The virtual newsroom: What new media means for modern journalism

Com 417

Issues and perspectives in communication

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1A. Introduction

Journalism as we know it is changing. With the introduction of new media, the world of reporting has become a venerable wild wild west. There is no denying that new media plays a titanic role in our society, but as the role of journalism in the 21st century comes into question, so does it’s relationship with new media. This paper seeks to explore that relationship, observe the role of new media platforms in comparison to traditional print journalism, and ultimately determine the future direction of journalism as a whole. In order to achieve this purpose, this paper will draw on critical research from publications that are considered the authority in journalism studies as well as research from leading new media publications.

2B. Description of the issue

Journalism has been a principally print medium since the term was coined. With the invention of television it progressed to broadcast, but print journalism still maintained a starring role in people’s lives. Over the years, the role of traditional journalism has undergone a major change with the invention and popularity of the Internet. The Internet has given rise to new media platforms, which have drastically shaped the way that people get their news today.

According to research from the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, some 51% of Smartphone owners use that device to get news, as do 56% of tablet owners. And nearly a quarter of the population, 23%, now gets news on multiple digital devices. These new media platforms have made traditional newspapers nearly irrelevant. Ten years ago, no one would have guessed that 44% of the American population would own Smartphones (Mitchell, 2012) and certainly could not have
predicted the explosion of tablet ownership and usage. Technology has forever altered the media landscape. These constant changes mean that traditional journalism must either adapt with the times, or be left behind due to lack of funding.

With the rise of new media, the question becomes, what do the platforms actually mean for the practice of journalism? The influence of new media on traditional news reporting became an undeniable factor during the events of 2011’s wave of uprisings in Arab nations, coined as “The Arab Spring” by media outlets. Twitter became the platform for live information from Tahir Square in Egypt, an area many traditional journalists were unable or unwilling to visit due to the extreme violence. CNN or the BBC did not break the first reports of the protest that would start the spring of revolutions; they were disseminated through Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Anderson Cooper and Fareed Zakaria were not the original reporters on the story, instead countless social media users and bloggers in Sidi Bouzid who were witnessing the protests first hand took on the role of news breakers. The question that has arisen from events like this is whether or not Twitter and other new media mean the end of traditional journalism and mediums.

3C. Key terms and related theory

Throughout this paper several terms will be reoccurring due to their importance in the context of the subject. This section provides reference to the meaning of these terms. The invention and rise in popularity of new media has created a new vernacular for media professionals and every day consumers alike.

New media: New media refers to the technological inventions that have become commonly used mediums. These are the mediums that have come into use since traditional media. The New Media Institute defines New Media as a 21st Century catchall
term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound. It is important to realize that this is not a static term, like traditional media is. It is a constantly evolving category, as new mediums arise the category grows. Current examples of new media include social networks, Smartphones and mobile technology, and blogs.

*Twitter*: This paper will refer heavily to Twitter. Twitter on its own is simply a social website. It is, in effect, an instant messaging tool that has been expanded to a massive, global scale. Twitter defines itself as a "real-time information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what you find interesting." At the heart of Twitter are small bursts of information called Tweets. Each Tweet is 140 characters long, a challenge that makes it a micro-blogging platform in many ways. This character limit can cause some frustration for first time users and in many cases, journalists. It requires a user to edit their thoughts and decide what is important in their message, something that is valuable in the age of the 24-hour news cycle.

Within Twitter, there are several practices that a user should be aware of.

*Live Tweeting*: Twitter's definition of live Tweeting is to engage on Twitter for a continuous period of time—anywhere from 20 minutes to a few hours—with a sequence of focused Tweets. In the context of this paper, live tweeting has become an integral tool for journalists of all kinds.

*Hashtags*: Hashtags mark keywords or topics in Tweets. They are composed of a single word or phrase beginning with a "#" and with no spaces or punctuation. Clicking on one will lead the user to a search featuring Tweets with that same hashtag. Hashtags
have become a form of filing system for Twitter. Generally, live Tweeting goes hand in hand with hashtags, as the hashtag is the point of entry for the conversation.

**Blogging:** The concept of blogging is essentially an online journal. The term comes from 'web log’, which defines the actual site. As the act of blogging and following blogs has become more popular, the trends have changed dramatically. Formerly, only one author usually authored blogs and in many cases they were only about one subject. Blogging of now looks much different. Blogs are written by multiple people and range on so many topics that many times they become their own magazine or daily newspaper style endeavors. Because of this growth, blogs have become an increasingly trusted resource for information.

