

# THE EMBEDDED AUDIENCE

Journalists need to shift their mindset to talking with – instead of at – the “people formerly known as the audience”.

That was a take-home message from the BBC Social Media Summit staged in London in May. It’s a notion others (including me) have written about in academic research regarding media representation of minorities.

But it was *The Guardian’s* Meg Pickard who articulated the idea during the summit in reference to mainstream media approaches to social media. She told the over-packed conference room at the BBC’s White City headquarters: “Social media is a thing we do with an audience, not to an audience.”

The summit was a combination of controversially-closed workshops held on day one, operating under Chatham House Rules for invited representatives from the world’s most recognisable media brands, and a one-day open conference. The event, shorthanded by the hashtag #BBCSMS on Twitter, gathered international journalists, community media and academics interested in the development of a social future for journalism.

The event was criticised by some as too focused on legacy media and demonstrative of the slowness of some mainstream media outlets to adapt. And they had a point. During the day one workshops, I watched others cringe as one experienced journalist revived the brain surgery metaphor ... you know the one: “You don’t crowdsource brain surgery, so why would you crowdsource journalism?”

But while there was evidence of residual pockets of resistance, at the other end of the spectrum, the very progressive editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, demonstrated the transformative impact of social media on journalism. In his closing address, he rebadged social media as “open media”, saying, “People working in this generation of journalism just have to accept ... open media is better than closed media.”

Precisely.

One thing was clear at the end of #BBCSMS: audience engagement is now embedded in editorial processes. And the fear of audience interaction is no longer the barrier it was to journalists’ entry to social media when I ran a conference with the theme “The Future of Journalism in the Social Media Age” at the ABC in Sydney in 2009. Then, the question was “Why should we engage?” Now, it is “How can we best engage?”

And: “How do we manage the logistics of this new journalistic function?” and “How do we measure our success with engagement?”

Interestingly, the key themes identified in my early research on social journalism – summarised in an article carried in the 2009 edition of *Rhodes Journalism Review* – audience engagement; the merger of the personal and public spheres via social media; and verification issues; remain the big concerns confronting mainstream journalists practising or managing social media. And Twitter was clearly the social media platform of choice for most of the mainstream journalists present.

## Verification: still the big issue

“The biggest issue with social media is verification,” one journalist said to me during the invitation-only workshops staged in the BBC’s boardroom on day one, during which I acted as a facilitator-rapporteur. That statement was met with vigorous nods of agreement – from newspaper reporters and online editors to radio producers.

But how do you define verification? Can it evolve in the manner of a radio news story, filling in blanks over time? Can it be crowdsourced, with media consumers acting as widely-distributed fact-checkers with collective expertise? And what standards of verification and accuracy do audiences expect of professional journalists in the social media sphere?

What was clear from the conference was the great variety of approaches to verifying social media content within professional media organisations.

One participant reported: “Our default is to publish unchecked information with a disclaimer that it’s unverified.” Such an approach has become relatively standard for some of the world’s big media brands on breaking news stories, but many journalists remain concerned about the implications of this shift for professional practice and traditional ethics. There was debate about the methodology of crowd-sourcing verification, often attributed to NPR’s Andy Carvin, with criticism of the practice from Sky News’ Neal Mann. Mann insisted that traditional journalistic processes of verification should be applied to tweeting. In his view, Carvin risks magnifying inaccuracy. I expressed the view that a combination of both approaches equates with best practice in social media verification terms.

At the very control-oriented, conservative end of the social media spectrum, another contributor reported that a political correspondent in his organisation had her tweets vetted prior to posting as part of a strict social media policy that reflected residual corporate nervousness about accuracy and editorial integrity in the social media space. “If she’s

SOCIAL MEDIA IS A THING YOU DO WITH – NOT AT – AN AUDIENCE.

# FACEBOOK IS A ROLODEX

JULIE POSETTI SPEAKS TO VADIM LAVRUSIK – FACEBOOK’S NEWLY APPOINTED JOURNALIST PROGRAMME MANAGER – ABOUT FACEBOOK, JOURNALISM AND AFRICA.

**JP: What’s Facebook’s mission inside the world’s newsrooms?**

**VL:** Facebook is a people-powered news platform that anyone can tap into. This also applies to the world’s newsrooms. We want to provide newsrooms with tools to connect with their audience and community on Facebook. In the last year, the average news organisation saw a 300% increase in referrals from Facebook. It’s a way for people to discover content and connect with journalists and news organisations.

**JP: Twitter is a natural homeland for news junkies, how can Facebook compete with the 140-character domination of breaking social news?**

**VL:** Social tools have made the lives of journalists easier and their work more efficient. What Facebook is great at enabling you to do is reporting at scale and crowdsourcing content from authentic sources. Its strength is in scale. For example, when I was reporting on a student suicide three years ago, I went to the police station and picked up the policy report. There was one witness, who wasn’t listed in the student or local phone directory, but she had an account on Facebook. I was able to message her privately and got a response in five minutes. I was the only person she gave an interview to from the press. I later asked her why, and she said it was because I contacted her through Facebook and she was able to learn something about me and decide whether she would do the interview. This also exemplifies one of our other strengths: the idea of authentic identity, a person is who they really say they are on Facebook. Because I wasn’t a reporter cold-calling her, she decided she would give me the interview.

**JP: How do you see the relationship between Facebook and journalists changing in the next year?**

**VL:** In the next year, I expect more journalists will tap into Facebook as a reporting and distribution tool. For journalists, Facebook is a rolodex of more than 500-million people who can be sources for their work. Journalists today have more work and have to do that work 10 times faster. Facebook can help them be more efficient in finding sources, getting story tips and provides them with a way to distribute their content.

