

# Social Journalism: Exploring How Social Media is Shaping Journalism

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## Introduction

Some of the iconic images in journalism at the start of the twenty-first century have come from citizens sharing their experiences of a news event on social media. From the grainy mobile phone video of the July 2005 London bombings, to the 2009 Twitter photo of the airplane in the Hudson River, to YouTube videos of the protests in Egypt in 2011, media has become a space shared by journalists and citizens.

Powerful digital communication tools, often identified by the catch-all phrase of social media, are transforming the way media is gathered, disseminated, and consumed. A generation of Internet technologies, collectively described as Web 2.0, has facilitated the involvement of citizens in the observation, selection, filtering, distribution, and interpretation of events. It has become commonplace for the citizens caught up in the news to provide the first accounts, images, and video of events unfolding around them, sharing their media on services such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

There has always been a degree of social interaction with media. In today's digital spaces, social interaction has become so intertwined with media that it is shaping how people experience the Internet. In just a few years, social networking alone has become what Pew Research describes as a "global phenomenon," (Pew Research Center, 2010: 1). In countries such as the USA, Poland, the UK, and South Korea, almost half of adults say they use social networking sites, and the figure is even higher for young adults (Pew Research Center, 2010).

The range of Web 2.0 services and tools commonly referred to as social media are transforming how journalists and citizens relate to the news. Media organizations around the world have enthusiastically embraced social media as a way to distribute news and connect with audiences. Social media is an evolving field of study and application, with

the rapid development of new tools, features, and uses by people. Initial studies point to the importance of news as a personal, social, and participatory experience for growing numbers of citizens (Purcell *et al.*, 2010), with social media shaping the evolution of norms and practices in journalism.

Social media raises questions about journalism's jurisdictional claim to the news. Journalism has developed as a relatively closed professional culture for the production of knowledge, based on a system of editorial control. Yet social media is characterized by its connected and collaborative nature. Social digital media spaces allow for new relations that disrupt authorial structures. Journalists need to be able to learn and understand how news and information work in a social media ecosystem, instead of simply applying established norms and practices that may no longer be effective in communicating.

From the viewpoint of established journalism practices, social media raises a number of conceptual and practical issues for journalists. It changes the relationship between the producer and the consumer of news, questioning the institutional power of the journalist as the professional who decides what is newsworthy or credible. Social media systems such as Twitter and Facebook have been described as ambient journalism, where the journalism itself becomes fragmented and omnipresent, constructed by both journalists and audiences (Burns, 2010; Hermida, 2010a, 2010b).

This chapter explores how journalists and audiences are navigating social media and considers the implications on journalism norms and practices that have, until recently, been highly consistent. It aims to provide a framework to understand how social media may be impacting the role of the journalist and raising questions about the notion of what is journalism. The chapter seeks to understand the overall context and impact of social media in journalism, identifying trends that Hogan and Quan-Haase argue are "underlying long-term trajectories, persistent social practices, and discernable cultural patterns" (Hogan and Quan-Haase, 2010: 309).

## Defining Social Media

Social media is an elusive term to define as it can refer to an activity, a software tool, or a platform, let alone the fact that all media have a social element. Donath (2004) traces sociable media back thousands of years, with the advent of letter writing. She acknowledges that digital communication technologies have fostered the emergence of new forms of media designed to enhance communication and the formation of social ties. Donath was prescient in writing that "we are rapidly approaching the time when, for millions of people, mediated sociability will be with them at all times, no matter where they are or what they are doing" (2004: 631).

The intersection of social interaction and digital media is often associated with Web 2.0. Internet entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly used the term to refer to the development of the World Wide Web as a platform that enables dynamic interactions on the web, facilitating the creation, dissemination, and sharing of digital content. O'Reilly (2005) describes Web 2.0 as an architecture of participation that enables people to take part in the production, shaping, and distribution of news and information, rather than passively consuming content that others create. Tapscott and Williams suggest that this "new web

is principally about participating rather than about passively receiving information” (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 37). In other words, Web 2.0 technologies empower users to interact with each other, and participate and collaborate in the making of media, rather than just consuming media.

The use of the term “passive” is problematic, given the literature on how audiences actively make sense of media (Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1987). But traditionally, individuals have had very limited ability to directly affect the construction of media messages or communicate with the producers of the media (Ha and James, 1998). As Harrison and Barthel argue, the newness of social media is not simply the active media user, but rather “new media technologies now enable vastly more users to experiment with a wider and seemingly more varied range of collaborative creative activities” (Harrison and Barthel, 2009: 174).

Social media is defined by the characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectivity. Web 2.0 technologies at the core of social media provide an infrastructure for potentially geographically dispersed individuals with common interests to connect and collaborate via the Internet without any central coordination. Tools and services range from blogs, wikis, media sharing services, and social networking sites. Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61).

