2013

The 'twitterisation' of investigative journalism

Julie N. Posetti
University of Canberra, jposetti@uow.edu.au

The 'twitterisation' of investigative journalism

Abstract

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, the 'social tools' most widely used by journalists in their work, are transforming professional norms and values. The ways journalists engage with these platforms are: challenging notions of objectivity through the convergence of personal and professional lives; propelling the mainstreaming of 'open journalism' models, which promote collaborative research and reportage; and even upending established verification processes. So, what are the implications for investigative journalism? What are the potential benefits of 'social journalism' for research, investigation and verification? How can journalists and news publishers most effectively deploy social media platforms in pursuit of investigative stories? And what are the pitfalls of this brave new world?

This chapter will seek to answer these questions and work towards developing a best-practice approach to social journalism principles in the context of investigative reporting, with an emphasis on the role and impact of Twitter as the tool of choice for most journalists. The data for this chapter is drawn from: online interviews with 25 tweeting journalists conducted in 2009 (Posetti 2009a; 2009b; 2009c); a case study of Twitter and political reporting, based on the 2009 Australian Liberal leadership coup which became known by its hashtag #Spill, 1 featuring interviews with eight Canberra Press Gallery journalists (Posetti 2010b); the record of journalist working group contributions from the 2011 BBC Social Media Summit (Posetti 2011b), at which the author acted as a facilitator and rapporteur; and a 2012 qualitative survey of 10 social media-active Australian journalists engaged in investigative reporting. The data has been analysed2 with the objective of identifying the risks, pitfalls, strengths, benefits and impacts of social journalism specific to research, source identification, investigation and verification-the hallmarks of traditional investigative journalism practice.

The Twitterisation of Investigative Journalism: Collaborative modes of research and verification via social media

Julie Posetti

Professional journalists' participation in Web 2.0 communities like Twitter and Facebook, the social media platforms most widely used by journalists in their work, is having a transformative impact on established professional practices, norms and values. In particular, the convergence of private and professional lives on these platforms, and realtime interactions between 'audiences' and journalists are altering traditional reporting practices and even challenging the value of objectivity. Additionally, 'open journalism' models, which promote collaborative research and reportage, are gaining traction via the large-scale uptake of social media practice within mainstream newsrooms. One impact of this trend is the development of new verification processes that actively challenge long established standards designed to ensure accurate reporting. So, what are the implications for investigative journalism? What are the potential benefits of 'social journalism' for research, investigation and verification? How can journalists and news publishers most effectively deploy social media platforms in pursuit of investigative stories? And what are the risks and pitfalls of this brave new world?

This chapter will seek to answer these questions and work towards the development of a best practice approach to social journalism principles in the context of investigative reporting - defined here as a process involving deep research and investigation designed to lead to the revelation of new information, which may aim to activate social, corporate or political change. The role and impact of journalists' use of Twitter (the social media platform favoured for professional practice by journalists participating in the author's research between 2009-2012) with regard to investigative journalism will be the main focus of this chapter, which will probe industry expertise through a synthesis of the results of qualitative surveys, focus groups and interviews involving professional journalists active in the social media sphere. Additionally, a case study on the application of Twitter to remote coverage of the Arab Spring, produced by a pioneering Australian practitioner will be presented. Finally, a collection of social journalism tips, 'crowdsourced' from journalist participants in the research discussed, is provided with a view to delivering practice-relevant research, designed to enhance investigative journalism.

Methodology

A range of data forms the corpus for an analysis that employs a combination of Grounded Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis approaches[1]. This data includes: online interviews with 25 tweeting journalists (Australian, South African and American) conducted in 2009[2]; a 2010 Australian case study of Twitter and political reporting[3], based on the 2009 Liberal leadership coup which became known by its Twitter hashtag (#Spill[4]), featuring interviews with eight Canberra Press Gallery journalists; a record of three high level, international journalist focus groups from the 2011 BBC Social Media Summit at which the author acted as a facilitator and rapporteur[5]; and a 2012 qualitative survey of 10 exemplar social media-active Australian journalists engaged in investigative reporting. The categories identified through data analysis which are specifically relevant to this chapter's remit are: the risks, pitfalls, benefits and impacts of social journalism specific to research, source

---

[1] The researcher has adapted and combined principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1968) and Qualitative Data Analysis (c.f. Seidel 1998) to reflect the research methods of investigative journalism that involve a GT-style 'bottom-up' approach to generating categories/themes/codes and an analytical approach to data familiar to QDA researchers. This methodological approach most closely resembles that of Strauss & Corbin (Strauss 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990)

[2]

a) Posetti, J (2009) *How Journalists Are Using Twitter in Australia* Mediashift PBS
b) Posetti, J (2009) *How Journalists Balance Work, Personal Lives on Twitter* Mediashift PBS
c) Posetti, J (2009) *Rules of Engagement for Journalists on Twitter* Mediashift PBS

[3] Posetti, J (2010) *Twitterising Journalism and J-Ed: An Australian Political Journalism Case Study* Rhodes University, South Africa. Paper published in online proceedings of the 2nd World Journalism Education Congress (http://wjec.ru.ac.za)

[4] #Spill This Twitter hashtag aggregated all tweets referencing the leadership spill which saw the demise of Malcolm Turnbull in November/December 2009. In Australia, a leadership 'spill' refers to a process in which the leader's chair is vacated and the leadership is thereby thrown open to a party vote.

