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SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM: WHAT WORKS BEST
AND WHY IT MATTERS

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Abstract

As more Americans turn to social media sites for news and information, news organizations respond by using social networks as platforms to deliver content. This study examines how news outlets use social media platforms, the positive impact and concerns raised by social media use, and the best practices editors identify for effective social media use. The study aims to help editors understand which approaches to social media attract audiences and increase reader or audience interaction.

Keywords

News, social media, engagement, journalism, newspapers, broadcast, Facebook, Twitter

Introduction

Social networks are a rapidly growing source of news. The number of U.S. adults who say they regularly get news or news headlines on social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter nearly tripled in two years, from 7 percent to 20 percent, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center survey. News has become integral to social networks. The number of social network users who said they saw news on the sites yesterday grew from 19 percent to 36 percent from 2010 to 2012, according to Pew.¹

Newspapers, faced with continuing declines in print circulation, are signing on to social networks. Kenny Olmstead, Amy Mitchell and Tom Rosenstiel writing about a Pew Research Center study on Web news behavior said, “If searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next.”² News organizations are adapting to the new world of sharing news and information on social networks. The rise in the number of journalists with social media editor titles indicates that news organizations are thinking about social media strategically and taking it seriously, said Sree Sreenivasan, Columbia University’s chief digital officer.³

News outlets use social media hoping to engage and/or attract readers. Alan Miller, writing about a survey of Associated Press Media Editors, said 97 percent of respondents said their top goal for social media is growing audience, followed by 92 percent who said it is to connect with audiences.⁴ Little research has been done, however, to identify what practices help news outlets get the most from their social media use.

This study, based on a survey of editors at print and broadcast news outlets followed by interviews with select editors, examines the best practices that editors identified for using social media.

Literature Review

Editors are no longer the gatekeepers of news. Thanks to the Web, audiences can find many sources of news. Audiences decide what they’ll read and where they’ll go for news. In a New York Times column, Nicolas Kristof explained: “The public is increasingly seeking its news not from mainstream television networks or ink-on-dead

trees but from grazing online. When we go online, each of us is our own editor, our own gatekeeper. We select the kind of news and opinions that we care the most about.”⁵

The 2013 Pew State of the Media study reported that the majority of Americans get news from friends or family. Most do so by talking to someone either in person or by phone. But growing numbers are getting news and information from friends or family via social networks.

15% of U.S. adults get most of their news from friends and family this way, and the vast majority of them (77%) follow links to full news stories. Among 18-to-29 year-olds, the percentage that primarily relies on social media for this kind of news already reaches nearly one-quarter.⁶

The Web makes it easy for audiences to react to digital news tips. A story is only a click away. Sharing the same story is only another click away. And Pew researchers suggested finding stories through shared links will grow as mobile and digital platforms grow.

A study by Alfred Hermida, Fred Fletcher, Darryl Korell and Donna Logan details how sharing has become an integral part of news dissemination. New technologies simplify the process of creating or receiving news via social networks.

Users who are immersed in social media are likely to be more open to receiving news and information via their networked circles, from both peers and journalists. Editorially, the traditional gatekeeping function of the media is weakened as a significant proportion of news consumers turn to family, friends and acquaintances to alert them to items of interest. Essentially, a person’s social circle takes on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story, video or other piece of content is important, interesting or entertaining enough to recommend.⁷

Staying on top of the news is a primary reason behind social media use, the study said.

More than two thirds of social media users said they use Facebook to follow news. The ability to share news also was a key reason for social media use. Almost two thirds of

users and even higher percentages of users between the ages of 18 and 34 said sharing news was important for them.⁸

Most news organizations recognize the trend. They have created Facebook pages and established Twitter feeds. A study by The Tow Center for Digital Journalism indicates news organizations do so because they understand their audiences have moved to these platforms and because they believe social media will bring them an engaged audience.⁹

Although news organizations are adopting Twitter and Facebook as a way to disseminate information, Jennifer Greer and Yan Yan concluded that news outlets haven't capitalized on the full potential of either social network. As the newspaper industry reinvents itself, social networks could become a platform for innovation, they said, but "newspapers haven't figured out the key to success yet."¹⁰ Creating digital content takes time and people, which presents an obstacle. Greer and Yan said publishers — particularly in small markets — often concentrate their limited resources on the core print newspaper first, leaving untapped potential in social platforms.

