge a flat rate for

<sup>8</sup> <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/MTIportal/research/Publications.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.businesswire.com/portal/site/home/>.



MTI posts news releases on Facebook as well as general transportation news and related items of interest from other organizations.

the first 400 words and then for each additional block of 100 words. This provides good motivation to be concise.

Avoid paying what is known as the rack rate—the full retail price—for distributing news releases. Good negotiation can produce a favorable contract, including special deals, such as for guaranteeing a minimum number of releases during the year.

An organization that does not have a distribution service can build its own e-mail lists. The task is difficult, but not impossible. Although MTI uses a distribution service, it also maintains its own list of legislators, students, researchers, and others who would be interested in the new reports.

### Writing News Releases

Following are some tips for writing news releases:

- ◆ Write a headline of no more than 23 words. Search engines read only the first several words and move on—they do not read the entire release. The 23 words should include the keywords most likely to be entered in an online search. If the report is about factors contributing to increased safety at transit centers, for example, the keywords may include “transit,” “safety,” and “research,” among other rele-

vant terms. Anticipate which terms will connect with your report when someone does an online search, and place those terms in the news release headline, along with your organization’s name.

- ◆ Include your organization’s city and the release date. The first paragraph should summarize the most important information. If the rest of the story is cut, at least the critical elements will remain. Critical elements include the organization’s name, the report title, the author’s name, and a summary of the topic and results. Hyperlink the document’s title, allowing the reader to access the report directly. Live links give a release additional importance in the search results, but more than three links can reduce the search value.

- ◆ Follow with two to three paragraphs providing additional details and author quotes.

- ◆ Provide the organizational boilerplate statements at the end. This is the standard one-paragraph description of the organization, which should include a link to the website home page, along with links to the organization’s social media sites.

- ◆ Include the name and phone number of a contact who can answer media questions, even after office hours. Place this at the top or the bottom of the release.

### Leveraging Social Media

Discovering the appropriate social media often requires trial and error. Once a particular medium proves valuable, stick with it and continue to refine the content. Similarly, if another medium does not attract an audience within a few months, move on to the next outlet.

#### Facebook

Facebook is an easy way to reach friends, supporters, and staff at other transportation organizations by asking them to “like” the page.<sup>10</sup> Professional courtesy requires returning the favor. The Facebook page setup should employ the business format instead of the group or individual formats. The business templates provide for a mission statement, address, website, product descriptions, and more. For an example, click the “About” link on MTI’s Facebook page.

MTI posts copies of its news releases via the Facebook “Notes” feature, as well as posting announcements, general transit news, and information from other industry-related sites, including other Facebook pages. Users consider a page more valuable if it includes a variety of information, not only news about the page owner. If possible, post at least once a day, and encourage comments.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/>

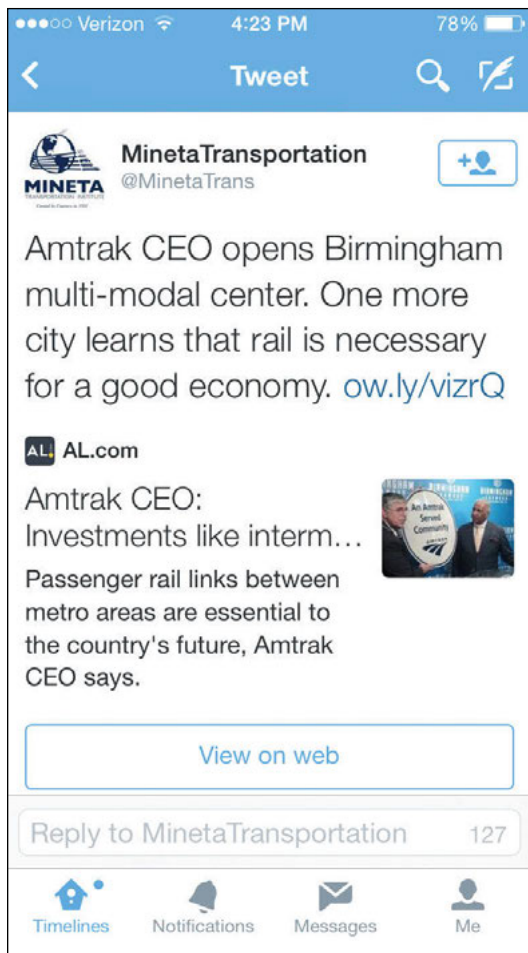
## Twitter

Twitter challenges the ability to be concise.<sup>11</sup> Messages cannot exceed 140 characters and can be compared to a “headline crawl” at the bottom of a TV screen. Twitter’s value is in disseminating a quick news bite, along with a link to more information. Readers can scan the list of incoming news and select the most interesting.