[5] Posetti, J (2011) **"*#bbcsms: Session report - Editorial issues: verification, referral, privacy*"** BBC College of Journalism, London (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/editorial-issues.shtml)

identification, investigation and verification – the hallmarks of traditional investigative journalism practice.

The emphasis placed on Twitter in this chapter is justified by the data collected from participants in the BBC Social Media Summit journalist focus groups facilitated by the author in 2011 and the results of the author's 2012 survey of investigative journalists. All respondents involved in the 2012 survey nominated Twitter as their professional platform of choice. Seven said they used Facebook but all users said it was a secondary tool for research and investigation, and most indicated an avoidance of public engagement via the site. Three identified LinkedIn as a site used but all who did indicated that it was only of limited value. The communal blog Tumblr was also nominated as an additional site used by one journalist. No respondents acknowledged using Google+ or MySpace. The collective reasoning regarding social media platforms of choice for journalists participating in the survey was summed up by this respondent:

> "Twitter I find the most useful, in terms of being in a collegiate community of other journos, commentators etc, to fact-check, get documents, seek contacts… It's also increasingly a tip-off service to breaking news - much faster than AAP (Australian Associated Press), that's for sure. Facebook I find next-most useful, but I use it more as a tool for cold-contacting people I don't know about stories, as an alternative when email, phone numbers or other contact details aren't readily available on the internet. Lastly, LinkedIn I maintain is a kind of Rolodex of people I've met on jobs, interviewed for stories etc who I know I will want to contact again. It's also a bit aspirational in the sense that I'll "link" with people I don't know but (who) might be professionally useful to me in future, or of interest."

The 2012 survey respondents uniformly indicated that Twitter was the superior commencement point for social media investigations and a better resource for establishing contacts. Also identifiable was the view that Facebook is primarily a 'private' social networking space, while Twitter is the preferred platform for open, professional interactions

> "Facebook (is) occasionally useful for lifestyle-related stuff, or confirming identity and finding photos. But mainly I try to keep Facebook a personal thing, with Twitter as my journalistic, professional social medium."

Four of the respondents to the 2012 survey said that they used social media to research 'every' story they worked on and four said they applied it to 'most' stories. The remaining two respondents indicated that they used social media for research, investigation and verification 'not very often'.

Note: While participants in the 2009 interviews and the 2010 case study uniformly agreed to public identification in journalism published from the research, only one of the respondents to the 2012 survey (Jess Hill) chose to be identified for publication purposes. One possible reason for this is that university ethics clearance approvals for the later research required the journalists to specifically 'opt in' to identification.

The 'Twitterisation' of Journalism

> "Twitter provides journalists with more potential sources than just about any other platform in history."[6]

Twitter is a micro-blogging platform launched in 2006, which encourages users to post 140 character-limited messages about their thoughts, experiences and activities to followers. It functions as a realtime (i.e. as live), interactive, globally interconnected, public conversation portal. It could be described as public text messaging on steroids, a collaborative newswire service, or an instantaneous international 'water cooler'[7] zone.

The platform allows users to interact with one another publicly, via (usually) openly published tweets directed at specific users, who are identified by naming 'handles' (e.g. @julieposetti) or by participating in 'hashtagged' conversations (e.g. #Ausvotes) which aggregate all tweets that include a common hashtag at a single URL. Additionally, tweeters can converse privately via Direct Message (DM), a function restricted to those following each other.

By late 2011, Twitter was estimated to have 100 million active users globally[8]. The speed of uptake and its popularity as a site for public communication involving policy

---

[6] 2012 Investigative Journalists Survey respondent

[7] The 'water cooler' effect is a term used to describe the spontaneous small talk that emerges where workers congregate. The Australian equivalent could be 'barbeque stopper'.

[8] Mangalinden, JP (2011) *Dick Costolo: Twitter has 100 million active users,* CNN Money (http://tech.fortune.cnn.com/2011/09/08/twitter-has-100-million-users/)

makers, news-breakers, journalists and democratically engaged citizens are what make it such a significant platform, despite its dwarfing by Facebook in terms of that network's almost ubiquitous status, with an estimated 850 million users worldwide[9].

In Australia, professional journalists have invaded the Twittersphere en masse, with uptake so widespread among mainstream media, that Twitter hashtags and reporters'/presenters' handles are now frequently included in news broadcasts on ABC, Channel 10, Sky, in online publications and even in print. This widespread uptake of Twitter by Australian journalists can be explained, in part, in terms of its operation as an easy access point for journalistic participation in the realtime, interactive web (i.e. Web 2.0) and its usefulness as a breaking news platform. It is a platform that bears some characteristics that are familiar to broadcast journalists (in particular those with talk radio experience) - such as live, unedited reporting capacity and facility for audience engagement.

I have adopted the term 'Twitterisation' to describe the transformative impacts of audience engagement and emerging reporting practices facilitated via many journalists' participation in the Twittersphere, as demonstrated by participants in my research. These impacts include identifiable shifts in professional journalistic practices, norms and identities that are challenging core elements of traditional journalistic ethics and professionalism in the process[10] [11] [12].