**4D. Review of selected sources**

- **Farewell to journalism, Robert W. McChesney**

  This article takes a very pessimistic view of the future of journalism. McChesney writes that “unless there is a dramatic rethinking in the United States, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, all signs point to a continued deterioration of journalism” (2012). While this article does not directly concern the role of social media, it looks critically at the state of journalism currently and exposes the drastic need to keep it from failing. It has begun to rely on press releases and pre-made stories, which McChesney feels are detrimental to democracy (2012). This review of journalism and what it will be without evolving shows the crucial element that determining the role new media plays in journalism has.

- **Tweet the press, Matthew Clayfield**

  Clayfield’s article from Metro is an appropriate place to start when discussing new media and the role it plays in the life of a reporter. This article offers at critical examination of
the ways that journalists use Twitter. It highlights the pitfalls and opportunities offered by
the medium and provide examples of journalists who have utilized it successfully,
delving into how they were able to use the medium and their later thoughts about it. The
article selects the main practices that have arisen from Twitter; live-tweeting news
events, crowdsourcing, and anchor journalism. Live tweeting the news has been one of
the biggest method developments due to Twitter. Clayfield quotes Julie Posetti, an
academic at the University of Canberra, explaining, “the platform [Twitter] can be used
for real-time reporting by professional journalists in a manner as kosher as a broadcast
news live report,” and adds that it is not only kosher but also increasingly necessary. This
necessity comes not from the development of new media, but from the 24-hour news
cycle that has gained prominence to the point of becoming the normal format for most
news. This has changed the role of the traditional print journalist, forcing them to become
live reporters in order to remain competitive (Clayfield, 2012). Another method that has
evolved with social media is crowdsourcing. While many journalists only use this
method casually and prefer their time honored contact lists, some have become so skilled
in it that they have been able to tell stories that would have been impossible to report
otherwise. In the Arab Spring case, this use of crowdsourcing by ABC Radio journalist
Jess Hill resulted in the first report from anywhere in the world on Gaddafi's use of
African soldiers, or 'mercenaries', against his citizenry (Clayfield, 2012). The final
method highlighted in Clayfield’s article is the invention of the anchor journalist. In this
case, journalists have become virtual Twitter switchboards for good journalism,
debunking rumors and spreading truth in their place. Clayfield explains that when a news
story is so big that hundreds of thousands of people are utilizing the hash tag feature of
Twitter at once, anchor journalists step in and "in short, they take the aforementioned maelstrom and channel it to a gentle current” (2012).

c. Embracing the future, Paul Steinle & Sara Brown

This article was based on the research study done by Steinle and Brown. For 13 months in 2010 and 2011, the two visited 50 newspapers across the United States – one in each state – to discover first hand what the status of the newsroom was. They selected a cross section of leading daily and weekly newspapers and interviewed each newspaper’s publisher, editor and Web site manager. Their findings led them to the conclusion that the industry was troubled, but far from dying. This article highlights their key findings that led to the conclusion of the industry state. This is organized by what stayed the same at successful newspapers, what changed at successful newspapers.

Concerning the traits that remain in place at successful newspapers, the main idea was to continue with the critical elements of a newspaper’s function in society. It must continue to act as a community conversation facilitator. This general motto was seen in every newsroom the authors visited. Emphasizing local news, providing watchdog reporting, facilitating community dialogue and serving the public remain the fundamental keys to success (Steinle & Brown, 2012). The classic newsroom mantra ‘don’t make stuff up’ remains highly important. Ethical and credible reporting cannot disappear simply because the medium has changed. Steinle and Brown quote Thomas Dewell, the coeditor of Wyoming’s Jackson Hole News & Guide explaining the need for credibility; "If a newspaper doesn't have its credibility, its audience figures it out real quick. And its audience turns away” (2012).
The changes brought on have a lot to do with the new medium. Newspapers are embracing digital delivery. The article reports that editors are increasingly changing to think digitally. “The way it is now, when we get together for our morning meeting each day, we're not thinking print first; we're thinking Web first,” said Dennis Anderson, managing editor of Kansas' Lawrence Journal-World (Steinle & Brown, 2012). Not only are papers now required to write for digital, they are also required to work faster. "We've changed the way we think. We're more real time," says Sara Scott, community news director of the Citizen Patriot in Jackson, Michigan. "We have veteran reporters who can recall the days when they were on deadline and they loved it, and now they're back on deadline again." All the daily newspapers in the sample posted breaking news on their Web sites whenever local news events occur (Steinle & Brown, 2012). The medium has also created challenges. Some of these challenges include fractionalized audiences, the need for a reorganized newsroom and the difficulty of funding a paper on the 10 percent commission that comes from online advertising.

