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Syndicate Report: Social Media, Citizen Journalism and Media Curators

By Julie Posetti

This Syndicate, chaired by Julie Posetti (University of Canberra, Australia), drew on the expertise of Mindy McAdams (University of Florida, US). Twenty-one journalism educators representing every continent debated the issues in an over-subscribed Syndicate.

The discussion centred on the role, risks and benefits of social media in journalism education. Time limitations necessarily restricted the focus on the topics of Citizen Journalism and Media Curators although it was acknowledged that that the theme of social media captured these topics in part.

Summary of deliberations

Social media literacy is now an essential element of journalism education and training.

"(Social media) isn't just a kind of fad from someone who's an enthusiast of technology," the BBC's Director of Global News Peter Horrocks told reporters early in 2010, "I'm afraid you're not doing your job if you can't do those things. It's not discretionary", he said.

Social media sites, including interactive blogs, are now essential items in journalists' kitbags. They are tools for newsgathering and dissemination; for investigation and even crowd-sourced fact-checking. Perhaps most importantly, though, they are platforms for engagement with Rosen's (2006) "the people formerly known as the audience" – each one of whom is a potential source.

Youtube, Twitter and Facebook may ultimately be replaced by new, hybrid sites, but the concept of an interactive, audience-engaged and activated realtime web platform for journalism is here to stay. And that means social media theory and practice must be embedded in journalism teaching.

But there are rules of engagement for journalists operating in these spaces. Rules which require more than mere technical knowledge of how to tweet or post a Facebook status update. They also demand reflective practice and critical thinking in reference to ethics and professionalism.

So, while individual journalists are now expected to swim with the social media tide, rather than resist it, it's incumbent upon industry trainers and J-Schools to provide the training necessary to equip the practitioners. This means journalism teachers need to be facilitating both technical training and critical engagement with these new technologies and their impacts. They should also be encouraged to research and practice in the field.

Inevitably, the question "But who *is* a journalist?" arose with some Syndicate members very keen to debate definitions. However, reflecting the broader global debate, this issue was not resolved. Neither was a single definition of 'journalism' agreed. For example, some members identified 'public purpose' or 'public interest' as important but others indicated this was problematic in societies where 'public purpose/interest' is defined as being inseparable from government objectives.

Significant time was spent discussing the ethical challenges of verification and the importance of authentic engagement in the social media sphere.

There were warnings not to be overly-seduced by social media and to maintain the focus on basic journalistic education with investigative purpose. However the ample opportunities that social media presents for journalism, journalists and journalism education were also discussed, with a Chilean delegate pointing out that the most followed person on Twitter in Chile (with over one million followers) is an investigative journalist, while others highlighted the capacity of Web 2.0 for student engagement.

Recommendations

Ultimately, the discussion was distilled into six recommendations on the role and application of social media in global journalism education. They are:

- 1) Social media exposure & competency is now an essential component of journalism training globally – even in areas where Internet access is limited or absent, mobile access is levelling the technological playing field & crossing cultural boundaries
- 2) Journalism educators & trainers need to be at the knowledge cusp of radically changing journalism training. Definitions of journalism, journalists, and journalism practice are in flux. Rather than trying to “pin jelly to the wall,” journalism educators should facilitate open discussions about the ways in which journalism is changing, focusing on descriptions and predictions, not definitions and limits.
- 3) Creativity is necessary to embed social media practice into traditional journalism training (not teaching it in isolation) and integrate with theory. Specific platforms (such as Twitter) need not be taught as stand-alone tools but rather to demonstrate/train in (changing) journalistic practices.
- 4) Ethics & professionalism are part of teaching about social media. Themes include authenticity; verification; transparency vs. objectivity; managing the personal/professional divide; sourcing.
- 5) Teach students to select & curate diverse sources of information along with professional contacts to build networks and new audiences, expanding beyond friends and official local news sources.
- 6) Explore using social media to excite students about topics that interest them (e.g. social justice; environmentalism) and engage and collaborate with local communities.

Syndicate Participants:

- 1) Jessica McBride (University of Milwaukee, US)
- 2) Catalina Montoya
- 3) Etim Anim (Cross River University of Technology, Nigeria)
- 4) Kobina Ano (Ghana Institute of Journalism)
- 5) Almuth Shellpeper (Deutsche Welle, Germany)
- 6) Teboho Senthebane
- 7) Andrea Vial (Alberto Hurtado University, Chile)
- 8) Janet Key (Northwestern, US)
- 9) Nancy Booker (Daystar University, Kenya)
- 10) Victor Ayedun Aluma (University of Lagos, Nigeria)
- 11) Femela Xelani
- 12) Alan Weimann (Walter Sisulu University, South Africa)
- 13) Kathy Hilton (London College of Communication)
- 14) Megan Knight (University of Central Lancashire, UK)
- 15) Cornia Pretorius (North West University, South Africa)
- 16) Ale Smith (North Western University, South Africa)
- 17) Mick Temple (Staffordshire University, UK)
- 18) Marian Pike (Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa)
- 19) Cherian George (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)
- 20) Ashia Nkontsa
- 21) Joe Ritchie (Florida A & M University, US)