I have identified three main effects of 'Twitterisation' through my research:

1) Embedding realtime audience engagement in the journalistic process
2) The challenges wrought via the convergence/clash of personal/private and professional/public lives
3) New models of verification that challenge traditional professional standards

[9] Savitz, E (2012) *The Future of Facebook. What's After the social Graph?* Forbes (http://www.forbes.com/sites/ciocentral/2012/03/19/the-future-of-facebook-whats-after-the-social-graph/)

[10] Posetti, J (2010) Op. Cit

[11] Sheffer, ML & Shulz, B (2010) *Paradigm Shift or Passing Fad?* International Journal of Sport Communication, 3, pp. 472-484

[12] Lasorsa, DL; Lewis SC; Holton AE (2011) "Normalizing Twitter: Journalism Practice in an Emerging Communication Space" Journalism Studies, Vol 13 (1), 19-36.

(e.g Open Verification)

Twitter's transformative effect on professional media is evidenced via: the merger of opinion, observational journalism and realtime reportage; the fostering of interaction between competitors and between journalists and sources; greater transparency of the Fourth Estate's processes and practices; and via unprecedented audience engagement (as identified by journalists who have participated in my research between 2009-2012). The major increase in audience engagement is a result of the large-scale uptake of Twitter by mainstream journalists across all platforms. Many of the journalists I have interviewed and surveyed have reported being exposed to 'audiences' directly for the first time through their active participation in Twitter conversations.

Other effects of 'Twitterisation' include the re-casting of Journalists as individual reporter-brands, along with a focus on follower-engagement, collaborative investigation and the 'crowdsourcing' (see definition in the next section) of news monitoring, research, verification and story dissemination [13]. This shift in professional journalistic identities and practices is playing out against a backdrop of rapid technological change and failing industrial-era commercial models, along with increasing demands for interaction with journalists and participation in news production and distribution processes by "the people formerly known as the audience"[14]. The collapsing of boundaries between journalists and media consumers has also been noted by Australian media consultant Bronwen Clune who effectively re-purposed Rosen's oft-quoted definition of contemporary audiences, saying "Journalists are the audience formerly known as the media"[15]. That is, journalists active on social media platforms are also now audience members – consumers of citizen-generated journalism, observation and commentary.

Twitter is the logical springboard for this social media era journalistic transformation

[13] Posetti, J (2009 a, b, c, d)

[14] Rosen, J (2006) *The People Formerly Known as the Audience* Press Think (http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html)

[15] Posetti, J (2009) *Media140 Brings Old and New Media Together With Explosive Results* Mediashift (http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2009/11/media140-brings-old-and-new-media-together-with-explosive-results317.html)

(a future foreshadowed by Gillmor 2004[16] and envisioned by Rosen[17] [18]): it is both 'cool' in the pop-culture sense of the word, making it the beneficiary of novelty news value which has made it a 'hot' story, and cool in the McLuhan[19] sense of being a highly participatory (and interactive) medium. This transformation builds on the tradition of participatory media, with its foundations in talkback radio in Australia[20] [21] [22] that I have identified as the original, albeit mediated, form of 'social' media[23].

The convergence of private and professional lives and identities in the Twittersphere is encouraging many participating journalists to remove their expressionless masks, and even challenging traditional notions of objectivity, as a result of the blending of news reporting and personal opinions,[24] while highlighting the increasing importance of transparency as a journalistic value[25]. Their practice is rendered more transparent through active Twitter engagement (e.g. tweeting about the processes involved in reporting as they occur), with the barriers to participation in public story-telling, and audience/source access to professional journalists, breaking down through Twitter-based interactions. These changes reflect the 'Open Journalism' model being

[16] Gillmor, Dan (2004) *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People For the People* O'Reilly Media

[17] Rosen, Jay (2006b) *Citizen Journalism Expert Jay Rosen Answers Your Questions Slashdot* (http://interviews.slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=06/10/03/1427254) (accessed 24/5/10)

[18] Posetti, J (2007) *Journalism That Bites* New Matilda. December 11th 2007 http://newmatilda.com/2007/12/11/media:-journalism-bites (accessed 29/11/09)

[19] McLuhan, Marshall (2001) *Understanding Media* (first published 1964) London: Routledge

[20] Phillips, Gail (2007) "The interactive audience: A radio experiment in community-building", *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, Volume 2007, Number 122, February 2007,pp. 174-185(12)

[21] Lee, Carolyne (2007) *Mornings with Radio 774: Can John Howard's medium of choice enhance public sphere activity?* Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy, Volume 2007, Number 122, February 2007, pp. 122-131(10)

[22] Griffen-Foley, Bridget (2004) *From Tit-Bits to Big Brother: A Century of Audience Participation in the Media* in Media, Culture & Society, 2004 vol:26 iss:4 pg:533

[23] ABC Radio National (2008) *The Audience Talks Back* The Media Report (http://www.abc.net.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2008/2410940.htm)

[24] Rosen, J (2008) "He Said, She Said Journalism: Lame Formula in the Land of the Active User" Press Think.