When signing up for Twitter, create a distinctive user name. MTI chose @MinetaTrans. The name always begins with the @ symbol and can be no longer than 15 characters. “Mineta” gives a unique identifier as the name of retired Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, who founded the Institute. Few other organizations will have “Mineta” in their user names. A unique name has an advantage for search engine results; anyone searching for “Mineta,” for example, will find a short list.

MTI Twitter posts include a direct link to the report on the Institute’s website. The typical message is written like a headline—for example, “New

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/>.



A unique Twitter user name, like @MinetaTrans, increases the chance that an organization’s feed will appear in search results.

MTI research shows how to reduce traffic accidents.” Then the link is inserted. When “send” is clicked, the message is distributed, or “tweeted,” to all MTI followers. A follower can repost or “retweet” the message to another set of followers, which can start a viral distribution of the MTI announcement.

Attracting followers who themselves have a large following is beneficial. Recently someone retweeted one of MTI’s messages to 101,000 followers. That tweet alone significantly extended the Institute’s audience reach.

Twitter messages can scroll away quickly, as new tweets arrive. Therefore repeating each message two or three times is a good practice.

Many news reporters and editors follow Twitter posts to pick up promising leads. Make friends with media contacts on Twitter, and send them good news stories. Media people also appreciate your distribution of their stories, if relevant to your organization’s Twitter followers.

## LinkedIn

LinkedIn has shown promise as a site to reach and develop business contacts.<sup>12</sup> The site can help locate other researchers, industry people, legislators, and others who may have an interest in your organization’s research projects. MTI maintains two group pages on LinkedIn and posts links to research reports, as well as other news items. LinkedIn is free.

## YouTube

MTI has leveraged YouTube<sup>13</sup> for posting videos of research presentations, workshops, panel discussions, and other events. Video is uploaded and stored on the YouTube server, and a link should be posted to your organization’s website, news releases, or other social media. Storing video on the YouTube server is advantageous, because the large files can consume space on your own organization’s server.

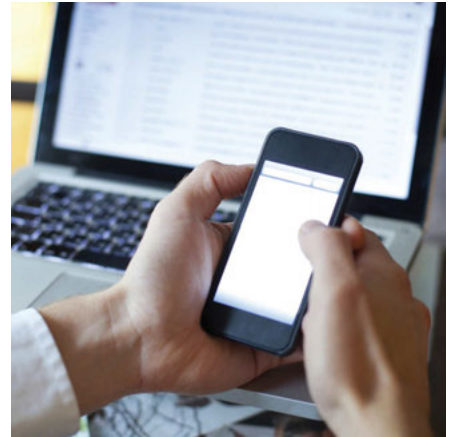
When posting a video, include a title, the names of the authors or participants, and a link to the research report, if applicable. This makes the posting visible to search engines and helps increase downloads for reports or other documents. YouTube is free.

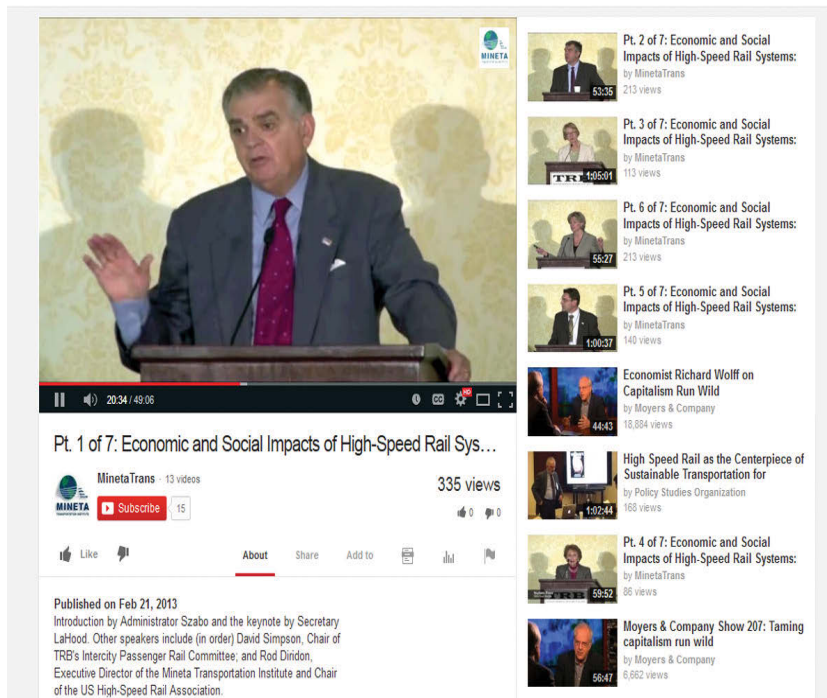
## Useful Apps and Sites

A small staff can face difficulties managing the many options of social media. Some companies have created innovative applications to simplify the task.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/>.





MTI recorded an address by former U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood at the 2013 TRB Annual Meeting and posted it on its YouTube channel for wider distribution.

These apps can be found with a quick online search. Some sites offer instruction in social media. Descriptions of a few of the many available resources follow.

### **Buffer**

Buffer is an application that facilitates posting to multiple social media sites.<sup>14</sup> Several items can be placed in the Buffer queue for posting at various times throughout the day. This distributes the information at regular intervals instead of releasing all of the items at the same time. Other supporting apps are available.<sup>15</sup> There is no charge.

<sup>14</sup> <https://bufferapp.com/guides>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://bufferapp.com/extras>.

### **TweetDeck and HootSuite**

Twitter users benefit from TweetDeck<sup>16</sup> and HootSuite,<sup>17</sup> which filter the news, send notifications of relevant posts, schedule multiple tweets, organize incoming tweets, and allow users to add comments to the messages they retweet. The apps are free.

### **TweetReach**

TweetReach reports how many times a tweet was followed or retweeted, along with a list of the top ten sources for tweets or retweets. The basic TweetReach is free, but the metrics apply only to the past week.<sup>18</sup> Detailed reports are available for a fee with TweetReach Pro.<sup>19</sup>

### **Interactive Insights Group**

The Interactive Insights Group does not provide management tools for social media but aggregates instructions on how to use social media.<sup>20</sup> The site offers tutorials on topics from blogging and microblogging to social networking and video sharing. The information is written in plain English and is free of charge.

### **Social Media Examiner**

Social Media Examiner is a resource for tips on how to make the most of social media. If a topic is confusing, the site will make it simple to understand.<sup>21</sup> Social Media Examiner publishes new articles daily and can deliver the articles via e-mail, all at no charge.

<sup>16</sup> <https://about.twitter.com/products/tweetdeck>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://hootsuite.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://tweetreach.com/>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://tweetreach.com/plans>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://blog.interactiveinsightsgroup.com/#SocialNetworking>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/>.

## **Communication Guidelines to Address Social Media Tools—and More**

TRB's National Cooperative Highway Research program (NCHRP) is launching a project to develop communications guidelines for state departments of transportation (DOTs).<sup>a</sup> The guidelines will help state DOTs communicate about challenges, opportunities, and day-to-day operations more effectively and efficiently and will address the use of new tools, such as social media and electronic communications, that have radically enhanced direct communication with the customer base.

In addition to guidelines, the project is expected to produce such resources as templates, case studies, examples, graphics, and other tools to illustrate the strategies and practices that transportation agencies can use successfully.

For more information, contact Christopher Hedges, 202-334-1472; [chedges@nas.edu](mailto:chedges@nas.edu).

<sup>a</sup> NCHRP Project 20-99; <http://apps.trb.org/cmsfeed/TRBNetProjectDisplay.asp?ProjectID=3667>.