



Photo courtesy of Clemson University, May 2012

Crestron DigitalMedia™ powers audio and video systems at Clemson University's Social Media Listening Center

It's the latest trend in high-tech customer interaction. Social media listening systems allow corporate or public entities to search for mentions of specific products or concepts in billions of entries on Facebook®, Twitter®, YouTube®, blogs, news sites and photo sharing sites, then listen, track and respond to them.

Although many Fortune 500 companies participate in social media listening, just four organizations have taken these tools to their ultimate level, building social media command centers

to track and respond to online feeds. Among them is Clemson University in South Carolina, which opened its command center recently. This center may be the most powerful of any social media listening post, combining six PCs tied to Radian6® servers, with a digital switching system from Crestron able to reconfigure the setup in seconds.

“The other social media listening centers have PCs used by single operators, each connected to a single display,” explains Chuck Heck, CTS, of Clemson's internal AV Systems Design and Engineering group. “We use our room for multiple teaching and research purposes, and instructors need to be able to reconfigure it quickly.”

Social media listening

According to Jason Thatcher, the faculty lead for the Clemson Listening Center, the room has been used so far for a variety of exercises and individual and group research projects, ranging from public perceptions of the Clemson athletics programs to an effort to predict changes in stock prices. “We’re still learning what the technology can do,” he explains.

The power of the system is immense. Based on Radian6 software tied to the company’s servers, it tracks and indexes material from over 200 million social media feeds and allows researchers to do Boolean key phrase searches on all of them. “It’s a huge dynamic database, and it keeps growing,” Thatcher explains. “We can search virtually anything that’s ever been posted on or fed through a public site.”

Designing the Listening Center

Because the Clemson Listening Center is used for many different types of research and research-based classes, Heck says it took him a while to understand what kind of audio/video system would best help its users. “Part of what we were talking about was a Network Operations Center (NOC) and part of it was a classroom. Once I realized that I needed to combine those two concepts, everything fell into place.”

Four of the Radian6®-connected computers are used most often to show dynamic visualizations of the data: one helps

researchers visualize sentiment expressed about the terms in question, one shows summary metrics, one shows influencers, that is, people who generate large numbers of comments and have large followings, and one shows the search terms’ geographic reach. The two others normally make up an “engagement console” and can be used to contact individual people by commenting on their feeds.

In the end, Heck designed a system with six 47" LED monitors hanging on one wall in an area primarily used for research, and two projectors for seminar-style classes, one at each end of a conference table with seating for up to 18. He used a Crestron control system to make reconfiguring the room easy and a Crestron DigitalMedia™ 8X8 switcher to route computer signals to the monitors and projectors.

With this configuration, it’s possible for class participants to see all eight screens at once, although it’s easier to read whatever an instructor switches to the two big screens. The instructor also has an input for his or her own laptop.

“The Crestron touch screen lets us move very quickly across different visualizations,” Thatcher says. “I may set up the room with captures of four interesting screens for students to view as they come in, leave two feeds live, and then start looking at various feeds on the projector.”



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Heck says he chose a 12" Crestron touch screen for the room's controls, large enough to include all of the main functions on a single screen. All the instructor has to do is touch one button for a computer source, then another for the display or projector he wants it to appear on. In this way he can put any source on any or all screens in seconds.

"Crestron is our campus standard so it was a very easy decision to use their products," Heck says. The DigitalMedia switcher, in particular, was an obvious choice, as it allows Clemson to put all of the center's audio and video signals on a dedicated IP network. "It was a quick and easy installation. Our Network Services guys came in and ran the cable, an AV tech plugged everything in and then I programmed it. The system is easy to use, reliable, and it just works."

Heck says he tied the six computers to the switcher with standard HDMI® cables. For the laptop input, he used a DM® transmitter and Cat6 cable, providing both HDMI and VGA inputs. To ensure optimum images from the monitors and projectors, he used Cat6 cable and Crestron DigitalMedia receiver/scalers. He also included an occupancy sensor to turn off the monitors and projectors if there is no activity in the room for an hour. "Our users sometimes forget to turn the system off, and this is a very simple solution to that problem."

A powerful research tool

So far, Clemson students and faculty have used the Listening Center to monitor the fall election cycle, listen to conversations

around pop culture, and study opinion about Clemson sports. One group of students is examining how people build trust when they enter a public forum for the first time. Another student study has attempted to predict foreign exchange currency prices based on public perceptions and the amount of buzz individual investments generate.

"These kids have figured out unique combinations of searches to analyze age-old problems in entirely new ways," Thatcher says. "They're able to get amazing results because the Radian setup aggregates so many different feeds, lending itself to hardcore analytics and new ways to visualize those analytics.

"You can't really get a feel for what this room can do until you start working with it. It's life changing in some ways, giving you an entirely new picture of the world."

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