[25] Weinberger, D (2009) "Truth and Transparency". Presentation to Personal Democracy Forum, New York June 29th 2009 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3qSDLF6lU4&feature=player_embedded (accessed 29/11/09)

pioneered by Guardian Editor In Chief, Alan Rusbridger[26] This transformation is not without risks and pitfalls, as identified by journalist participants in my research. For example, several journalists reported being accused of bias and being sanctioned by employers for perceived breaches of impartiality guidelines because of personal opinions published via their Twitter accounts. But the journalism of those practitioners who have embraced Twitter's capacities as a platform for audience engagement, crowdsourcing and audience collaboration, is becoming observably flatter. Journalists are equal participants in the Twitterverse, not all powerful information gatekeepers and agenda setters. Nevertheless, their combinant professional skill set of research, investigation, verification, information curation, sense-making, and narrative-weaving, appropriately deployed, can make them influential and trusted users.

The speed convention now embedded in Twitter practice (reflective of the instantaneous nature of the medium and its widespread adoption as a live reporting and breaking news platform), in combination with its emerging role as an incubator for collaborative journalism, is altering processes of verification, and re-framing the key journalistic value of accuracy in many instances. A shift by some practitioners towards what's become known as 'open verification' – a contentious process involving the publication of unconfirmed information and an invitation to the journalist's 'followers' to collaborate in the verification process - is of particular relevance to investigative journalism which depends on thoroughness, accuracy and reliability for its credibility and impact.

All but one respondent to my 2012 survey identified Twitter as having a transformative impact on journalism, in terms of the proliferation of new potential sources, the impact of publication speed, and instantaneous public interactions with 'audiences'. The Global Mail's Middle East Correspondent, Jess Hill, an Australian leader in innovative social journalism in an investigative setting, went further: "(Social media) has fundamentally changed the level of access I have to people all over the world… Twitter actually makes me work harder as a journalist… . It makes me work harder to get to the bottom of stories, rather than just accepting the official line. It makes me work harder to uncover contacts that we would previously never had

---

[26] Rusbridger, A (2012) "A Q&A With Alan Rusbridger on Open Journalism". Guardian Online.
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/25/alan-rusbridger-open-journalism

access to. The more I use it, the better it gets, because the profile I'm earning on there makes it easier for me to win people's trust."

The application of social media platforms to open and public journalism models was also noted by the 2012 survey participants. "Social media also offers new ways of constructing and telling stories and of doing investigations, for example (it's) much more participatory and collaborative."

How are journalists using social media to research, investigate and report?

The main functions of Twitter Journalism that I have identified through my research are:

a) Breaking and disseminating news in realtime (including live-tweeting)

b) Newsgathering: crowdsourcing news, case studies, fact checking and contacts

c) Audience engagement/building community around content

d) Sharing information & discussing journalistic processes/practices/ethics (public reflective practice

e) Making content out the processes of journalism (e.g. tweeting about doing the journalism)

f) Subverting spin (i.e. co-ordinated position of official sources)

g) Marketing themselves as journalist-brands

h) Publicly engaging with one another – working collaboratively across competitive boundaries

"Often the key to good investigative journalism is finding the right people and Twitter and Facebook make this easier," one tweeting investigative journalist reported in the 2012 survey. For The Global Mail's Jess Hill, Twitter is where all investigations begin: "First, I'm looking for information: I'll search to see if anybody has posted links related to the story, or has tweeted something that might be a good clue. If I find a clue that looks like it's worth following up on, I ask for the tweeter's email address so I can find out more about it. That person may lead me to a source, or just provide a link in the chain." Hill says her next move is to crowdsource (see discussion of crowdsourcing below) contacts. "That doesn't mean I'm looking to speak to people who are actually on Twitter, but rather to enlist tweeters' help to find the most relevant people to speak to. It's like a fixer relationship – you find somebody who looks knowledgeable in the field you're reporting on, let them know what you're looking for and ask if they're prepared to help."

Hill went on to describe how she augments her Twitter investigations with other social platforms. "I'll use Facebook and YouTube to dig deeper - perhaps to get in touch with people who are active on relevant Facebook groups, or on YouTube, to find video evidence that can back up a testimonial I've collected, or track down the original owner of a video that's relevant to a report I'm writing."

A political journalist who specialises in economics described how he used Twitter to nail a story about Federal Opposition costings:

> *The people who do the election costings for political parties are secretive. How to get in touch with one and find out what really goes on? Using Twitter, writing about Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey's claim that a Perth accountant had "audited" his costings, a commentator tweeted in such a way as to make me suspect he had been on the inside. I messaged him, asking him to follow me so I could direct message (DM) him. In my DM I asked for his phone number... He used to do the costings for the Coalition at Access Economics and told me lots, so long as I didn't use his name. The background was very valuable, and I quoted him in the final two pars, without using his name.*

Jess Hill also described her Twitter network as a kind of journalists' travel service: "As a foreign correspondent, Twitter is invaluable. Before I travel to a new city, I can make contact with key people there - journalists, activists, intellectuals, even politicians - ask for advice and contacts, and sometimes arrange to meet them once I get there."

Journalists surveyed and interviewed by the author between 2009-2012 also identified Twitter as a place they curate research resources, by way of following informed users and as a platform for sharing their own individually curated content which blends their own work with others'[27].