However, any consideration of social media needs to move beyond simply the technology. Hogan and Quan-Haase propose the term social media practice “as a means to overcome the transient nature of the phenomena encountered on social media and identify practices that are stable and universal” (2010: 309). They argue that it is more important to understand the effects of social media, rather than simply getting bogged down in a debate on what social media is. Hardey argues “Web 2.0 is *inherently* social so that users are central to both the content and form of all material and resources” (Hardey, 2007: 870; emphasis in original), with people exercising with a new degree of agency in shaping their engagement with media.

Social media platforms provide spaces for users to share content such as status updates, links, photos, and videos. These social awareness streams provide a mix of news, information, and comment, related to current reality, contributing to what Hermida (2010a, 2010b) has described as ambient journalism. Ambient journalism conceptualizes journalism as a telemediated practice and experience driven by networked, always-on communications technologies and media systems of immediacy and instantaneity. Journalism itself becomes fragmented, omnipresent, and ingrained in the everyday media experiences of users, with contributions from both professionals and non-professionals.

Social media spaces suggest the evolution of the public sphere online, where individuals “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison, 2007: np). Users of these spaces are mediated publics, where the affordances of social media enable individuals to connect and gather publicly through mediating technology. A networked public sphere, where individuals share, discuss, and contribute to the news, subverts media flows based on the idea of a mass media audience. Examining how networked

publics are influencing news flows would contribute to our understanding of the evolving relationship between the journalist and the audience.

## Participation in the News

Social media has fueled an explosion of participation in the news process, from photos shared on Flickr to 140-character eyewitness comments on breaking news on Twitter. However, the desire or capability of users to participate in the creation of media is neither new nor solely linked to the development of digital communication technologies. In their discussion of media production, Harrison and Barthel (2009) stress, “historically, active media users have accomplished radical and community-oriented purposes through the construction of media products organized in support of social movements and community initiatives” (2009: 174). However, they acknowledge that digital technologies are empowering more users to participate in more ways in the creation of media. Tapscott and Williams go further, arguing that participation is the defining characteristic of digital interactions: “Whether people are creating, sharing or socializing, the new Web is principally about participating rather than about passively receiving information” (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 37).

Beyond the rhetoric, social media builds the notion of a participatory media culture, where citizens are viewed as going beyond just reading the news (Dewey, 1927). In a participatory media environment, “rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (Jenkins, 2006: 3). A number of terms are used to refer to audience involvement in news production, such as citizen journalism, user-generated content, and participatory journalism.

Social media is an extension of the ability of news consumers to take part in the gathering, analysis, and dissemination of news and information. No longer do audiences need to rely solely on media institutions to get a message to a wide public. The twentieth century was characterized by the rise and dominance of mass media in western liberal societies. Paid professionals produced the news, and decided what the public needed to know, when it needed to know it, and how it would know it. The role of journalists was as “professional observers and communicators to work full-time to access, select and filter, produce and edit news, which is then distributed via the media to network members” (Domingo *et al.*, 2008: 329). Web 2.0 technologies form an architecture of participation that signals a move away from a one-way, asymmetric model of communication to a more participatory and collective media ecosystem, where jurisdiction for the news is shared between journalists and audiences.

How to share jurisdiction has become a major area of contention for journalists who have long been used to owning the news. The way media organizations have adopted mechanisms to involve audiences in the news process provides a window into the tensions of integrating the participatory and open ethos of social media into traditionally tightly controlled and closed editorial practices. It has become rare not to stumble across an exhortation for a reader to send in photos or videos from a breaking news event,

comment on a story, or share a link on their social network. The tools of participation continue to evolve. For example, the *Guardian* newspaper started with user discussion boards in 1999. More than 10 years later, it was using social networks and a myriad of other tools to enable readers to contribute and to share content with others (Singer *et al.*, 2011).

In principle, the tools for participation allow for users to become co-collaborators in the journalistic process. In practice, studies show that journalists have largely transferred existing norms and practices to new media, rather than taking on the open and participatory ethos of Web 2.0 tools and services. Opportunities for media audiences to participate in the processes of news production have been severely circumscribed, with editorial control retained by journalists (Domingo *et al.*, 2008; Harrison, 2009; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Singer *et al.*, 2011). Despite a diversity of strategies, by and large there has been a general aversion to opening up significant phases of the news process to the audience. Instead, audiences are framed as “active recipients” (Hermida, 2011), expected to act when news happens and react when the news is published. While this overarching attitude has influenced the integration of social media into established professional practices, there are also indications of how journalists are adapting their news production processes and interactions with audiences.