d. News in the age of now, Nicholas Carr

Carr’s article examines the way that readers ingest news in the digital age. The way that the reader consumes their news is of great importance for the way that journalists write. The case that is made by Carr is one for brevity in journalism. He points out that skimming is now the new reading (Carr, 2010). He explains that the change has happened due mainly to the medium. “For 500 years the medium of print has been training us to pay attention,” Carr explains, “The genius of a page of printed text is that nothing else is going on. The page shields us from the distractions that bombard us and break our concentration. The Web promulgates a very different mode of reading and thinking. Far
from shielding us from distractions, it inundates us with them” (2010). Because we are a culture of ‘now’ we hurry on to the next new thing even when we are aware that the next new thing is not necessarily one of substance. He concludes that this research leads to the facts that if journalism is going to survive as a whole, it is going to have to be a counterweight to the Net. Journalists are going to have to find creative ways to encourage and reward readers for slowing down and engaging in deep, undistracted modes of reading and thinking (Carr, 2010).

e. **What is journalism’s place in social media? Geneva Overholser**

Overholser takes the position that the current media is looking at social media the wrong way. She explains that “social media are not so much mere tools as they are the ocean we’re going to be swimming in—at least until the next chapter of the digital revolution comes along,” and journalists should instead focus on the roles they need to play in order to bring journalistic values into the territory of social media (2009). She is quick to stress that she does not feel that journalism is completely defunct or is no longer important. Instead she stresses that journalists have to find a way to be a part of the social media conversations that have become reporting tools in their own right (Overholser, 2009). The main point that is made in this article is the serious need to bring journalistic ethics to a medium that, as of now, has no real ethical code. She maintains that the web has introduced a new element of democracy to journalism and those who do not embrace will fade into irrelevance (Overholser, 2009).

f. **Blogs, tweets, social media, and the news media, Robert G. Picard**

In this article from the Nieman reports, Picard takes the position that the simple fact that social media is popular with some journalists does not make it the best idea to use in
all cases nor does it make it an innocuous medium. He cites the widespread adoption of mobile and web media by everyone from TIME to the Dallas Morning News and CNN. Their mantra, he says, is to be anywhere anytime on any platform, but he questions the value of this strategy. He proposes a series of questions that must be raised concerning this strategy. News organizations must be aware of the financial value of technology and ask how the use of a particular media will generate money. If it does not generate money or at least pay for itself, its necessity should be re-evaluated (Picard, 2009). Reasons for use, he suggests, should be based around the actual strategic thinking and informed decisions and not on the hype generated by this medium. He also stresses the need to understand the benefits of using new media. Many news organizations see the ease of communication with readers as a valuable commodity, however this has yet to be an effective creator of news products and revenue. Just because people are listening at the time does not mean that they are listening all the time. The relationships don’t necessarily translate into greater economic value (Pickard, 2009).

**g. The Revolutionary Force of Facebook and Twitter, Jillian C. York**

Jillian C. York puts the role of social media into context, examining the role of social media in the new media landscape of countries that were part of the Arab Spring. In many of these countries, the media was largely state run and censored, with many topics completely off limits to write about (York, 2011). The holes that were left by this lack of good mainstream journalism were filled in by blogs and group blogs like Mamfakinch publish information about the ongoing protests sparked by the February 20th movement (York, 2011). While these forms certainly add to the media landscape, the question must be asked if they are journalism or activism. In the case of nations like Egypt that are filled
with gaps in the media due to corruption and governments that use it as a propaganda tool, blogs can be seen as journalism (York, 2011). Active participation in journalism, made possible by social networking sites, is therefore changing the region's journalistic landscape and allowing for commentary not possible in even the most alternative of venues (York, 2011).

h. Sandy, social media and journalism’s new frontier, Ray Bresica

In this Huffington Post article, Ray Bresica recalls the recent natural disaster brought on in the form of Hurricane Sandy. When the storm hit the east coast, social media skyrocketed to thousands of tweets per minute and news outlets focused all of their coverage on it, just a week before the presidential election. While outlets like CNN sent journalists to the front lines, Bresica still did not feel the reality of the situation in his hometown through the traditional media the way that social media reporting was making it seem. He described the feelings created by the storm and the ability to convey them through social media. “Thousands upon thousands of micro-documentarists took to their windows, the streets, and the internet to track Sandy's paces and share them with the world,” Bresica writes. “The pointillist vision crafted by many hands offered not just a sense of the events as they transpired, but also of the emotion -- the fear, the determination, and even the wonder -- shared by those in the midst of the catastrophe” (2012). In a situation where emotions so high, social media reporting seems more appropriate to many. Bresica explains that, “while traditional journalism may not be dead, for one night, I was grateful for my friends, and their friends, and their friends-of-friends, to keep me close, in touch, and in tune with the true heartbeat of the city, something a newscast has never done” (2012).
i. How social media has devalued journalism, Milo Yiannopoulos.