Despite those pressures, news outlets ignore or use social media minimally at their own peril. Social media advocates say it's not enough to simply create a presence, but instead news outlets must interact with their audiences.

Amy Gahrn said it's critical that news organizations embrace engagement via social media. Critical tenets of journalism — strengthening communities and democracy — could be achieved in part through sharing on social media, she said.¹¹

Some editors understand the benefits of interaction. Vadim Lavrusik said, journalists are “managing and amplifying the conversations the community is having.”¹²

They understand audiences can easily connect online and converse without them.

Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein put it this way:

Let’s face it: nobody is interested in speaking to a boring person. As such, if you would like your customers to engage with you, you need to give them a reason for doing so—one which extends beyond saying you are the best airline in town, or manufacture the most robust kitchen blender. The first step is to listen to your customers. Find out what they would like to hear; what they would like to talk about; what they might find interesting, enjoyable, and valuable. Then, develop and post content that fits those expectations.¹³

Engagement’s power is apparent in Facebook’s success. Alan Mutter reported that, “in each of the last nine months through June 2011, the Newspaper Association of America has reported that the average visitor spends about 3.5 minutes per session on the industry's websites. By contrast, the average visit at Facebook in June 2011 was 11.1 minutes, up 33.7 percent from 8.3 minutes in the same month in the prior year, according to ComScore, which tracks statistics for both NAA and Facebook.”¹⁴

A report on engagement by the Reynolds Journalism Institute said news outlets should make turning Web traffic into conversation their priority.

Joy Mayer and Reuben Stern, the report’s authors, said:

Being in conversation with our community means listening as well as talking, and adjusting what we do and cover based on what we hear. It involves: Hosting discussions in person and online on topics that matter to the community. Participating in conversations we're not hosting, both in person and online. Valuing how a continuing dialogue can make us better journalists and improves the journalism.¹⁵

The Current Study

Social media as a news delivery platform is in its infancy. Although Amy Mitchell, Tom Rosenstiel and Leah Christian stated the role of networks such as Facebook and Twitter is relatively small in disseminating news, use of both platforms as a news source is growing.¹⁶ Today's journalists must adapt to a world where readers have many choices for how they'll get their news. Audiences can tell editors what they want to talk about. Editors no longer are trusted to be the sole decision-makers.

The purpose of this study is an attempt to provide news organization leaders with a blueprint of best practices for using social media. It looks at how editors most satisfied with their social media efforts build audiences. The information is critical not only for newsroom leaders but also for journalism educators and students. As Michael Skoler said, "Social media are the route back to a connection with the audience...the new journalism must be a journalism of partnership."¹⁷ This study aims to help editors capitalize on social media as a way to connect with their audiences.

Research Questions

RQ1: What do editors identify as the positive impact of using social media?

RQ2: How are news organizations engaging with audiences/readers on social media?

RQ3: How do print and broadcast outlets differ in their use of social media?

RQ4: What are the best practices for using social media?

Methodology

This study examines best practices for using social media based on an online survey of editors and follow-up interviews with editors from print and broadcast news outlets of varying sizes.

A link to the Web-based survey was emailed to 3,374 senior editors on a mailing list of a major professional journalism association. The senior editors represented U.S. print, broadcast and online news outlets. The results are based on 376 responses to the survey, which was conducted in February 2013. Follow-up telephone interviews in March-May 2013 were conducted with eight editors, who either completed the survey or were suggested for follow-up interviews by senior editors surveyed. The editors selected for telephone interviews had indicated that they were satisfied with their news outlets social media use. They represented both broadcast and newspaper outlets of different size circulations. In the interviews, editors were asked about best practices for using social media platforms and were asked to provide specific examples of ways they use social media effectively. They also were asked how they measure impact. They discussed both the positive impact and any concerns raised by social media use.

Findings and Discussion

Nearly every news outlet (98 percent of survey respondents) is using social media in some way. Facebook (nearly 100 percent of those who said they use social media) and Twitter (94 percent of those who said they use social media) are the two platforms most widely used with YouTube a distant third (60 percent of those who use social media).

The majority of editors (69 percent) who answered the survey said social media is most frequently used to promote work. But more than 50 percent also indicated they very frequently used social media for other reasons.

Table 1: Top 5 reasons for using social media

Reason	Percentage
Promote stories or work	69
Report news in real time	59
Engage or interact with audiences	58
Grow readership	56
Build brand	53

Note: Percentages reflect reasons editors gave for “very frequently” using social media.