## Impact on Journalism

### Gathering the news

The Internet has become a part of the newsgathering routine of journalists, who go online for story tips, to research story ideas, and to find sources (Callahan, 2003). Turning to the audience online for news material predates social media but the approach has remained largely consistent with the use of Web 2.0 tools and services. Journalists and editors have largely framed audiences as additional news sources who can provide eyewitness photos, video, or accounts, above all in situations where journalists are not yet present. As a journalist working at the BBC’s user-generated content hub explained:

That first hour before you get your resources to that story: this is where we come into our own. We will have access to people who are there and who are contacting us much quicker than any other news resource we can get there

Quoted in Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011: 92

Social media has reinforced the value of the audience to the media, not just as news sources, but also as news sensors. In the case of rapidly developing breaking news events such as natural disasters, users of the social messaging service Twitter have taken on the role of social sensors of the news (Sakaki, Okazaki, and Matsuo, 2010). Twitter provides a real-time, networked platform for the rapid diffusion of short bursts of information that lends itself to breaking news scenarios. The social messaging services can function as a detection system that can provide early warning of breaking news, and then provide a stream of real-time data as events unfold. Twitter has played a role in the breaking and dissemination of information on major events such as the Chinese earthquake of May

2008, the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, the Iranian election protests in June 2009, the Middle East uprisings in the spring of 2011 and the killing of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011. In the words of *Guardian* journalist Matthew Weaver, “first the tweets come, then the pictures, then the video and then the wires” (quoted in Bruno, 2011: 7).

One of the reasons why social media has become part of newsgathering is due to the news vacuum that characterizes the aftermath of major events, such as the devastating earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, where there is an absence of journalists on the scene (Bruno, 2011). Real-time messages on Twitter, eyewitness accounts on Facebook, photos on Flickr, or cellphone videos on YouTube fill a need for information from the location until professional journalists arrived on the scene, hours or even days later. Restrictions on foreign correspondents, such as in Iran in 2009, or the breakdown of communications services, such as in Haiti in 2010, leave the news media turning to social media.

Research indicates that news organizations place the most value on audience contributions in the immediate aftermath of major events such as a terror attack or adverse weather events that have broad public impact (Williams, Wardle, and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). As journalists reach affected areas, there tends to be a decrease in the reliance on audience content. In his study of coverage of the Haiti quake, Bruno (2011) found what he called an opportunistic model. After extensively using social media, the three news organizations studied – the *Guardian*, the BBC, and Cable News Network (CNN) – rarely used audience content once they had correspondents on the ground a week after the disaster. Most dramatically, the amount of social media used by CNN in its newsgathering went from 65% to 4%. Bruno concludes that “in order to go beyond such an ‘opportunistic’ model, traditional media will need to fully redesign their operational structures” (2011: 66).

In addition to affecting the flow of information during major events, social media is influencing the pace of breaking news. Speed has always been a factor in news production, whether rushing to meet a publishing deadline or a show on-air time, or to be first with the news and scoop a competitor. The pace of news has accelerated with the development of 24-hour news channels and the Internet, marking a shift toward a continuous news cycle. The speed of news flows has increased, largely enabled, if not driven, by the technological change brought about by the immediacy of social media services. Bruno (2011) uses the term “the Twitter effect” to describe how online tools that facilitate the publication and distribution of user-generated, real-time content are affecting how the news is reported and by whom. He suggests that “the Twitter effect allows you to provide live coverage without any reporters on the ground, by simply newsgathering user-generated content available online” (2011: 8).

### Reporting the news

News organizations themselves have taken up social media as a way to extend and enhance their reporting, particularly to reflect fast-moving, multifaceted events taking place over a period of time and across a broad geographical space. Mainstream media coherently used social media tools to cover a major event for the first time during the

G20 summit in London in April 2009. Journalists from leading news organizations such as the BBC and the *Guardian* provided regular updates from the streets of London as events unfolded. According to BBC News web site editor Steve Herrmann, this approach to reporting “allowed us to build a nuanced, full picture of the protests in real-time on a map” (quoted in Newman, 2009: 32).

The two main services used by journalists by 2011 were Twitter and Facebook, described as “the ‘kings’ in the realm of social media in the newsrooms” by García de Torres *et al.* (2011) in their analysis of 27 Iberian and South American news outlets. In the USA, all but one of the top 198 newspapers and TV stations had an official Twitter account by 2010 (Messner, Linke, and Esford, 2011). In Australia, “where journalists are literally in a Twittering frenzy” (Posetti, 2009: np), Twitter has been used by the mainstream media to help reporting on devastating bushfires and floods. As Farhi (2009) notes, “reporters now routinely tweet from all kinds of events – speeches, meetings and conferences, sports events.” Twitter has even become a factor in court reporting, with tweets from the courtroom offering virtually instantaneous accounts of proceedings.

Both Twitter and Facebook provide journalists with a platform to send out short bursts of text, photos, or video to a broad audience as the story unfolds before them. Instead of fashioning facts and observations into a self-contained packaged story produced and published later in the day, information is delivered in fragments in real-time, combining observations, impressions, and behind-the-scenes remarks. Prominent examples of this type of reporting include *New York Times* journalist Brian Stelter’s tweets from the town of Joplin leveled by a tornado in May 2011. On his arrival in Joplin, Stelter was “trying to tweet everything I saw,” reflecting that in those first few hours, “I think my best reporting was on Twitter” (Stelter, 2011: np). Another *New York Times* journalist, Nicholas Kristof, used Facebook to post updates, observations, or short stories during his reporting of the Arab spring (Lavrusik, 2011). However, journalists are not abandoning more established news products to report the news, rather they are supplementing traditional practices. The two *New York Times* journalists cited were also writing stories for the following day’s newspaper, in addition to their activities on social media.

