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# There's a tweet
## in every class

**T**witter is now well-established as a platform for news gathering, dissemination and global interaction between journalists, their audiences and their sources. It's also become a common news theme, with many breaking stories now featuring 'the Twitter angle' (See *RJR* September 2009).

I began implementing it as a training tool for event coverage with my final year University of Canberra radio journalism students during a regional Australian election in 2008. While Barack Obama tweeted his way through an historic US election, my students used Twitter as a political reporting device for live online election coverage.

The result was both an improvement in the speed and clarity of writing as well as breakthrough engagement with democratic processes and political journalism by a generation of student reporters frequently cast as disengaged citizens averse to political news.

### Tweeting an Oz election

UC is situated in Australia's national capital, only a few miles from the seat of federal government and the media hub that is the Canberra Press Gallery. We have a reputation for producing job-ready journalism graduates with a capacity for original story generation.

But like many journalism educators, we've found engaging students in political reporting activities a challenge. However, my professional background as a former member of the Canberra Press Gallery makes me persevere with the struggle and I'm constantly seeking innovative and appealing ways to engage my students in political journalism.

In the past I've taken them to the tally room on national election nights to report for a community radio network. And, when the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) election was called in 2008, I overcame logistical and bureaucratic barriers to enable 12 of my students to join the media throng in the tally room's live broadcast centre, under my supervision. But we were told we would not have access to desk space and or Internet connectivity. So, I turned to Twitter and cell phones.

### Getting students Twitter-ready

I devoted one radio production class to training the students on the finer points of Twitter and getting them registered to use the platform. I first established a Twitter account connected to NOWUC (www.twitter.com/nowuc – I'm the administrator of this account) to host the aggregated student tweets on election night and then got each of the participating students to create their own individual accounts, connecting them to their cell phones. The next step involved getting them to follow me (@julie_posetti), @NOWUC and one-another. In turn, I connected my own accounts to theirs by following them.

Next, traditional radio reporting assignments were devised and allocated to the students for election night coverage, with a view to producing and uploading longer-form audio reports to NOWUC in the days following the election.

Interestingly, none of my 12 students had used Twitter before and only a few were even familiar with its existence. Most, however, were Facebook addicts, and the idea of using a social media platform for journalistic purposes excited them. I saw news value in the novelty of this reporting task and so I assigned one of the reporting duos to the story of this Canberra election student Tweet-a-thon.

Challenge #1 – getting the students interested in political reporting – had been achieved with the help of Twitter.

### Election night

Challenge #2 was election night itself: 18 October 2008. The plan went like this: each student was assigned a Tweet-Beat, some were attached to government desks or the opposition parties' representatives, while others mingled with the voting public who'd gathered to watch the action. The remainder stalked the main media outlets in the broadcast hub or went in search of colour. They were told to tag each of their Tweets with #ACTelection08, using a hashtag so they could be aggregated by Twitter's search function. Each of the students was then paired in a radio reporting duo to undertake their traditional broadcast production assignments and they alternated between roles as tweeters and broadcast journalists.

### Challenges and obstacles

The actual process of tweeting proved logistically tricky. I needed to filter the Tweets before aggregating them on the NOWUC Twitter page in the interests of legal and ethical propriety given the direct link to a UC-sponsored publication.

This was also an important part of the educational process – teaching the students about the perils of live-reporting. But this meant that I had to re-tweet (RT) each and every student post manually via my iPhone.

I edited the posts only very minimally where required in the interests of downplaying the gate-keeper role and I had to intercept only one defamatory Tweet. By the end of the night, I'd re-tweeted almost 70 student news-briefs from the tally room via my phone.

Twitter's limiting of posts to 140 characters also posed significant journalistic challenges – restricting capacity to use quotes and provide background and analysis, for example. Indeed, Twitter, like many social media applications, provides as many opportunities for education and discussion around issues of journalistic ethics and practice as it does challenges to traditional news processes.

### Great lessons learned

The content of the NOWUC Twitter feed reveals the diversity of student-experience, talents and the lessons learned. Some tweets were pithy and witty – colourful political observations. Others were heavily fact-based. Some were clunkily written, while others were stellar examples of clarity and brevity in writing.

Some students tweeted prolifically; others were slower and less productive. For some, the highlight was meeting prominent politicians and broadcasters; for others it was breaking a news titbit ahead of the mainstream media.

Most learned something new about the Australian political process and picked up fresh reporting skills. But, most importantly, they all thoroughly enjoyed the learning experience, describing it variously as "awesome", "a blast" and an "adrenalin rush".

Some of the lessons learned from this exercise were in overcoming the logistical obstacles outlined above. For example, I've since discovered a Twitter tool called Grouptweet http://grouptweet.com which allows groups of connected users to post on a single Twitter page using a shared Twitter identity. This tool allows for public or private usage, meaning it can be locked down for training exercises or discussions about sensitive themes in the workplace or the classroom, for example, or opened up to all-comers for publication purposes like the NOWUC Twitter election coverage. Applying this tool in the election coverage scenario would have averted my need to re-tweet all of my students' posts in order to group them @NOWUC, but it wouldn't have resolved the issues around legal and ethical clearance of posts. As counter-intuitive to social media principles as it sounds, a function which allowed for a hold to be put on such group tweets until cleared by a 'super-user' would be useful.

Two of the student Tweeters produced a radio current affairs package about the role of Twitter in reporting, and their experience of it, in the Canberra tally room, highlighting the value of this experiment as a journalism training exercise.

"Our mission was to tweet… as the politics played out around us we were sent into a tweeting frenzy. We were embarking on a new journalistic dawn, competing against the traditional media outlets to break the news first," they reported.

From this lecturer's perspective, the main benefits were in watching the students work as a reporting team, seeing their excitement as their tweets went live, their amusement with the novelty of reporting using cell phones and social media tools and their willingness to mix it with prominent mainstream journalists, along with their rising interest in political reporting as the night unfolded. "This isn't so boring after all!"

Using these contemporary reporting tools helped bridge the gap between 'digital natives' and traditional political reporting.

And, it's a lesson worth repeating.