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SOCIAL JOURNALISM: OUTSIDE-IN AND INSIDE-OUT

BY JANE B SINGER

In the world in which most journalists feel at home, their social interactions with people outside the newsroom are defined by occupational roles – and, by and large, controlled by the news workers who occupy those roles. But networked media, especially participatory journalism options such as comments and social media formats such as Facebook and Twitter, challenge the roles and undermine the controls. The resulting pressures come from two directions.

The “outside-in” pressures reflect a world in which everyone is not merely a potential source – a potential realised only when and if the journalist says so – but can produce unsolicited, unverified information at any time.

The “inside-out” issues involve the journalist’s own participation in social media, requiring a finely tuned ability to separate truth from “truthiness” and the professional from the personal.

Outside-in

“Who is a journalist?” is no longer the simple question it was just a few years ago. The interactivity of an open computer network has been married to the ubiquity, portability, and increasing sophistication of personal mobile technology, enabling anyone, anywhere to capture and publish information.

For news organisations around the world, this blessing has been decidedly mixed.

The intangible benefits are easy to enumerate. The civic good generated by an open marketplace of ideas. The enrichment of engaging with other people in other places. The ability to tell more stories and tell them better – to reach “a better approximation of the truth” by being “more open, more participative, more networked” (Rusbridger, 2012).

Tangible benefits may be even easier to see. Virtually all “user-generated content” is free – freely available on individuals’ social media accounts or freely contributed to the news organisation in the form of comments, announcements, photos, and news tips. It comes from people knowledgeable about topics unfamiliar to journalists and from those living in places far from resource-crunched newsrooms. And, crucially, it generates website traffic.

Indeed, nearly every news organisation around the democratic world now invites user contributions. But those invitations typically come with a startlingly lengthy list of caveats and cautions. A small sample from the English-language cohort:

South Africa: Independent Newspapers list a 14-point set of guidelines for use of forum and chat rooms. Among other things, users must not use the site to post any content that is “threatening, harmful, abusive, defamatory, vulgar, obscene or otherwise objectionable.”

Australia: The 13-point list from *Sydney Morning Herald* publisher Fairfax Media forbids posting content that contains nudity or “excessive” violence, or that is “defamatory, obscene, offensive, threatening, abusive, pornographic, vulgar, profane, (or) indecent,” including material “likely to offend, insult or humiliate others” based on race, religion and so on.

Britain: *The Times*’ prohibition list totals 31 items, including banning any “content or activity” that “promotes racism, terrorism, hatred or physical harm of any kind against any group or individual or links to websites that promote the same.”

India: *The Times of India* warns users not to “host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, update or share” information that is “grossly harmful, harassing, blasphemous, defamatory, obscene, pornographic, paedophilic” and more; nor may users encourage gambling or money laundering.

United States: *USA Today* users may not “engage in personal attacks, harass or threaten, question the motives behind others’ posts or comments, deliberately inflame or disrupt the conversation, or air personal grievances about other users,” among items in another lengthy list of

prohibitions similar to those elsewhere.

You get the idea. News organisations are concerned about legal repercussions caused by harm to others as well as about harm to their own credibility as information providers – all in public view and with any user contribution capable of going viral in an instant.

“Mostly the comments you get on individual stories on the website are not terribly well-thought-through or just vitriolic,” an editor at Canada’s *Globe and Mail* told us during our research for *Participatory Journalism* (Singer et al, 2011: 103). “Very few of them make intelligent comments or have intelligent things to say.”

Nor are people notably more likely to be civil in their contributions to local news outlets, despite writing for and about their neighbors.

One journalist at a local British newspaper, for instance, described “most” user comments as “vulgar, abusive and generally worthless. It cheapens our product and, in some cases, offends our sources” who fear becoming “the subject of human ‘bear baiting’” (Singer, 2010: 134).

Essentially, the issue is one of user ethics – the expectation (or hope) that every person who contributes will treat others with dignity and respect. Many will. Some, inevitably, won’t. The latter can drive away not only sources but also advertisers and other disgusted users, creating economic as well as journalistic problems for the news organisation.

Still, the benefits remain compelling. So while a few outlets have abandoned comments altogether, most have sought solutions. Nearly universal is the requirement that users register in order to comment, providing at least a valid email address and, generally, a real name. Registration creates some accountability to the media outlet, though screen names may continue to mask identity from other users.

Recent technological enhancements have enabled news outlets to go further, shifting responsibility and even considerable editorial control onto users’ shoulders. Community management systems, such as Pluck and Disqus, easily enable users not only to flag problems but also to recommend interesting comments or contributors.

Use of Facebook Comments is another newish trend; newspapers including *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), the *Daily Telegraph* (UK), and the *Wall Street Journal* (USA) now encourage users to sign in through Facebook to post a comment. Facebook largely removes the anonymity that augments likelihood of abusive posts (Loke, 2012). Put simply, “trolls don’t like their friends to know that they’re trolls,” as a *Los Angeles Times* online editor put it (Sonderman, 2011).

Of course, comments are only one kind of “participatory journalism.” People with smartphones avidly share news as well as views.

In 2005, the BBC jumped on the ability to publish photos taken inside Underground tunnels as people evacuated after the London bombings (Sambrook, 2005). The 2009 Iranian elections and 2011 Arab Spring uprisings drove home the additional value – timely, informational, emotional, communal -- of blogs and microblogs such as Twitter (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012). Eyewitness accounts from people on the scene fill the news vacuum that immediately follows a major event, before any reporters arrive, as well as diversifying the coverage (Bruno, 2011; Hermida, 2012).

