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Merging old and new media: a new research agenda

Media researchers have begun to study how media groups worldwide are appointing editors, and staff, to mine the social media networks and promote their programs via YouTube and Facebook. The Hoot introduces a new feature on media research trends. A Research Review by USHA RODRIGUES.

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Social media networking and news

It has been noted by several commentators and journalists alike, that advances in new technologies are changing journalism. "The process of reporting and the process of consuming news are both mutating beyond recognition," according to Annabel Crabb, Chief Political Writer for the Australia's ABC Online (Crabb 2011). Many traditional commercial and public media have recognised the importance of social media as a significant source of information, and as a platform to engage with their audiences at home or elsewhere in this world.

The government's crackdown on Syrian protesters continues to be reported on Twitter; the anti-Mubarak protests into Cairo's Tahrir Square, their excitement and their tension was shared via Twitter and YouTube; and self-immolation by a university graduate fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, and broadcast of a YouTube video showing angry crowds protesting outside government buildings thereafter are widely regarded as a catalytic event in the Tunisia uprising. As well during the Iranian protests in 2009, when the government cut off mobile phones and the internet, and banned international and Iranian media from covering the protests, international news coverage heavily relied on user-generated content (emails, phone calls and messages from Twitter and Facebook).

A similar case can be made for the coverage of disasters and events at domestic level, where social media networking seems to have become a part of the social and political landscape. For example, Mumbai Terrorist attacks in 2008 being reported on YouTube, Flickr and Twitter. And, the use of social media networking sites such as Orkut, YouTube and Twitter during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections by government authorities, politicians and voters is noteworthy. It is not only the online publics who turn to these social media networking sites, but also journalists working for *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Times of India*, the *NDTV*, and other news organisations.

Giving into market forces

However, it needs to be acknowledged that there are many news organisations who have not yet taken up the option of changing their journalism practices, while there are other proprietors who have used technology to cut costs and reduce quality of journalism. But, intense competition and audience demand have persuaded many news organisations (particularly in the so called Western countries with struggling news readership and viewership) to embrace new technologies, and interact with audiences by listening and reporting their expressions as presented via blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other social media networking platforms. Many media groups have appointed Social Media Editors, and a team of staff, to mine the social media networks and promote their programs via YouTube and Facebook. As Associate Press' Manager of Social Networks and News Engagement, Lauren McCullough says, her team "looks for articles, tips and eyewitness reports to complement the work being done by AP reporters when news breaks" (in Gleason 2010: 6).

This is yet another stage of transition for mainstream news media, transforming from print and broadcast media into a multi-platform industry, particularly following the path set by their audiences who increasingly want to receive their slice of news from whichever media device they can access at any particular time (newspaper, mobile phone, radio, television or their iPad). "People use several media sources in combination to formulate an opinion-not just one source. Networks that recognize this and attempt to work effectively with the new forms of social media will survive" (Qualman 2009: 62).

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism found that Americans were spending more time with the news than was the case a decade ago as they integrated new technologies into their news consumption habits by getting news from both digital and traditional sources (Pew Research Center 2010). Roberts and Foehr research found that younger audiences used several media concurrently. "They frequently listen while they watch while they click and, sometimes at least, write" (Roberts and Foehr 2008: 30). The authors argue that the emergence of digital media, their portability and convergence are the driving force behind the multitasking phenomenon, raising the need to reconceptualise "media exposure" (2008: 11). A debate has ensued among media analysts and academic scholars about the impact of social media on journalism practice, particularly when covering issues, events and disasters several hundreds if not thousands of kilometres away from home (international news).

A new agenda for research

During the last two decades of the 20th Century, when economic pressures and technological innovation shifted the investment in foreign bureaus, there was a deep concern about the decline of foreign correspondents and foreign news coverage in mainstream news media. An on-going project at Concordia University about the impact of globalisation and the emergence of the internet on news flows found that each of the ten daily newspaper web sites in Canada, the US, France, Israel and the UK in their international news coverage focused primarily on the US, the UK and France. The study's findings (so far) are: News organisations in these countries perceived their audiences as predominantly local or regional; the audiences are primarily interested in local news, news from national capital and sports; and they have negligible interest in foreign affairs, but a great appetite for sports coverage (Gasher 2009; Gasher and Klein 2008).