Additionally, Twitter was an invaluable resource for investigations undertaken to support ABC Radio Current Affairs' remote coverage of the Arab Spring in 2011, according to Hill, who was then on staff as a reporter/producer with the flagship ABC programs *AM, The World Today* and *PM*. "Sometimes we would find an eyewitness on Twitter that was tweeting from an event as it happened". Once such case involved Mohammed, a photographer from Bahrain. "Just before *PM* was about to go to air one evening in March 2011, I was monitoring Twitter for tweets coming out of Bahrain. We knew that Saudi forces had entered the country, and were on their way to confront protesters in the capital – we just didn't know exactly when it would happen. Suddenly, a tweeter, who said he was on the highway leading into the capital, started posting photos of soldiers approaching the main square, then more

---

[27] Posetti, J (2010 Mediashift a, b, c); 2011 BBC focus group participants; 2012 survey respondents.

urgently, that those soldiers were shooting on civilians. I asked him to follow me so I could DM (Direct Message) him, and then got his phone number. *PM*'s presenter Mark Colvin recorded an interview with him five minutes later"[28]

Another useful function of Twitter for investigative journalism is its ability to provide a platform of record, or act as content aggregator, for material that may be excluded from the mainstream publication due to space limitations or editorial priorities. As ABC Online Political journalist Annabel Crabb observed when reflecting on the value of Twitter as a reporting tool during the 2009 #Spill (see earlier references) story, Twitter can accommodate the back-story via 'mini-serial narratives'[29]:

> "A story filed for a newspaper at the end of the day would, of necessity, be obliged to edit out some of the stranger twists and turns that occurred during the day; the deals that fell over, the partnerships that formed and disintegrated all within the space of an orthodox news cycle."[30]

Similarly, through its role as a platform for audience engagement and reflective practice by journalists, Twitter also has capacity to increase journalistic transparency. Practically, this transparency could be achieved by journalists describing research, investigation, ethical dilemmas and reporting processes (where appropriate) during or after publication (depending upon the nature of the story and issues of exclusivity) via social media and facilitating conversations with other users about these issues. This approach is akin to what I described above as the act of making content out of process.

Crowdsourcing

---

[28] C.f. http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2011/s3165820.htm

[29] Clark, RP (2011) *How Journalists are Using Facebook, Twitter to Write Mini Serial Narratives* Poynter http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/writing-tools/115607/how-journalists-are-using-facebook-twitter-to-write-mini-serial-narratives/

[30] Posetti, J (2010) *The Spill Effect: Twitter Upends Australian Political Journalism* Mediashift http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/03/the-spill-effect-twitter-hashtag-upends-australian-political-journalism061.html

My 2009 analysis of journalists' use of Twitter highlighted the emergence of crowdsourcing as a technique for news-monitoring, research, investigation and reportage in mainstream Australian journalism. Crowdsourcing – a portmanteau of crowd and outsourcing – is a term first coined by Wired magazine contributing editor, Jeff Howe, in 2006[31] (source). Howe initially observed the rise of online collaborations between producers and users in business settings and the term has since been co-opted to apply to the collaborative production of journalism.

So, how does crowdsourcing apply to journalism research and investigation? A useful example is the method of research I employed in my 2009 work on Twitter Journalism. When I began this research, my first move was to tweet a request for journalists on the platform to respond to questions about why and how they used Twitter.

> "**Harleyd**@julie_posetti i'd have responded earlier about how i use twitter as a journo, but i was too busy live tweeting an inquiry on my beat :-)"[32]

I received useful feedback and uncovered a number of new contacts via this method, before conducting more extensive online interviews with 25 of the respondents. [33]

Crowdsourcing may be a relatively new term, but the practice of sourcing content from audiences/sources re-cast as citizen-reporters is quite established in talk radio. For example, ABC Local Radio stations in Australia have, for decades, asked their listeners to phone in information designed to augment and extend news, current affairs and features content. Some of these callers come to see themselves as citizen reporters, while presenters and producers putting them to air have described them being like unpaid stringers[34]. In Australia, ABC Local Radio has used this approach to source information about emergencies and disasters from observers on

---

[31] Howe, J (2006) "The Rise of Crowdsourcing" Wired Magazine
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html
[32] Dennet, H @harleyd on Twitter http://www.twitter.com/harleyd (accessed April 2009)
[33] Posetti, J (2009 a, b, c) Op.Cit.
[34] Posetti, J (2008) Unpublished interviews with ABC Radio presenters and producers who participated in the Reporting Diversity Project on which the author worked.

the ground when reporters, and even emergency workers, have not been able to gain access to the scene.

Wolf Cocklin, then of ABC Innovation, was integral in ABC social media coverage of emergencies in 2009. He described the value of Twitter in crowdsourcing elements of coverage of a large-scale blackout in Sydney that year. "I was able to crowdsource the size and approximate location of the affected area in 5 minutes, faster than calling 100 people to ask them if their power was out."

In 2012, Jess Hill demonstrated just how far crowdsourcing has come in Australian journalism since 2009. "Working in the Middle East, I also ask people on Twitter to help with spot translations – of a word or, if the cause is worth them volunteering their time, of an entire document. I once crowdsourced three separate Arabic translators to translate a video of the Saudi activist, Manal al-Sharif, breaking the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia. I had each translator check the last translator's work, until we were satisfied the video had been translated accurately. When we posted it on YouTube (and promoted it on Twitter), the video received over 80,000 hits."

Verification

The perceived problems associated with social media verification continued to dominate debates about social journalism at the time of writing this chapter in mid 2012. This fixation became apparent during the BBC Social Media Summit (#BBCSMS) held in London in May 2011, during which I acted as a workshop facilitator, while undertaking research. "The biggest issue with social media is verification,"[35] one journalist said. 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, with details unfolding hour by hour? Can it be

---

[35] Posetti, J (2011) Op.Cit.