Newman has suggested “that a new grammar is emerging of real-time news coverage” (2009: 34). While the approach to real-time, disaggregated news reporting is evolving, one commonly used format is the live blog or live page. The online story-telling format is used to aggregate the disaggregated reporting coming via social media, providing a constantly updated stream of text, audio, and video from both journalists and amateurs. There are some indications that the editorial approach for this type of real-time coverage may diverge from established norms. *Guardian* journalist Matthew Weaver suggests that “on a live blog you are letting the reader in on what’s up there, and say: look, we’re letting you in on the process of newsgathering. There’s a more fluid sense of what’s happening” (quoted in Bruno, 2011: 44).

The inclusion of material from the audience alongside reports from journalists is a form of “pro-am” journalism, where media professionals collaborate with users to cover stories or topics, supplementing existing newsgathering and enhancing output. The attributes of social media facilitate the crowdsourcing of the news, where reporting can

be undertaken by a large group of loosely organized non-journalists (Howe, 2009). News organizations can either direct audience actions by requesting text, audio, and video or aggregate existing social media content.

As stated previously, the integration of social media content into the newsgathering process is most important during breaking news, where the first reports are most likely to come from people on the ground caught up in the event. One way this is playing out in newsrooms is a realization that they no longer have a monopoly on being the first to break the news. Instead, the focus shifts to being the best at curating the news. The journalist takes on the role of curator, whose primary function is to navigate, sift, select, and contextualize the vast amounts of data on social media streams such as Twitter.

The most prominent case of the journalist as curator is Andy Carvin, a social media strategist at National Public Radio (NPR) in the USA. He made a name for himself by curating messages on Twitter during the uprisings in the Middle East at the end of 2010 and start of 2011. Farhi noted that “by grabbing bits and pieces from Facebook, YouTube and the wider Internet and mixing them with a stunning array of eyewitness sources, Carvin has constructed a vivid and constantly evolving mosaic of the region’s convulsions” (2011: np). Carvin describes what he does as “another flavor of journalism” (quoted in Farhi, 2011). Rather than creating a definitive account of events, the journalist as curator exposes the tentative process through which a news story is constructed, as bits of information are reported, contested, or verified in a continual cycle. Carvin is an example of how media professionals are negotiating professional practices and rethinking the way they think about and engage in their work.

Social media can facilitate what Stassen describes as “a type of journalism in which the audience is much more involved in the news-creation process” (Stassen, 2010: 13). However, so far, the use of social media to engage and involve audiences in the news-making process appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Numerous studies have found that journalists tend to normalize new communication technologies to fit within long established norms and practices. As O’Sullivan and Heinonen suggest, journalists “welcome the net when it suits their existing professional ends, and are much less enthusiastic about, and unlikely to promote, radical change in news work” (O’Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008: 368).

Research to date suggests that journalists are normalizing social media rather than adapting their occupational culture to what Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton describe as “a new media format that directly challenges them” (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton, 2012: 1). While some reporters and editors are enthusiastically using social media services to report and share the news, studies show that they are much less likely to take advantage of the conversational modes on Twitter or Facebook.

A study by Messner, Linke, and Esford (2011) on the use of Twitter by the top US newspapers and television stations found that few of them engaged in an exchange with readers. They concluded that “while Twitter facilitates an open dialogue in many areas, traditional news media are not using their main Twitter accounts as a community-building tool, nor are they engaging with their audience on a frequent basis” (2011: 20). An analysis of the use of social media by 27 Iberian and South American news outlets revealed a similar picture, with conversational messages just “a drop in the



ocean,” (García de Torres *et al.*, 2011: 21). The research to date suggests that news organizations and journalists have yet to tap into the full potential of the “social” aspect of social media technologies.

### Recommending the news

Rather, one of the main ways that news organizations have embraced social media is as a mechanism to extend their reach. The prevailing use of social media is to promote content and drive traffic, by sending out a headline with a link back to the news outlet’s web site. García de Torres *et al.* (2011) found that 50% of Twitter messages and 68% of Facebook postings fell into this category. The journalists interviewed for the study spoke of social media as offering “the possibility to reach readers more quickly, to show what we do” and reaching “people living in a faster, more immediate world, and who are technology fans” (2011: 16).

Messner, Linke, and Esford (2011) reached a comparable conclusion in their analysis of the official Twitter accounts of the top newspaper and TV organizations. In some cases, the distribution process was automated, without any editorial intervention. Blasingame (2011) found that more than a third of the messages from newsrooms were automatically generated whenever a story was published on their web site. The use of social media as a promotional tool was not limited to a new organization’s official account, but also prevalent among the personal accounts of reporters and editors. In their analysis of the Twitter practices of US journalists, Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) found that 42% of the tweets contained an external link, with half of these to the journalist’s own host news organization.