Yiannopolus looks critically at the devalued nature that has befallen journalists. He recalls fondly the days when reporters enjoyed the status of respect from their peers and the anticipation of investigative journalism. He argues that there is a certain type of person who can be a journalist, equivocating it with a disease one is born with. He argues that the open-ended critiques have changed the way stories are written noting that, “the process is open to inspection, it has acquired imitators and fierce but uninformed critics. That makes the product worthless: too many people are churning out too much substandard guff, while the quality outlets are racing to pump out more content, while acting unforgivably timidly. Thus we are locked in an unnecessary and entirely avoidable death spiral, brought about by a lack of confidence” (2012). He asks proponents of the ‘democratization’ of news to ask themselves three questions, “What other profession has opened its inner workings, laid bare its methods for public scrutiny and prostituted itself before its customers… and survived, commercially? What other profession is so crucial to the workings of a healthy democracy? And how much would be lost if all you had to go on was Twitter for your news?” (2012). The answer could be daunting, he points out, as it could mean the end of high quality reporting on issues that truly need to be uncovered.

j. The Twitter death epidemic, Barb Palser

This article examines the necessity of newspapers and traditional press through the lens of one of the oddest Twitter trends that has come with the platform. In the last few years, Twitter users have spread rumors that just about any celebrity you can think of has died, using the hashtag #RIP[Celebrity] which then spreads like wildfire. Sometimes the
rumors are true, most times they are false. In the case of the death of musician and actor Whitney Huston, the rumors were correct. Because of this the headline that was adopted by many popular Internet news outlets and blogs was "Twitter Breaks News of Whitney Houston Death 27 Minutes Before Press," implying that the medium broke the news itself (Palser, 2012). Palser asserts that this is an incorrect assumption because "individuals and organizations may use Twitter as a vehicle for breaking news, but that's not the same thing as Twitter breaking news" (2012). While this may just seem like rhetorical semantics, Palser stresses that it is more than that. "While they might not mean it literally, bloggers and news organizations that credit Twitter and other social networks with "reporting" or "breaking" news are implying a contest between social networks and the press, in which lumbering news organizations are smacked down by a faster and more agile rival" (Palser, 2012). The truth of the matter is that the media are working through Twitter, and not against it on a time crunch. Palser explains that the first news outlet to break the story, AP, was not out reported, because they have the authority to be trusted in the matter of life and death. "The first person to tweet the information had far more credibility than the individuals who first tweeted about Whitney Houston's death and his exuberant tweet may have had a direct impact the news cycle," Palser explains. "But, as he noted, the information was rumor until news outlets confirmed and carried the story forward" (2012). According to Palser, this demonstrates that "rather than marginalizing the news media, Twitter and other social networks may be reinforcing their value" (2012). In the end, the AP and other news sources simply reported quickly and accurately, and used social media to leverage their coverage of the story (Palser, 2012).

5E. Summary of the reviewed sources
The previously reviewed sources all have several things in common. While they were all written about different specific issues, they all concerned the new roles emerging in media and journalism. They offered solutions, opinions, and simple research. All of the articles eventually led to the point that social media and journalism are absolutely intertwined, whether journalists like it or not. They answer the question of is social media a new part of journalism with a resounding yes. It is important to note, however, that these articles stress the fact that the medium is not the message in this case. They differentiate normal Twitter users from journalists using Twitter by the ethics that a journalist must follow, the fact checking that news outlets offer and the specific set of skills that a journalist brings to the table. They also affirm that while the media landscape is changing, there is still a major place for news organizations within the changing field. Not only is there a place, the articles say, there is a need for traditional style news to remain, even if the platform changes.

6F. Resolution

The overall solution that all of the scholarly articles that were reviewed above suggested was simple. Grow. While they all affirmed that there is no silver bullet for fixing the state of newspaper circulation in this country or saving the traditional newsroom, they did express faith in the journalists. Social media and new media must not be looked at as impeding journalists or destroying the news as we know it. It should be used as a tool, like it was in the Arab Spring or in Hurricane Sandy coverage, for journalists to better do their craft. It was very clear from the reviewed sources that if news organizations and journalists cannot evolve with the mediums their readers are using, they will cease to be distinctly relevant.
References:


