

Module 1 video 2: Investigating people and social media accounts - Beyond Breaking News

[00:00:00] Hi, welcome to the second lesson in Investigating people and social media accounts. I'm Brandy Zadrozny an investigative and features reporter for NBC News.

[00:00:09] In this video, I'm going to focus on social media stories that go beyond backgrounding and breaking news. One of my favorite kinds of social media sleuthing stories are those that unmask secret, fake and anonymous social media accounts, which can have outsized impacts on local government, business, politics, misinformation and more. Stories in this genre include Ashley Feinberg's brilliant reveal of the secret accounts of James Comey and Mitt Romney. Her secret was simply a matter of finding smaller accounts of family members that Comey and Romney would naturally want to follow and then scrolling through those accounts followers until she found one that seemed inauthentic. More often what you'll encounter is an anonymous account that you want to get to the bottom of.

[00:00:52] In 2019, when a video of a high school student seeming to taunt a Native American protester went viral, members of Congress wanted to know who was behind the anonymous account responsible for the viral tweet, and news organizations suggested foreign influence. Her account was deleted, but captures from the Wayback Machine showed links to an online store where teachers buy and sell lesson plans and resources. I contacted her and found she wasn't a bot or a foreign actor, she was just a liberal teacher from California who loved to tweet.

[00:01:21] So in trying to find out who's behind an account, I like to start from the beginning. You can tell a lot about an account from its earliest posts, followers and follows. TweetBeaver is a good tool for investigating the connections between accounts and downloading things like timelines and favorite's for smaller accounts. For the more technically savvy I use Twint. I'll include links to these tools, but for today's purposes we're gonna stick to the advanced search function.

[00:01:48] Let's take a look at the Columbia Bugle. A popular anonymous far right Twitter account that boasts of presidential re tweets. When I'm looking at a mystery account. I like to start at the beginning of someone's social media history and work forward in time. You can get there by hand with the assist of an auto scroller extension. Or you can use Twitter's advanced search to limit the time frame to the first few months of an account's existence.

[00:02:13] So this account was started in July 2015, but a search for the early tweets shows nothing. This either means that no one tweeted from this account for at least the first six months, or it suggests the more likely scenario that someone's been deleting tweets. So let's open our date range up a bit.

[00:02:31] Lucky searching brings us to a dog pick. It's a great identifier for an anonymous account. And I'm going to screenshot that for later.

[00:02:39] Now, we've got some early videos. Since many of Columbia Bugles tweets include videos from San Diego, Trump rallies. We can start to guess that this person behind the account might live near San Diego.

[00:02:51] Early followers and follows can also provide clues to an accounts, real location and relationships. When you first open an account, an algorithm powers up influenced by a load of factors, including the contacts list in your phone and your location. A platform will suggest accounts to follow.

[00:03:07] So let's look at Max Delarge, an account claiming to be the editor of the Columbia Bugle. Follows are listed in reverse chronological order. Here the earliest follows are San Diego specific news sources and San Diego specific sports accounts, more evidence to suggest that this account owner lives or lived in San Diego. You can do the same relationship hunting on other platforms.

[00:03:30] One more trick, like in the case of the Columbia Bugle, sometimes a user will delete earlier tweets. When you see a discrepancy between the date when an account was created and the first tweet. You can tweak your search. So instead of tweets from the account, I'll look for any tweets mentioning the Columbia Bugle. I'll then read all of these one sided conversations to get more clues.

[00:03:52] Another way you can look at tweet's past is every journalist best friend. The Internet archives, Wayback Machine. Looking at an accounts, deleted tweets and how the account and bio have been edited and evolved is always helpful.

[00:04:05] Another, often easier but just as revealing story can be found from looking through old social media posts to uncover the opinions of local politicians or people in power before they became so buttoned up. We did this in 2019. Looking at President Trump's ambassador nominations and found the new ambassador to Slovenia had shared conspiracy theories, including ones calling Bill and Hillary Clinton serial murderers.

[00:04:30] This year, Georgia's next likely congressional representative, Marjorie Taylor Green's old Facebook posts revealed Greene's history of anti-Muslim sentiments and beliefs and conspiracy theories. Several now deleted posts pointed me to an unreported conspiracy Web site where Greene had blogged.

[00:04:46] Facebook doesn't make it easy to scroll back to old posts. So your best bet is to manually scroll through and read every post if he can. If you know what you're searching for, Facebook has a good native search function, too. As an example, we can go to Donald Trump's Facebook page and see what his views were on vaccines before he became president.

[00:05:05] So a few tips. Start from the beginning. Use an accounts earliest follows, followers, and conversations as clues to their real world identifiers like location and relationships. Search mentions of an account, not just posts, to unearth deleted conversations and relationships. Use the Wayback Machine to see previous Twitter bios and deleted tweets. Twitter and Facebook have useful native advance search functions that allow searches by keywords, contacts and dates. Use them.

[00:05:36] OK, and some homework. Dox Yourself.

[00:05:39] One of the best ways to practice following an online trail is to make yourself the target. Open a browser you don't normally use and pretend you've just been given your own name. Try to track your online trail.

[00:05:49] That's all for me for now. I've shown you some of my processes investigating social media accounts, but know that because of privacy concerns or the whims of platform executives, many of the tools that work today might not work tomorrow. Every reporter has their own favorite process. But I've found that tools can only take you so far. It's obsession and virtual shoe leather that yield the best results. So if you want to get the story, be prepared to read thousands of tweets. Click until the end of the Google results and dove down a social media rabbit hole.