Social media offers news organizations new ways to promote content, increase audience reach, and potentially build brand loyalty. Social interaction has always played a role in the dissemination of news, from conversations in the office to newspaper clippings sent through the postal service. Sharing and discussing news takes place through social networks for a growing number of citizens, who are turning to their networked circles of family, friends, and acquaintances to alert them to news of interest. The sharing of links and recommendations on social networks is becoming a form of cultural currency, extending the reach of news.

A 2010 study by Pew Internet found that 75% of online news consumers in the USA get news forwarded to them through e-mail or posts on social networking sites (Purcell *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, it found that just over half of social networking users say they get their news from family, friends, and acquaintances they follow on services like Facebook. A study of Canadian news consumers also pointed to the growing importance of social recommendation. The study found that 43% of social media users get some of their daily news via links and recommendations from friends and family on services like Facebook (Hermida *et al.*, 2011).

While the news home page is far from obsolete, there is a growing body of data indicating the importance of social media in how people navigate the news. Social recommendation is emerging as a key driver for traffic to news web sites, potentially rivaling direct visits to the home page or visits via search engines such as Google. “Facebook is beginning to join Google as one of the most influential players in driving

news audiences,” concluded Olmstead *et al.* in a 2011 Pew study that analyzed the flow of traffic to 25 of the top US news web sites (Olmstead *et al.*, 2011: np). They found that Google remained the primary entry point for visits, accounting on average for 30% of the traffic to these sites. But Olmstead *et al.* added that social media is emerging as a powerful conduit for visits, particularly Facebook. The popular social networking site was the second or third most important source of traffic for the five top news sites.

A study into the diffusion of news links on Twitter also pointed to the importance of social recommendation. An *et al.* (2011) found that a message from a news organization or journalist received an average of 15.5 retweets. News content is spread through the social messaging network, as users send on a news link to their network. The researchers concluded that social recommendation could increase the audience reach of media sources significantly, by up to a factor of 28.

The use of social networks to share news and information has been embraced by news organizations. They have added social networking functionality to web sites to make it easy for users to share links (Singer *et al.*, 2011). Studies show that the ability to share is important for news consumers. Olmstead *et al.* found that when users leave a site, “share” tools that appear alongside most news stories rank among the most clicked-on links (2011), while Hermida *et al.* (2011) found that being able to easily share content was important to almost two-thirds of social media users.

But social recommendation also poses financial and editorial challenges for established media. While social networks such as Facebook open up new ways for the news media to engage audiences, they also compete for consumer attention and revenues. On its Facebook for Journalists page, the social network promotes itself as a way for news outlets to “reach your readers directly on Facebook, an audience of more than 500 million people around the world” (Facebook, nd). Mass media business models have been based on delivering large, aggregate audiences to advertisers. Using Facebook for posting content or hosting discussions boosts the audience for the social network and for the advertising it sells. So while a media outlet can increase its reach, this does not necessarily result in a financial return as the activity takes place on a third party rather than on its own web space. Newman warns that just as Google became a key intermediary in the news business, “history may be about to repeat itself, with social networks reinforcing the trend towards disaggregation and putting further pressure on the funding of journalism in traditional news organizations” (2009: 49).

Editorially, the traditional gatekeeping function of the media is weakened as a significant proportion of news consumers turn to their family, friends, and acquaintances to alert them to items of interest. Hermida *et al.* (2011) found that news consumers were twice as likely to get links to news items from people they knew than from a news organization or a journalist. Essentially a person’s social circle is taking on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story, video, or other piece of content is important, interesting, or amusing enough to recommend. Social recommendation weakens traditional hierarchical relationships between the mass media consumers and producers of media. It disrupts the authority of the journalist as the professional who decides what the public needs to know and when it needs to know it. By removing a news story from its original context, the user is reframing the message and sending a

signal about the content to their audience. Olmstead *et al.* say that understanding “what content they are likely to pass along may be a key to how stories are put together and even what stories get covered in the first place” (2011: np).

There are concerns, though, about the impact of a personalized news stream where the news is filtered by a social network of friends, rather than by traditional media. The principle of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001) suggests that people have a tendency to connect with others who will validate their core beliefs rather than be exposed to opposing viewpoints. The presence of homophily in social networks has implications for the news and information users receive and the attitudes they develop.

However, it is unclear to what extent this is taking place on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Purcell *et al.* (2010) observed that news consumers who have the widest range of online sources were far more likely than others to have customized their news experience. Similarly, Hermida *et al.* (2011) found that a significant number of social media users believe they receive a broader range of news and information via their social networks than if they relied solely on traditional media.