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?

Twitter's role in the 2009 Iranian election aftermath highlighted some of the key issues with research and verification being faced by professional journalists in the Twittersphere. Questions emerged like: Does re-tweeting (or RTing) - re-publishing someone else's tweet - equate to giving their tweets your professional stamp of approval if you tweet openly as a practicing journalist? And, if you are passing on information to your followers, do you have an obligation to first establish its authenticity or acknowledge it as "unconfirmed" - an obligation many journalists would feel if they were doing the same for a newspaper or broadcaster? And what do you do if you report an inaccuracy?[36] In the example below, The Guardian's Technology section quickly tweeted an apology for misinforming followers after another tweeter corrected the record by tweeting at their account handle @guardiantech.

Twitter's potential for the almost viral amplification of errors and erroneous reports was highlighted by journalists responding to the 2012 survey. "The rush to report breaking stories like celebrity deaths, the recent leadership ballot, mean Twitter mistakes are amplified before they can be properly checked," one journalist observed.

The prevalence of anonymity and pseudonymity on social media sites also make verification more complex. "The ability for the source to then be "anonymous" or to choose a different identity can influence how the information is received by the journalist, credibility tests become more difficult, therefore old methods are needed anyway - to confirm and verify information." However, one journalist also pointed to

---

[36] Posetti, J (2009 c) Op.Cit

the potential advantages of anonymity and pseudonymity for investigative journalists "…(anonymous) people are more prepared to share information that they may have been otherwise. Also, on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, people develop a relationship with the journalist that they would not have had otherwise, therefore a trust develops which facilitates sharing of information." Such rapport can develop even between pseudonymous tweeters and journalists.

Signifying a radical shift in verification practice, one #BBCSMS participant reported in 2011: "Our default is to publish unchecked information with a disclaimer that it's unverified."[37] 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 standards of verification.

During this workshop, there was debate about the emerging methodology of crowdsourcing verification, called 'open verification', that is the publication of stages of verification, including the crowdsourcing of verification (such as publishing a rumour on Twitter and seeking followers' assistance to verify or debunk it) popularised by US National Public Radio's Andy Carvin (@acarvin on Twitter). One of the respondents to my 2012 survey explained the process of 'open verification' on Twitter like this "You can RT with a question posed. This opens debate and the truth can be found…or at least be attempted."

Asked whether they'd ever publish material sourced from social media before independently verifying it, the 2012 survey respondents reinforced the shifting standards of verification. Two answered 'Certainly' and eight responded "Yes, but with some hesitation", while none chose the options "Only in exceptional circumstances", or "Never".

One journalist said the qualifier for redistributing unchecked information on Twitter was the perceived trustworthiness of the source: "If Mark Colvin (respected presenter of ABC Radio's PM and exemplary journalistic tweeter who tweets as @colivinius) were to tweet that the Prime Minister had been shot, I would probably retweet it. Some random follower? Probably not."

---

[37] Ibid

However, another journalist indicated that the number of times an unverified fact had been re-posted by others would influence their own decision to retweet: "For example, I was working the day Whitney Houston died and RT'd an unknown and unverified source before it broke on Twitter from AP, because it had been RT'd by someone I trusted and was also an unsubstantiated fact that was getting widely trafficked."

Another commented that they would never knowingly redistribute inaccurate information: "I don't publish or RT material I know to be wrong or misguided - at least not without some commentary to this effect." The idea of redistributing inaccurate information with explanatory detail is not as problematic as it might sound. It might occur, for example in the context of a journalist tweeting about social media scandal involving a politician making false claims.

A point raised by other respondents is relevant here – most said they now view RTs as they would quotes – they do not necessarily endorse the content, they are just redistributing it, believing it may be of interest to their followers. As one commented "I RT a large volume of information. I can't possibly verify every article that I retweet. I RT what I think might be interesting, useful, relevant - or occasionally even just entertaining - for my followers. …my disclaimer is that I don't necessarily agree with everything that I retweet or publish." Many journalists have adopted the practice of including the disclaimer "An RT is not an endorsement" on their Twitter biographies as a means of attempting to limit the impact of any backlash against redistributed content.

Jess Hill believes her social journalism verification methodology enables better exposure of official 'spin' (i.e. messages massaged by Public Relations operatives or propaganda units for public consumption). "After verifying information about events occurring in real time on the ground, and then hearing/viewing contradictory 'official statements' on traditional media, I have come to question the latter's willingness to broadcast such statements from official sources, especially after such sources have been proven to make false statements."

Hill places traditional 'official sources' on par with reliable social media users. "I now pit these versions of the truth against each other: if the (social media) info contradicts the traditional media sources, I confront the source with it; but more critically - because it's atypical - I can challenge (official) sources making their statements…with the eyewitness accounts from the scenes they're speaking about."

