

Legacy media and social media nexus: Ethical considerations for South African newsrooms and journalism schools

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Summary

Introduction

Jurgen Habermas (1989) defined the role of the public sphere as a way for civil society to articulate its interests. Social media, particularly *Facebook* and *Twitter* have become the public spheres of the 21st century and legacy media seem to have recognised their utilitarian potential for journalism. These sites have become new spaces of contestation on a variety of topical issues; they advance the democratisation agenda by facilitating robust engagement about religion, politics, culture, music and a range of other issues. Consequently, such social media sites have become potential sources of information for journalists. Journalists are increasingly dependent on them for story idea generation and for sourcing opinions on various issues.

It is contended in this paper that usage of such new media technological development by journalists has given rise to numerous concomitant ethical considerations with particular reference to veracity and sensationalism.

Theory

The key theories that inform this paper are the Habermasian concept of public sphere, as just alluded to, the two-step flow theory and the agenda-setting theory.

Methodology

The basis of this research is in keeping with the qualitative approach. The study is located within the South African context. The use of primary and secondary data was sourced. The primary data sources were interviews conducted with South African journalists on their use of social media as sources of information and story idea generation. Secondary data was derived from content analysis of social

media sites, *Facebook* and *Twitter* and of a selection of daily and weekly South African national and regional newspapers. Articles that include comments and other information accessed from these sites and stories based on debates and discussions on these sites were studied to ascertain ethical considerations or lack thereof.

Key Concepts Unpacked

The key concepts are social media, legacy media, public sphere

I had not intended to define social media as I assumed my audience would be au fait with the term but one of the delegates had asked me what social media was therefore I provide a definition.

According to TechLearning.com, social media is, "...where people develop networks of friends and associates. It forges and creates links between different people."

Legacy media refers to traditional media that has existed for centuries and evolved over the years before the advent of the internet. However, at the lightning pace that technology is advancing, internet based news media probably soon will be considered legacy media.

Whilst there are various social media applications, this paper limits the focus to emails, Facebook, Youtube, Wikileaks and Twitter as in South Africa these seem to be more popular than other social media sites, except for MXIT among youngsters.

Social media and the transmission of information

I will refer briefly to how social media adherents are using these spaces to transmit information. Apart from keeping in touch with friends and advancing a particular self image, i.e self branding, people are using social media to transmit information they believe others would be interested in. Ultimately people desire to relay and obtain information by the fastest, most reliable and cost effective means possible. Information that traditionally had been transmitted, discussed, etc via 'word of mouth', in the Habermasian concept of public sphere is now being exchanged on cyberspace via email lists (which now seem archaic), Facebook and Twitter, etc. Cyberspace is the new loci of discussion, debate and contestation.

All this has resulted in the intersection between social media and legacy media. Prior to the internet, people largely were reliant on legacy media for information about happenings outside of their

immediate proximity. And of course, this remains so for those without internet access. With the advent of social media the dependence on legacy media as a first stop for information has to an extent lessened. Social media users post breaking news as they witness it or hear about it and share links to articles, videos and blogs, etc. and their friends increasingly rely on this type of heads-up. As the two-step flow theory suggests, people look to these opinion leaders for information, clarity on issues, confirmation of viewpoints, etc and via social media, they tend to rely on friends whose ideologies they share and whose judgment they trust for pointers to interesting news stories, insights, etc.

Social media users, in this way, are setting the agenda. They have turned the agenda-setting theory on its head to some extent. Previously it was legacy media that wholly set the agenda and oft times people would lament the agenda set by news organisations. Now they have taken it upon themselves to distribute information perceived to be ignored by mainstream media, they ask critical questions and engage in robust debates. All of this has the potential of reaching large audiences because if they're considered interesting they go viral. This tells us that audiences too want to be listened to not just spoken to.

Journalists and social media

That brings us to journalists and how they are using social media. Many take their cue from the agenda set on social media sites.