However, the process of globalisation (here defined as interconnectedness between communities and nations across the world), audience expectation of instant coverage of world news and events, and a technological capacity to provide continuous news coverage have forced news organisations to replace the resources-hungry foreign bureaus with new and innovative local reporters, editors and producers (Hamilton and Jenner 2004). Richard Sambrook, who interviewed a range of news organisations across the world, says:

The growing interconnectedness of the world, through global communications, ease of travel, increasing migration and more, is changing expectations of international reporting. What was once 'foreign' is now better known. For diaspora communities, news from overseas can be news from home. In increasingly multicultural societies, national identity is more complex and a white middle-class male reporter may not be an adequate cultural bridge between the country he is reporting and the audience at home. The importance of diversity is as true in international reporting as any other area of life. (Sambrook 2010: 53)

Sambrook in his recent study based on several case studies in Asia and Africa found that "social media are increasingly helping countries develop a public space for debate, the exchange of information and views, and to tell their own stories where previously this had not been possible" (2010: 101). He says social media are helping foreign correspondents report these countries with greater insight and

accuracy, although the role of firsthand eyewitness reporting still remains important in presenting news from overseas.

Meanwhile, a survey of print and online journalists in 2009, which measured their use of, and attitudes toward, social media for researching and reporting stories, found that a majority of journalists were increasingly using online resources including social networking sites to research their stories. However, only 15% said that social media networking is 'important' to their reporting efforts, while another 40% said that social media were 'somewhat important' for reporting their stories. The surveyed journalists acknowledged that social media and other online resources are their first-check method for obtaining facts and background when they are preparing their stories (Bates 2009).

Similarly, recently when the news of killing of Osama bin Laden filtered through mainstream media, commentators noted the role of Twitter in breaking the news story. An IT consultant, living in Abbottabad, Pakistan, unknowingly tweeted details of the US-led operation as it happened. Following the event, a BBC correspondent says "such is the power of this (Twitter) network that it has become the key resource for older media trying to stay ahead of events. A journalist who does not use Twitter is now like one who abjures the mobile phone" (Cellan-Jones 2011). Cottle (2011) in his soon to be published paper notes how today's 'media ecology', including the social media networks, has become 'infused' within the recent Arab uprising.

Cottle notes how the new social media and mainstream media appear to have often performed in tandem, "with social media variously acting as a watchdog of state controlled national media, alerting international news media to growing opposition and dissent events and providing raw images of these for wider dissemination" (2011: 11). However, it should be noted that governments around the world have the capacity and repressive regimes do censor and block these cyber conversations on social media networks. By the same token, media-savvy activists have often come up with technological antidote for such censorship.

By engaging with social media networks and participatory publics therein, news media is becoming a player in local issues and their communities. The continuing exchange of information and ideas via hyper-linking between news media, and blogging and social media sites, illustrates that the globalised news media is becoming part of a loop where information is circulated between local publics and international media, and as well disseminated to audiences in the rest of the world. In this way, the news media have become 'infused' (to use Cottle's description), more than ever before, in local communication networks. There is a need to fully research and theorise the role of global media and international news practices as part of the current state of social media networking, which are both hyper-local and global in nature, as it operates through ever expanding news communication technologies across the world.

Related current events

Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (<http://www.aejmc.com>) is offering three member journalism faculty the opportunity to spend two weeks this summer learning first-hand how newspapers and broadcast stations use social media across multiple platforms. The idea is to then bring that knowledge into the classroom in the courses that person teaches. A second phase of the program provides funds for a professional from the media outlet to visit that professor's campus for five days during the 2011-12. The Scripps Howard Foundation is partly funding this pilot program.

As well, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu> has been running several workshops on Social Media Networking Skills and seminars to discuss the impact of social media on traditional commercial and public media.

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