This is a significant benefit of social media verification – the capacity to upturn attempts at traditional message control and call out falsehoods with evidence acquired in realtime. "The shift is essentially one engendered by the different speeds of social media and traditional media", Hill said. "Many sources are used to making statements that take time to verify, and do so knowing that any gaps in their stories will not be news by the time they're revealed. With SM, these statements are made to answer to the voices on the ground"

This approach – combining 'open verification' via social media with traditional fact-checking methods - was described by several of the respondents to my 2012 survey. "Verification also comes via crowd sourcing, asking direct questions on Twitter and then combining that with other methods (like) making phone calls, talking to those on the ground, and wire services…", one observed.

Pertinent, too, is how journalists respond upon discovering that information they have redistributed is false. "If I RT something later shown to be wrong, for example Phillip Coorey's (Sydney Morning Herald) initial (incorrect) tweet on the ballot numbers for the Gillard/Rudd leadership spill, I RTd subsequent corrections," one journalist said. This is something noted by many journalists who have participated in my research – Twitter is both a risk in terms of sending misinformation viral, but it is also a very swift self-correcting system.

The pitfalls of re-publishing witness accounts sourced from social media on a breaking story were cogently summarised by one 2012 survey respondent: "…as a story is breaking, there is lots of incorrect and exaggerated information. Sometimes people claim to be 'there' when they're not, others have a political slant or opinion that can affect the way they Tweet." The same journalist said crowdsourced content needs particularly careful vetting. "I still tend to gravitate towards other reputable journalists for information if I am not on the spot, but again, I try to build an accurate picture using that information combined with other sources – such as direct checking, wires and so on."

Other journalists spoke of simply transposing traditional processes of verification onto the Twitterverse, for example, by following up public tweets with DMs, phone calls and face-to-face meetings where appropriate. "I use Twitter to find people and contact them. I ask potential interviewees/contacts to follow me and we DM. I have been independently contacted by people on Twitter about stories. Most of the traffic is via DM and it usually moves later to email," one said. Another commented: "I also

direct message people I am trying to get in touch with. It can be more effective than a phone call as it was today!"

Jess Hill detailed a forensic approach to investigative social journalism verification. "Clues are everywhere on Twitter, if you have the patience to comb through (them). For example, I'm about to go to the Turkish-Syrian border to report. Colonel Riad al Asaad, the leader of the Free Syrian Army, is based in a town close to there. When I decided to try and contact him, I knew I'd have to find someone who'd either met with him recently, or was closely connected to him. But how to find someone like that? On a whim, I thought I'd see if Twitter could turn up any clues." Hill searched his name, and found this tweet:

@Lauandomar: My Dad just back from Antakya, meeting Riad Al-Asaad/FreeSyrianArmy, difficult times, no support from Syrian National Council **[@MiaFarrow](#)**

Hill said her first reaction was curiosity, laced heavily with scepticism. "Lauand was trying to bring a celebrity's attention to this tweet. Why? Is he an activist? I checked his feed, and couldn't see any examples of intentional misinformation. In fact, there was very little about Syria in his feed at all - he's a young film director, originally from Northern Iraq. With that checked, I thought there was a chance this tweet could be genuine." Hill's next move was to ask Lauand to follow her on Twitter so they could send private Direct Messages to one another. "I then inquired a bit more about his Dad, and told him that I was looking to meet with Col. Asaad, if it was possible. He emailed me with a detailed précis of who his Dad was (a Kurdish-Syrian community leader), what he was doing with Asaad (talking about how to protect Kurdish soldiers defecting from Syria), and how I could get in touch with him (a phone number for someone who works closely with Col. Asaad in Antakya)." Hill said Lauand's DMs were rich in detail, enabling her to Google his father and confirm his identity. "I also researched Lauand, and found details about a movie he'd recently filmed on Northern Iraq. So now I'm content that Lauand is almost certainly telling the truth, the next step is to enlist a fixer, someone who can speak Syrian Arabic, to call this contact, use their own gut to confirm finally that it is legitimate, and if so, arrange a meeting." Jess Hill's approach is one example of how journalists can value-add as Twitter participants. In using the platform, and the connections she has built through collaboration with other users, to deepen her reporting and verify information, her

practice is distinguishable from others operating in the Twittersphere who may primarily converse with like minded people, or retweet interesting articles.

Another issue raised in the context of verification is the phenomenon of 'astroturfing' - organised social media campaigns designed to mimic organic public reaction. It can be difficult to determine what is authentic in public outcries on social media, sometimes described as 'Twitstorms'. Online journalism pioneer Paul Bradshaw has observed that the journalist's task of verification in such cases is especially difficult when content is post-moderated. "Although there's a skill to be built in knowing when to respond and when to ignore bait, it's not so clear how to manage disinformation".[38]

This was a concern also raised by respondents to my 2012 survey. "I have seen well intentioned journalists attacked for asking basic questions," one said. "This can be because there is a crowd of bored people out there, but it also ties into the widespread astro-turfing efforts going to misinform, befuddle and endanger journalists. I have seen journalists sucked into false breaking news and others sucked into the ease of Twitter. This may lead to them ending the chase of an investigative story as it is too hard."

The concept of various platforms being imbued with different standards of verification and audience expectations emerged from #BBCSMS. For example, 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, for example. And 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."[39]

This was a perspective echoed by one of my 2012 survey respondents "I think the rules for Twitter are different to news, which is why it is so much faster than the

---

[38] Bradshaw, P (2001) *Editorial Issues* BBC College of Journalism (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/editorial-issues.shtml)
[39] Posetti, J (2011) OpCit

(mainstream media) at breaking news, there's an inherent understanding that it's a bit fast and loose and not always…right."