Andy Carvin of National Public Radio in the United States, who processed 400 to 500 tweets a day (and occasionally well over 1 000) from the Middle East during the upheaval in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, describes researching

and reporting through Twitter as “a combination of real-time news and real-time oral history” (Sims, 2011).

But like comments, tweets and other social media forms come with cautionary flags. Of particular concern is the speed with which misinformation can circle the globe. People tend to retweet what they want to be true, which is sure to be more provocative and engaging than the correction that may or may not follow (Silverman, 2012).

For journalists, then, a crucial decision is when to publish information obtained through social media and when to wait to verify it. Some observers predict the emergence of a new newsroom role, a “curator” whose job is to filter, verify, and edit relevant content circulating online (Bruno, 2011).

In the meantime, as these “outside-in” examples suggest, news organisations are wrestling with how to encourage economically and civically valuable user contributions while discouraging those that are neither.

And user contributions are only half the story of journalistic life in a social media space.

Inside-out

As the consideration of how to handle users’ news tips suggests, the other half involves journalists’ own interactions in these shared spaces, which can be similarly challenging for news workers accustomed to a more sheltered existence within newsroom walls that separate those inside from those outside, literally and metaphorically.

Virtually every major news outlet now has an active social media presence, with websites prominently displaying exhortations to “like us on Facebook” and “follow us on Twitter.”

However, studies in the United States indicate the vast majority of posts and tweets are promotional – teasers highlighting and linking to a published story (Holcomb et al., 2011). Of course, there are exceptions, among both individuals and news organisations. We already met NPR’s Andy Carvin, for instance, who is an active – indeed, hyperactive – curator of information circulating through the Twitterverse. At the *Chicago Tribune*, social media pioneers have created a paper-hat-clad character named Colonel Tribune. The affable Colonel serves as a kind of “goofy front man” for the newspaper (Foster, 2009) on Facebook and Twitter, where he has more than 800,000 followers, answering questions and offering commentary; he even hosts real-life meet-ups between *Tribune* readers and journalists.

But by and large, journalists’ use of social networks to date has been restrained – and, frequently, constrained by employer policies. Though not generally as exhaustive as the policies for user behaviour, which bear an unmistakable legal thumbprint, these ethical guidelines can be restrictive all the same.

One key concern is that journalists will undermine the organisation’s credibility by passing along bogus information. Another is that they will jeopardise their status as neutral observers and reporters.

Social media sourcing policies to help guard against inaccuracy are increasingly common. One implemented by Reuters has been widely cited as a model for helping



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journalists take advantage of social media as an information source while maintaining “a posture of open-mindedness and enlightened skepticism” about the credibility of that information.

The *Toronto Star* policy, for example, addresses fears about passing along information that turns out to be premature (as numerous tweeted celebrity deaths have been lately) or just plain wrong. “When reporting breaking news through social media, the source of the information should be included and readers must be told if the information has not yet been verified by the *Star*,” it states. “If such information is subsequently found to be inaccurate, that should be communicated through those same social media tools as soon as possible.”

Lack of editorial oversight in a rapid-fire social network is a related concern. BBC News has a “golden rule” for social media activities carried out in its name: “Whatever is published – on Twitter, Facebook or anywhere else – **MUST HAVE A SECOND PAIR OF EYES PRIOR TO PUBLICATION.**” Yes, the capitalisation is theirs. It’s in bold-face type, too.

The BBC’s main UK competitor, Sky News, generated a flurry of critical commentary last winter with a similar policy advising staffers not to retweet “information posted by other journalists or people on Twitter” in an effort to ensure that “there is sufficient editorial control of stories reported by Sky News journalists and that the news desks remain the central hub for information going out on all our stories.”

News organisations also have issued cautions about the danger of mixing personal and professional roles. South Africa’s *Mail&Guardian*, which posted its social media policy in January 2012, sums up the issue:

“The bedrock of our authority as a publication is our impartiality. Your profiles, retweets, likes and postings can reveal your political and ideological affiliations. Be very sure that your audience either understands that you are professional enough to put those aside in the

workspace, or that those affiliations will not be construed as having an effect on your ability to do objective journalism.”

Similarly, *The New York Times* advises editorial staffers to be circumspect in what they post, even on personal blogs. “Bloggers may write lively commentary on their preferences in food, music, sports or other avocations, but as journalists they must avoid taking stands on divisive public issues,” it states. “A blog that takes a political stand is as far out of bounds as a letter to the editor supporting or opposing a candidate.”

Critics see such policies as restrictive and an indication that overly cautious news organisations are out of touch with the way information travels around social media spaces.

“These kinds of rules seem to be aimed at trying to remove the human being from the process, something that may work in traditional forms of media, but fails miserably when using social tools like Twitter,” blogger and technology journalist Matthew Ingram (2012) wrote in response to the Sky News policy. “The whole point of using them is to be social, and that means expressing human emotions,” he added. “The best social-media policies ... simply ask reporters and editors to be themselves, but to think about what they post before doing so, and to use common sense and ‘don’t be stupid.’”

Yet more broadly, both the “outside-in” policies covering users and the “inside-out” ones covering journalists are experiments. By testing various options, journalists are attempting to understand which ethical guidelines from a well-understood past might remain suitable in, or at least adaptable to, a still-bewildering future.

Will the laws of journalistic nature hold in the uncharted world of social media? So far, journalists seem to believe – or hope – that they will. But like all good experiments, this one is ongoing. An open network is open not just to contributors but also to perpetual change.

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