

Information in Times of Social Journalism

Traditional media outlets have experienced constant alterations since social media forums became new, revolutionary tools of communication and interconnectedness. Social media outlets have been establishing themselves since the late 90's turning journalism as we know it into "Social Journalism". Cooperation between in-depth research and the striving for objectivity on one hand, personal opinion and instant news gratification on the other.

Woody Lewis, a social media strategist defines a social journalist as a person with a "premeditated watchdog role who uses social media to communicate and collaborate with readers."

As the impact of social media emerges, conventional journalists representing print, radio, and TV are gradually losing their status of final authority or opinion-making on a specific subject.

We experience revitalization and an overall new definition of writers' and audiences relationships. Traditional journalists have to endure a critical audience and implement checks and balances for media representatives.

While salaries within the traditional media market have been decreasing steadily and lifelong contracts are highly unusual today, social journalists contribute often for free, which not only means that new media is frequently not reimbursed for its work, but it also means that prize standards for the entire industry are going to be redefined and often to the disadvantage of the traditional journalist/editor.

A realistic option exists, that necessary quality standards in social media reporting might not be maintained. Because social media sites are not reliable news sources, unless they have an official news section, fact checking while blogging and tweeting is crucial.

Social media outlets are at risk of distributing false information, which can as a result, skew public opinion. At the same time certain traditional news outlets within the US-American and international media landscape are skewing public opinion deliberately.

On the contrary, of course, a wide and strong flow of information can bring forward social movements and as a result democracy.

This article looks at how traditional and social media can produce profound results in cooperation.

Loss of traditional authority – vigilant public

While performing research for this article, I came across an example that supports the notion that traditional and social media collaboration can work while news stories break.

In February of 2010 Andrew Joseph Stack flew a single-engine plane into an Austin, Texas office building. Social media played a crucial role, completing the coverage of the incident in cooperation with the local news outlet The Austin American Statesman.

The story broke in the Statesman's newsroom through Twitter. Immediately, staff members started working the phones, drove out to the scene while others checked Twitter for news updates. The Statesman newsroom asked their 20,000-plus followers on Twitter for witness calls and pictures, which Twitter users were taking with their camera-equipped mobile phones on the scene.

Only a few hours after the plane hit the building, the Statesman received a private message from one of their Twitter followers that tipped the paper to Stacks online manifesto. The local paper was the first outlet to host the manifesto online.

This is a good example of a newsroom collaborating with the public, for better and faster results. In this case the public is exercising the checks and balances on traditional journalism mentioned above, and the journalist has to compromise his or her authority somewhat, because he or she does not have a monopoly on the information. However, the journalist's job is still to check the facts and make sure that they are truthful and not hearsay.

In a way, the audience is redefining their relationship with the media outlet by making it more interactive. Or to quote Michael Skoler, journalist and fellow at the Donald Reynolds Journalism Institute:

"[People] expect to be listened to when they have knowledge and raise questions. They want news that connects with their lives and interests. They want control over their information. And they want connection — they give their trust to those they engage with - people who talk with them, listen and maintain a relationship".

While this is a mutually beneficial example of cooperation between traditional journalism and social media, there are of course counterproductive, even harmful examples. Social media affected the reporting on the Fort Hood shootings in November 2009, where a single gunman killed 13 people and wounded 29 others.

According to a study published by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 2010, a number of people were claiming to be witnessing the events at Fort Hood. They tweeted and posted blog entries while the military base was locked down. Some mainstream media outlets picked up the stories from social media users, and some, including NBC's Today show, The Huffington Post, and The New York Times, set up aggregated Twitter lists, to follow comments and conversations on the topic.

Megan Garber wrote for the Columbia Journalism Review: “Lists also represent, more significantly, a new — or, more precisely, a newly facilitated — way for news organizations to collaborate: They allow news outlets essentially to co-opt others’ reporting. But in a good way, to the benefit of the news organizations in question and, of course, their audiences”.

Social Media and Democracy

However, while some of the information reported through social media was correct, blogs and Twitter also may be responsible for spreading rumors, like one saying more than one shooter had been involved in the incident.

Paul Carr at TechCrunch, a technology-focused blog, wrote later, “For all the sound and fury, citizen journalism once again did nothing but spread misinformation, at a time when thousands of people with family at the base would have been freaking out already, and breach the privacy of those who had been killed or wounded. We learned not a single new fact, nor was a single life saved.”

This example shows that giving consumers the ability to publish information more efficiently isn’t good news for everyone, because multiple problems emerge from the change:

First, many blog posts or tweets are still opinion-oriented rather than first-coverage news oriented, meaning most blogs don’t offer journalistically reported news content or fact-checking.