Indeed, since 2009 there has been a slew of headline grabbing inaccuracies sourced to tweets. From false reports of the recall of the iphone4 based on a tweet by a Steve Jobs faker on Twitter[40], to the fabrication of Nelson Mandela's death[41]. The 'Gay Girl in Damascus story' is another example. The character at the centre of the story was purportedly a "lesbian Syrian blogger" who was reportedly arrested but turned out to be a middle-aged Scotsman. Jess Hill described ABC Radio PM's sceptical treatment of the story. "We didn't report her arrest, for one simple reason – we couldn't find anyone who had actually met her in person. No relatives, no personal friends. We spent two days looking for people, asking our Syrian contacts to refer us to people who may have had contact with her, but each lead became a dead end. The fact that we couldn't find anyone who had actually met her set off major alarm bells, so we didn't report it." A few days later, the true identity of the blogger was discovered by several people who spent days investigating her identity. "News agencies who rushed to report that story didn't do the basic job of going back to the source. They reported news based on an entry on a blog – an unbelievably irresponsible approach," Hill said.

However there's a traditional journalism familiarity to these pitfalls, as one of my 2012 survey respondents observed: "…these are the same pitfalls faced by any journalist using unfamiliar sources, and (they) simply require the same amount of care. That means 'triangulating' all information you receive – either via other contacts in the field (checking to see what they know about the source, or the information the source is giving you – this is especially pertinent if the source is using a pseudonym) or through background searches to confirm identity, which can often be done simply by using Google."

Institutional Media Responses

Best practice social journalism at the organisational level requires adequate, targeted resourcing. At the BBC, a critical role is played by a group of journalists attached to

---

[40] Axom, S (2010) "There's No iPhone 4 Recall, No Matter What Twitter Says" Mashable http://mashable.com/2010/06/27/iphone-4-recall/
[41] Haggarty, E (2011) "Nelson Mandela The Victim of Latest Twitter Death Hoax", Toronto Star

the User Generated Content (UGC) Hub - a desk located in the physical center of the London newsroom that seeks, among other tasks, to verify social content. And many of the major media outlets present at #BBCSMS said their organisations employed Social Media Editors with a specific editorial brief to oversee social journalism production. This is a role finally starting to catch on in Australian newsrooms with some News Ltd and Fairfax titles seeking journalists to take up such appointments. In terms of specific investigative units within media organisations, such a resource could be very valuable for aggregating internal inter-disciplinary skills and intelligence to develop best practice methods, in the interests of enhancing social journalism research and verification techniques.

While Open Verification is finding growing acceptance within professional journalism, the flood of information, disseminated at unrelenting speed on Twitter means that careful research and investigation by journalists is more important than ever. Meantime, smart media organisations will invest in the development better systems of social media verification – from human expertise to analytical tools designed to sift, assess, synthesise and analyse social data.

TIPS FOR USING TWITTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM*

1. Always verify information elsewhere
2. Make sure you know an account is a "real" person before quoting.
3.   Cultivate a varied Twitter feed.
4. Upskill. Social media is such a rapidly evolving field, it is very difficult for individuals to stay abreast. Organisations should be supporting staff to upskill
5. Engage with followers, don't just use Twitter as another publishing platform – much of its value is derived from its capacity to facilitate realtime conversation.
6. Watch and learn from others around the world. It is a time for innovation and experimentation.
7. Make friends with IT savvy, data-loving types. Journalists need to get better at collaborating with other skill sets.
8. If you are part of the conversation and community in a particular news round, you will get early warning of a hot issue and you will be the go-to reporter for whistleblowers. But this means being active in the community when you don't want anything, not just busting in when you do want something.

9. Be incredibly careful about the line between your professional and private life and opinions. The crossover can be potentially career-ending, and social media tends to blur the boundary significantly.

10. Promote your work - but politely.

11. Set up an engaging account that is not just about work, but is as professional as work. Be a real person out there and people/contacts will want to engage with you. Don't reveal your story too soon, but when you do go for it. People out there want to help a good story.

12. Verify, verify, verify.

13. Reply to those good enough to respond to you - develop the personal relationship

14. Do not get dragged into silly partisan back and forth brawls. One reply, or leave it alone.

15. Never trust an account until you have personally verified it, regardless of how real it looks

16. Never say anything on Twitter that you wouldn't be prepared to say in front of a television camera. Helps to keep your lesser instincts in check!

17. Share and engage with a wide range of stories and views as well as your own, and remember that social media is a two-way street/conversation, not an info dump.

18. Use lists on both Twitter and Facebook - you can keep lots of projects on the boil at once with the click of a button!

19. Social media doesn't replace traditional methods - it's an additional tool. Use it to broaden your contact base and your outloook - not everyone thinks the same as you!

20. Check and recheck, rigour is even more important when sources are faceless and therefore less accountable.

21. Regard it as a water cooler. Use it to pick up the vibe rather than treating it all as gospel.

22. Deploy deeper search functions and third party applications to augment manual social journalism research e.g. Advanced Twittersearch, Google reverse image search; Facebakers, Topsy, Tineye, Trendsmap, Twitpic, Twitvid and Twitpoll among others.

* Crowdsourced from participants in the author's 2012 survey of social media-active investigative journalists