Research on Twitter has also raised doubts as to how far social networks foster homophily. In a study of conversations on abortion conducted on Twitter, Yardi and boyd (2010) identified both homophily and heterogeneity. They conclude that “people were more likely to interact with others who share the same views as they do, but they are actively engaged with those with whom they disagree” (2010: 325). In a study of news flows on Twitter, An *et al.* (2011) noted that users tended to receive information from multiple outlets, with people exposed to six to 10 media sources through retweets by friends. “Users are exposed to information they did not know they were interested in, serendipitously,” An *et al.* concluded (2011: 8).

## Editorial and Ethical Challenges

As social media becomes part of the media landscape, it raises a series of editorial and ethical questions about everyday work routines and practices, as well as time-honored tenets of journalism. As Arceneaux and Schmitz Weiss note, media technologies such as Twitter and Facebook “disrupt established concepts of communication, prevailing notions of space and time and the distinction between public and private spheres” (2010: 1266). Numerous studies have looked at how an earlier form of social media, blogs, affected the professional norms and practices of journalists from within mainstream news organizations (Lowrey and MacKay, 2008; Hermida, 2009; Singer, 2005). Some of those same tensions around verification, impartiality, and engagement are playing out on newer social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

### The process of verification

Social media platforms such as Twitter that facilitate the instantaneous transmission of news and information have contributed to an acceleration of the news cycle. The compressed news cycle raises significant questions for news outlets, above all concerning the

key tenet of verification. Even before the advent of social media, Kovach and Rosenstiel (1999) argued that the continuous news cycle was undermining the classic function of journalism to provide a true and reliable account of events.

The rise of social media as a source for breaking news, and the speed at which information is disseminated on the network, poses a challenge to journalism's discipline of verification. Verification is at the core of the journalist's contention to objectively parse reality and claim a special kind of authority and status. Gowing has labeled this as the tyranny of real-time, suggesting that professionals face a difficult choice in deciding "when to take on the tyranny of the time and intervene with real-time information, even if it is incomplete, possibly flaky and probably cannot be verified with 100 per cent accuracy" (Gowing, 2009: 30).

One prominent case that provoked an intense discussion of the appropriateness of Twitter for breaking news involved the shooting of US Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in January 2011. Major news organizations including the BBC, CNN, NPR, and Reuters mistakenly reported that she had died, sending out the news on Twitter. The initial report was later corrected in subsequent tweets, but the original messages had been re-sent by others across the social media network. Safran noted that "for hours after it was reported she was alive, people kept discovering the original tweet that she was dead, retweeting it to their friends without seeing the update" (Safran, 2011: np).

Negotiating the tension between being first and being right is not new. Journalists have long had to find "the right balance between speed and accuracy, between being comprehensive and being merely interesting" (Meyer, 2009: 11). The networked nature of social media can add to these tensions by amplifying the dissemination of information, which travels in as a data fragment and may be divorced from context, as in the Giffords case. Moreover, much of the information on social media comes from the public. Such a scenario is particularly acute in times of a news vacuum, when the initial reports of a breaking news event come via tweets, blog posts, and photos and videos taken on cellphones.

There are indications that the real-time flow of information from the public is changing news practices, with Newman suggesting that "news organizations are already abandoning attempts to be first for breaking news, focusing instead on being the best at verifying and curating it" (Newman, 2009: 2). Such a strategy does have certain risks for the credibility and reputation of the news media. In 2008, the BBC was criticized for publishing unverified Twitter messages alongside reports from its journalists in its live online coverage of the Mumbai bombings. BBC News web site editor Steve Herrmann summed up the difficult balancing act facing news organizations between trying to reflect "the unfolding truth in all its guises" without compromising core editorial principles (quoted in Newman, 2009: 9).

New storytelling approaches are developing in the live coverage of unfolding events that brings together both unverified social media content and authenticated professional reports. During the Iranian election protests of June 2009, major news outlets such as *The New York Times* in the USA and the *Guardian* in the UK published constantly updated accounts that relied on unverified tweets, photos, and videos, alongside updates from journalists in Tehran (Stelter, 2009). There are indications that newsrooms are

applying different standards of verification in the real-time coverage of ongoing, fast-moving events. Comments made at a social media conference organized by the BBC in London in May 2011 suggested that there is “a view within the mainstream media that audiences have lower expectations of accuracy and verification from journalists’ and media outlets’ social media accounts than they do of ‘appointment TV’ or the printed page” (Posetti, 2011).

The extent to which an accelerated news cycle is eroding standards of reliability and verification is an area for further research. An analysis of media coverage of the 2010 Haiti earthquake by the BBC, CNN, and the *Guardian* found that only the BBC consistently sought to verify information on social media before publication (Bruno, 2011). For at least some of the time, CNN and the *Guardian* chose speed over verification. Bruno suggests that this strategy “seems very dangerous for one of journalism’s golden rules: each news story must be verified first” (2011: 66). But he goes on to suggest that the opposing models that pit publication versus verification may combine into a single strategy through a “reporter-curator.” Indeed, the work by NPR’s Andy Carvin in sifting through the social media streams out of the Middle East in 2011 offers a prototype of the journalistic function of curating the news.