True investigative journalism, like that done to uncover the Watergate scandal for example, faces a threat that could render it impossible, because bloggers may not want to perform the meticulous work investigative journalism involves. It includes much in-depth research performed by visiting credible sources throughout the political spectrum, because the author has to maintain objectivity. That also means interviews with experts or witnesses, in order to collect first-hand experiences and quotes that back the argument.

And thirdly one has to understand the technicalities that go into writing the news story, commentary, etc., depending on the style chosen. A feature is written differently than an op-ed piece. An art or film review requires in-depth knowledge in order to categorize the artist or the film within the history of the respective genre, it also requires knowing the technical terms in order to give a precise and well-founded analysis.

Another problem is that bloggers tend to focus on what interests them rather than upon what is important for the public. In order to establish sound judgement for what might be important for the public, one needs knowledge, education, and a bit of life experience.

Another example of the significant impact social media can have, was of course the Arab Spring, starting in December 2010.

Dr. Natana De Long-Bas published a study with Oxford Islamic Studies Online, called The New Social Media and the Arab Spring, in which she describes the dilemma social media-involvement can cause and has been causing during the Arab Spring.

She describes how particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, information and instructions have been disseminated via Facebook and Twitter that the government has not been able to control.

Long-Bas describes the new belief that social media has created a new process for revolution. In her experience during the Arab Spring, the process begins when someone establishes a page on Facebook which is seen by various users who then comment on it and begin interacting with each other.

Once the group is solidified, users begin posting pictures, video footage, and links to YouTube. As this happens, news and comments also begin appearing on Twitter, ever expanding the network of people who are linked in to debates about these events and images. Since the network is not limited geographically, the scope can quickly become global.

"While this process can be promising in terms of reaching large numbers of people very quickly and creating instantaneous reactions, it also carries the inherent danger of being used to perpetuate sectarianism, tribalism, regionalism, racism, sexism, and discrimination through the proliferation of extremist or exclusionary content. It must be recalled that Facebook is not the private domain of "enlightened" values or democratic ideals. The reality of an open source is that it is open to everyone and anyone who cares to access and comment on it, whether constructively or destructively. Thus, there is the potential for both democratic change and retrograde reactionism that can have serious political and economic repercussions, and for both building and fracturing social cohesion."

The Status Quo of Traditional Media

Can social media outlets replace traditional media outlets over time? The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released a survey in 2010, describing the status quo of traditional media.

According to the survey respondents have less confidence that traditional news organizations strive to report accurate, politically unbiased news than they had a few decades ago. In fact, the public's confidence has reached its lowest level in more than two decades. Despite this, the Pew survey showed most respondents still think watchdog journalism is critically important.

The poll also monitored consumers' most-used news medium, finding audiences tend to obtain national and international news mainly still from TV and the Internet.

However, this and a survey study conducted by the National News Association (NNA) found the opposite seems to be true for local newspapers, especially weeklies. The NNA's survey found the majority of respondents spend at least 40 minutes a week reading their local newspaper and often prefer the print over the online edition.

A Media Post article discussed a survey that found males tend to be more open to new media than females, and to little surprise, the 18 to 34 year-old age group has seen the largest decline in traditional media usage.

This survey also found that while most people said newspapers needed to change to remain relevant, users wouldn't be willing to pay to read print magazines online.

A wide number of media experts believe that news organizations will move toward the increasing use of mobile devices, smart phones and other devices will become hubs of social media use and communication. They also suggest reporters will become more independent instead of being linked to a specific news organization for a long period of time.

While most respondents of the Pew perception survey do believe in the critical need of investigative journalism as a democratic pillar, the public's assessment of news organizations' accuracy and media bias are at the lowest in decades.

According to the Pew public perception survey, 29 percent of respondents said the media generally report the facts correctly, while 63 percent said news stories are often inaccurate.

In contrast, in 1985, 55 percent of survey respondents said the media are accurate most of the time, and 35 percent said media are often inaccurate. The public isn't finding news organizations to be unbiased, either. According to the survey, about 26 percent of respondents said news organizations are careful to remain unbiased, while about 60 percent said news organizations are politically biased.

Only about 20 percent said organizations were "independent of powerful people or are willing to admit their mistakes," which matches all-time lows.

A National Newspapers Association (NNA) survey found 81 percent of respondents read a local paper each week, and 73 percent read most or all of it.

Interestingly, this survey also found 53 percent of respondents never read local news online while 12 percent said they often read local news online.

The Pew perception survey summed this up by saying online news lags behind newspapers, which remain the most popular media outlet, according to the perceptions survey.

Michael Skoler argued as news conglomerates took over local news organizations and made changes people began losing trust in the media. Skoler wrote, "Surveys show a steep drop in public trust in journalism occurring during the past 25 years."

While traditional journalism is facing fundamental changes, including a loss of trust from its audience, social journalism has not been able to establish itself as a valid alternative, but certainly as a supplement. Social media outlets satisfy instant news cravings by a large and growing group of internet users worldwide, but are by no means reliable news sources.