Benefits

Going multimedia in South African newsrooms requires a mindshift. There is little buy-in for two main reasons, bandwidth limitations and lack of profitability as perceived by them. Newsroom managers ought to embrace social media and not consider it a threat to legacy media. Despite this disjuncture between younger reporters and older managers in South African newsrooms, and the prohibitions on the use of social media, South African journalists are using social media in a range of exciting ways to inform their research and stories such as:

- Posing questions to sources such as potential witnesses of events
- To brand themselves and abet their media organisations to build and consolidate relationships with audiences, journalists channel traffic to their full news reports by tweeting or facebooking about their experiences at conflict zones, natural disasters, demonstrations, and including behind the scenes information and witty anecdotes that don't make into the story.

- Using Twitter or Facebook to elicit questions from their 'followers' for interviews and press conferences. This heightens the concept of media being the voice of the public and the public's responses inform the journalistic perceptions of the reporters.
- Lifting comment from celebrity profiles and from other newsmakers profiles or those of their friends.

Media Ethics

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics outlines the following principles:

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable

These are some of the principles that form the core of journalistic ethics yet seem to have fallen by the wayside when it comes to social media where there seems to be a free-for-all as will be discussed now.

Concerns

Off the record

Increasingly, sources accessed via social media are quoted without their permission. This has implications for on/off the record information. Do we assume that all the information on social media sites are on the record and do we as journalists simply lift the information and include in our stories without seeking permission from the sources? This is fast becoming the norm.

Sources, veracity and accuracy

Journalists have to be vigilant about bogus information.

Many times the authenticity of the identity and location of the sources are not confirmed e.g. During the Iran election saga, it was discovered that some of the Twitter profiles of Iranians who purportedly were sending tweets from the streets of Tehran were fake profiles set up by Israelis in Israel.

Similarly celebrities are often quoted from the social media profiles and some of these 'sources' turn out to be fake profiles.

There have been examples of fake pictures published in mainstream media taken from emails without being verified. A recent example was that of a photograph of the exterior of (ANC Youth League leader) Julius Malema's home which turned out to be someone else's home. The rightful owner was so irate about the number of people visiting to get a glimpse of Julius Malema's palatial home, he threatened to sue the media unless they apologised for the error. This raises questions about invasion of privacy.

Publication of pictures sourced on social media sites or from those that audience are requested to submit without any verification of date and time and if the pictures were doctored.

Recently a video of a couple who was beaten brutally in Afghanistan for committing adultery had many hits on Youtube and the story was publicised in various media. It was then exposed that it was a fake beating. The couple was paid by a human rights NGO to participate in the fake video which was then used in the NGOs fundraising campaign.

Disclaimers

Mainstream media outlets are using unverified content and covering themselves by including disclaimers. We have to ask if it is enough to use unverified information and simply add a disclaimer saying that it's unverified? During the Iran election saga, CNN frequently publicised tweets about the Iranian elections and included a disclaimer saying it was unverified. So did Al-Jazeera when it broadcast a Wikileaks about US soldiers shooting civilians in Iraq.

Sensationalism

Another worrying trend evident in newspaper articles is the sensational headlines and generalisations about reasons for social developments, trends and phenomena based on discussions on social media sites, without corroboration from verifiable research findings by credible research organisations. An example was when the Sunday Times Extra carried a lead story with a headline that said (South African) Indian men are lousy in bed. This front page story was based not on verifiable research but on a group set up by a South African white male who was resentful about white women dating Indian men.

Public/Private Persona

A disconcerting trend among South African journalists is the disparaging comments they make on social media sites about politicians, sports administrators and stars, corporations and parastatals. This raises questions about partisanship and credibility. We have to ask if their stories then could be considered balanced and fair.

These trends underscore the need for newsrooms to articulate editorial policies on the use of social media by their journalists.

Conclusion

The onus is on journalism schools to re-curriculate their courses against the backdrop of these ethical challenges posed by social media as journalistic tools. Journalism students ought to be made aware of the importance of devising protocols on the use of social media by journalists. They should be made aware of the negative impact on their credibility and that of their employer if controversial issues are sensationalised and conclusions made about them are based on information procured solely from social media sites. Journalists have to keep in mind that being using social media in their professions does not render media ethics obsolete. If their credibility is eroded, they will be bypassed altogether by audiences who increasingly have a larger range of information sources to tap into.