### The interpretation of objectivity

Objectivity has long been held up as one of the key values in journalism (Schudson and Anderson, 2008), and journalists are expected to keep their personal opinions out of their reporting (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Yet the characteristics and culture of social media platforms facilitates journalists to be candid about their thoughts and share them in public. In the early 2000s, the tension between objectivity and opinion was being played out in blogs, as media outlets integrated blogging into news practices (Hermida, 2009; Lowrey and MacKay, 2008; Singer, 2005, 2007).

The addition of Twitter and Facebook into news routines has renewed debates over the journalistic norm of objectivity in mediums that encourage personal expression. The structures of these platforms may also provide greater leeway for what journalists say. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) point out that blogs tend to be published within the structure of a professional news site and are thus often subject to organizational standards and protocols. Platforms like Twitter are outside of these institutional frameworks. As a result, journalists who tweet “operate on a neutral platform (via Twitter.com), and so do not face the same level of oversight nor the same necessity to stay on-topic journalistically,” note Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012: 6).

News organizations have sought to address how their journalists operate on social media platforms by drawing up specific editorial policies. In its advice on best practice guidelines, the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) acknowledged that social media platforms “offer exciting opportunities for reporters to collect information and for news organizations to expand the reach of their content, but they also carry challenges and risks” (Hohmann, 2011: 3). Guarding against any behavior that could harm the reputation of the news organization is at the core of social media policies, including expressions of opinion. *The Washington Post*, for example, advises its staff that “nothing we do must call into question the impartiality of our news judgment” (quoted in

Hohmann, 2011: 4). In its guidelines, the *Los Angeles Times* observed that “just as political bumper stickers and lawn signs are to be avoided in the offline world, so too are partisan expressions online” (quoted in Currie, Bruser, and Van Wageningen, 2011: 2).

An added complication for the media is the practice of retweeting, as sending on a link or comment may be perceived as an endorsement or expression of support. The ASNE advises reporters to offer clear disclaimers that a retweet is not an endorsement of the content. The BBC is one organization that has gone further, telling its staff that a disclaimer may not be enough. Instead it advises staff to “consider adding your own comment to the ‘tweet’ you have selected, making it clear why you are forwarding it and where you are speaking in your own voice and where you are quoting someone else’s” (BBC: nd).

The visible connections formed on social media present an additional dilemma for journalists. The people that a journalist follows or friends, or even the Facebook pages that are “liked” by them may be perceived as indications of bias. Reuters, for example, warns that “a determined critic can soon build up a picture of your preferences by analyzing your links, those that you follow, your ‘friends’, blogroll and endless other indicators” (quoted in Currie, Bruser, and Van Wageningen, 2011: 2). The ASNE guidelines caution against friending sources in Facebook, while noting that there is a lack of agreement among editors about whether accepting or making “friend” requests is acceptable. There are also concerns over how a decision to join a Facebook group or like a page may be perceived. Most news organizations accept that there may be valid editorial reasons to “like” the Facebook page of a politician, for example. In its overview of social media policies in the US media, the ASNE found there was general agreement that journalists need to balance the pages or groups they join (Hohmann, 2011), while the Canadian Association of Journalists recommends reporters “consider joining a wide variety of groups and accepting a range of followers – instead of choosing only a few” (Currie, Bruser, and Van Wageningen, 2011: 6).

The range of social media policies reflects how news organizations are seeking to balance the personal aspect of social media with long-held professional rules designed to protect journalistic reputation. However, just as has happened with blogs, there is some evidence that shows how journalists are going beyond what may be considered acceptable practices on social media. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) note that US journalists on Twitter strayed away from traditional conventions of objectivity by offering opinions in their tweets. They conclude that “j-tweeters appear both to be adopting features of Twitter in their microblogging and adapting these features to their existing norms and practices” (2011: 12). Further research into the use of social media by journalists will assist in understanding how far they are adapting it to fit traditional professional norms and practices, and how far it is changing those norms and practices.

### The professional/personal balance

The personal aspect of social media has also raised questions about how journalists manage their identity. As Currie, Bruser, and Van Wageningen observe, “being social means showing one’s personality” (2011: 6). There is an expectation on social media platforms that users will share personal aspects of their lives. Consequently, social networks may

collapse the professional distance that journalists have tended to cultivate with both readers and sources. As Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton explain, “in an emerging communication space like Twitter, which can be used for everything from breaking news to banality, journalists have far greater license to write about whatever strikes their fancy, including the mundane details of their day-to-day activities” (2012: 6). While journalists mostly use social media to report and share the news, they are also asking questions, talking about their job, and making observations about everyday life.