**JP: How does Facebook see the future of journalism in Africa – a continent of developing nations, where desktop internet access remains extremely limited but mobile connectivity is prolific?**

**VL:** There is a lot of opportunity for journalists in Africa to tap into Facebook as a reporting tool. As we continue to improve our feature phones app, this opportunity will come to fruition as journalists in the developing countries will be able to access Facebook on-the-go through their mobile devices.

**JP: Does Facebook have a strategy for gaining traction within African media and among news consumers? What is it?**

**VL:** We’re in the process of developing our international strategy as a whole, which will include resources for African journalists and media.

**JP: How many active Facebook users have been identified in Africa?**

**VL:** Those aren’t publicly available at this time. (But) I can assure you that we’re continuing to grow in developing countries.

*Lavrusik is also an adjunct professor teaching social media at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He previously worked as the community manager and social media strategist at Mashable.com*

on air, nobody vets what she says beforehand. But it’s a bit of a sop to management to have tweets checked before publication,” he said.

While some journalists spoke of simply transposing traditional processes of verification onto the Twittersverse, for example, by following up tweets with direct messages, phone calls and face-to-face meetings where appropriate, others talked of the need for technology development to assist the process and, importantly, appropriate newsroom resourcing for the tasks of verifying “User Generated Content” (as the BBC still refers to external editorial contributions) from myriad sources.

At the BBC, a critical role is played by a group of journalists attached to the UGC Hub -- a desk in the centre of the London newsroom that seeks to verify social content.

One idea emerging from day one’s closed discussions that fascinated me was the concept of various platforms being imbued with different standards of verification and audience expectations.

One participant spoke of the lower threshold for publication of unverified information on Facebook: “We might put it out there unverified on our Facebook page, but we wouldn’t print it until we’d verified it.” And another print journalist shared a similar approach: “Our journalists use social media to correct over time, in between print runs.”

These comments reflect 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. As one participant observed, “It’s deeply insulting and condescending to audiences to assume they can’t tell the difference between professional and personal social media publication by journalists.”

## What does “open media” look like?

While the themes of the discussions at BBCSMS appeared at times to have hardly shifted from 2009, there were many examples of progress and, in particular, four big names showcased how social media is creating openness, collaboration and creativity in legacy media: Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

Al Jazeera Turkish social media co-ordinator Esra Dogramaci, offered a useful formula for distilling social media content: (Information - noise) + context = responsible reporting.

She also told the conference about Al Jazeera’s role in the Middle East and North Africa as a social media trainer and equipper of citizen journalists – functions that became important during the Arab Spring when attacks on Al Jazeera from regimes under fire resulted in reliance on unofficial correspondents who’d been trained and equipped by the Qatar-based broadcaster.

Dogramaci’s address was one of the most impressive of the conference, but she was questioned by senior BBC journalists in the audience, who effectively accused Al Jazeera of facilitating revolutions. The inference was that an activist model of journalism, particularly one that involves “collaboration” with citizens and equips them to report, was incompatible with professional journalistic practice and the value of objectivity. In the context of a global conference on social media, that view seemed particularly narrow.

While *The Guardian’s* representatives demonstrated why they’ve been so successful in the social media space, with an emphasis on openness, *The Washington Post’s* managing editor Raju Narisetti highlighted the importance of metrics (stats on number of followers, replies and hits on links shared) in effecting cultural change within newsrooms reluctant to enter the social media age: “Show them the metrics. Link the move to audience and ego,” he urged.

Meanwhile, one of *The New York Times’s* social media editors, Liz Heron, announced the move to humanise the *NYT’s* main Twitter news feed which operated as a cyborg account. She reported to the conference that a blend of personal and professional content was proving most successful in reporters’ efforts to build audience via social media, pointing to two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning *NYT* foreign correspondent, Nick Kristof’s successful approach to Facebook journalism.

## What’s next?

Despite the organisers’ stated desire to avoid another talkfest about social media, that’s precisely what #BBCSMS was. But that’s not necessarily a bad outcome. Opportunities for reflective practice in journalism are few and far between. The consequence: nowhere near enough critical examination of the profession by practitioners once they graduate from journalism school. And talking generates ideas that can trigger action and relationships across geographic, cultural and corporate boundaries. This, in turn, could help mature the profession’s engagement with social media.

The event had some ambitious (and as yet unfulfilled) goals, including the possible formulation of a universal set of social media principles for journalists. The key goal, articulated by one of the conference organisers, Claire Wardle, was to generate real action from the conversations. And she concluded the conference by challenging participants to ask themselves “So what?”

So, what now? Well, for my part, I outlined some research goals designed to steer a course for scholars investigating the impact of social media on journalism ahead of the conference.

And, in the aftermath, I established a Facebook page (BBCSMS Social Media Research Incubator), curated in partnership with some of the other academics involved in the conference, designed to connect researchers, journalists, start-ups, media outlets and developers. So, that’s one tangible outcome.

More broadly, the vibrant conversation started during the event continues under the #BBCSMS hashtag on Twitter. But sustaining the conversation and facilitating funded research outcomes from these conversations will be the real test.

For journalism educators grappling with how to train the next generations of journalists, the message from the summit was clear: *The Guardian’s* Pickard said she expects all journalism students to be tweeting in their first year, while *The Washington Post’s* Narisetti said he looks for evidence of social media skills during recruitment.

As for ongoing attempts at converting those social media detractors and cultural change resisters lingering in the dusty corners of some newsrooms? A combination of carrot and stick approaches was suggested, while the benefits of mentoring from senior journalistic converts were also mentioned. But one of the participants in the day one workshops summed it up best for me: “It’s been long enough. Time to stop encouraging and tell them to just get on with it.”