News organizations and individual journalists are in the process of negotiating the blurred line between the personal and professional on social media, figuring out what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. García de Torres *et al.* (2011) found there was no consistent approach in balancing institutional with individual voices in their analysis of social media use by 27 Iberian and South American news outlets. Some news organizations, such as Reuters, advise their staff to set up separate profiles for work and personal activity, while others, like Bloomberg, acknowledge that the ubiquity of social networks makes it almost impossible to draw a line between the professional and the personal (Hohmann, 2011). In any case, even if a reporter tries to maintain different online identities, the public may still perceive them as a representative of their news organization.

Research into what journalists are saying and doing on social media is in its early stages. In their best-practice recommendations for the Canadian Association of Journalists, Currie, Bruser, and Van Wageningen advise that “expressing opinions about certain matters and making light-hearted jokes can humanize one’s profile in social media and build engagement” (2011: 6). There are data that at least some journalists are sharing aspects of both their professional and personal lives on Twitter. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) found that 20% of the messages they analyzed were only about a journalist’s personal life. Another study discovered that many of the most followed and most active journalists on Twitter were incorporating humor into their messages. The researchers suggest that injecting a little wit may help legacy news organizations better connect with existing and potential audiences (Holton and Lewis, 2011).

Newman (2009) offers a case study of *Guardian* journalist Jemima Kiss whose Twitter messages switch from technology news updates to minutiae about her pregnancy to her love of tennis. Kiss talks about the “richness of connection” with her readers through social media: “It gives a voice and a face to my audience; it gives me a direct relationship with them,” (quoted in Newman, 2009: 36). Kiss is an example of how some reporters are sending out details that would once have been considered private, blurring the line between the personal and the professional.

The other side of the privacy equation is the public itself. Journalists have access to a broad range of content posted by audiences on social networks. Greenslade noted that “when stories break it is customary for reporters to do all they can to discover as much as possible about the people involved. The willingness of people to place so much material about themselves on the net has made that task much easier for journalists” (Greenslade, 2008: np). Whereas the media would have had to turn to family or friends to find personal details or photos of people who suddenly find themselves in the headlines, much of this information is available online. Since it is digital, it is searchable, easy to copy, and replicate.

The way the media feeds on the personal material on social media sites raises questions about what can be considered public or private in an Internet age. Boyd argues that “just because people are adopting tools that radically reshape their relationship to privacy does not mean they are interested in giving up their privacy” (boyd, 2010: 50). The public availability of personal information does not necessarily mean that it was intended to be publicized. The issue has led to guidelines over the use of social media content. The BBC for instance acknowledges that while content may be considered to be in the public domain, its use by the broadcaster would expose it to a much wider audience. Its guidelines state that the “ease of availability of pictures does not remove our responsibility to consider the sensitivities in using them,” and that “the fact that material has been placed in the public domain does not necessarily give us the right to exploit its existence, disregarding the consequences” (BBC: nd). The disruption to traditional dynamics of privacy due to social media is requiring journalists and news organizations to reconsider professional practices and ethical approaches to privacy.

## Conclusion

Social media tools and services have become part of the daily routines of many journalists, using them to gather, filter, and disseminate the news. As with every communication technology, there is a process of negotiation as new affordances collide with established norms and practices. Research suggests that many journalists are normalizing social media tools to fit in with existing values.

At the same time, the affordances and culture of social media are influencing how newsrooms are reporting the news, leading to discussions on key principles such as impartiality, verification, and professional behavior. In this ongoing process, “guidelines are being rewritten; social media editors and Twitter correspondents are being appointed; training and awareness programs are under way” (Newman, 2009: 2).

Social media may require a rethink of the role of journalists as the traditional regulators and moderators of public discourse. As Deuze has pointed out, “instead of having some kind of control over the flow of (meaningful, selected, fact-checked) information in the public sphere, journalists today are just some of the many voices in public communication” (Deuze, 2008: 12).

Journalists are facing changes in work routines, in occupational culture, in their relationship to the audience, perhaps even in what it means to be a journalist today. They are operating in a digital and networked ecosystem where the traditional distinction between the producer and consumer of media has been eroded. For media professionals, “in a networked world, there no longer is the ‘journalist,’ ‘audience,’ and ‘source.’ There is only ‘us’” (Singer, 2008: 75).

We are in the early stages of figuring out the “us” in journalism. As with the development of earlier media technologies such as radio and television, what we do, how we do it, and who does it will change and evolve. Likewise, while this chapter has discussed the journalistic uses of Twitter and Facebook, these social platforms may wither and be replaced with others, or become a permanent fixture in the media constellation.



The significance of social media lies less in current services and tools and more in how these networked, asynchronous, distributed, and always-on systems enable dynamic interactions that exalt participation over publication, collaboration over individual authorship, sharing over selfishness, and fluidity over stability. Within journalism, new genres are emerging as newsrooms incorporate social media services into daily routines, from live blogging to crowdsourced investigations. Just as social media is reshaping journalism, journalists are themselves engaged in forming and shaping norms of acceptable, and accepted, professional practice of social media.

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