When asked about the positive impact of social media, about 90 percent of the respondents said that social media allows them to reach readers or audiences in multiple ways and that social media increases engagement with readers or audiences. These responses confirm that editors use social media, in part, because they believe it can connect them with their audiences.

Although 58 percent of editors said social media is very frequently used to engage with audiences and 91 percent cited engagement as a positive impact of using social media, far fewer said their staffs very frequently interact with audiences or readers — when asked to describe the specific behavior in their newsrooms. Only 30 percent, for instance, said their staffs very frequently pose questions to readers via social media when asked to describe how their staffs specifically use social media.

The majority of editors — print and broadcast combined — said their staffs very frequently post links to their coverage on either Facebook (56 percent) or on Twitter (53%). But editors said journalists in their newsrooms respond to Facebook comments or tweets from their readers or audiences far less often. Only 29 percent said their staffs very frequently respond to Facebook comments and only 22 percent said they very frequently respond to tweets.

Editors representing print publications are even less likely than those who represent broadcast outlets to say their staffs very frequently engage or interact with readers in those ways. Only 19 percent of print editors said their staffs very frequently pose questions to readers on social media, compared to 50 percent of broadcast outlet editors. ($p = .00$) (See Table 2). Only 21 percent of print editors said their staffs very frequently respond to Facebook comments, compared to 49 percent of broadcast outlets. ($p = .00$)

Table 2: Comparison of print and broadcast activity

Activity	Very frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
	%	%	%	%	%
	Print Broadcast	Print Broadcast	Print Broadcast	Print Broadcast	Print Broadcast
Post links to Twitter	52.4 53.6	22.2 34.5	15.1 9.5	6.1 0	4.2 2.4
Post links to Facebook	54.5 64.7	31.5 27.1	11.7 8.2	1.8 0	0.5 0
Respond to Facebook comments*	21.1 49.4	29.2 28.2	36.4 18.8	9.5 2.4	3.8 1.2
Pose questions to readers*	18.7 50	39.7 34.1	28.7 11	6.7 1.2	6.2 3.7
Promote social media coverage*	19.9 32.5	35.3 47.5	24.9 18.8	13.4 0	6.5 1.2
Respond to Tweets	20.7 26.2	25 26.2	31.7 39.3	15.4 4.7	7.2 3.6
Cover events live on Twitter	22.5 22.5	22 25	29 27.5	9 6.2	17.5 18.8
Seek news from readers*	18.2 33.8	33 42.9	35 15.6	9.9 3.8	3.9 3.9
Seek sources for stories*	10.2 27.2	34 49.4	39.8 19.8	11.6 1.1	4.4 2.5
React to comments about news outlet*	8.9 28	18.8 17.1	32.7 31.7	25.7 14.7	13.9 8.5
Post videos to YouTube	7.5 17.3	16 16	36 25.9	16.5 19.8	24 21

* $p \leq .05$.

Editors at broadcast outlets also are more satisfied than editors at print news outlets with the level of reader engagement they see from social media, according to the survey. Of the broadcast editors who responded, 34 percent said they are very satisfied

with the level of reader engagement compared to only 13 percent of print editors who said they were very satisfied ($p = .00$).

In an interview, Laura Neuzil, social media coordinator at WIFR-TV in Rockford, Ill., said interaction is critical to social media success. When asked to name the best practice for using social media, she said:

The No. 1 thing is to listen to your fans and viewers. If they're posting and they want to know the answer to a question, you can't leave it blank. You have to respond to them. If you're not responding, you're not being social. You have to show that you're listening to your viewers, that you care about them.¹⁸

Some print editors agree. In an interview, Scott Kleinberg, a social media editor at the Chicago Tribune, calls interaction essential.

I don't think in social media there is anything worse than following a feed that tweets the same thing all the time and never responds to your questions. It's the digital equivalent of someone ignoring you. It's as if someone is standing in front of you and not answering you when you talk. You wouldn't like that in real life and you wouldn't like that in social media.¹⁹

Larger circulation papers engage with readers more frequently than small circulation papers, according to the survey. Only 15 percent of papers under 40,000 circulation very frequently pose questions to readers, for instance, compared with 32 percent of papers over 40,000 circulation ($p = .00$). That probably reflects time concerns and staff sizes.

At the Log Cabin Democrat in Conway, Ark., Social Media Editor Courtney Spradlin acknowledged that at a small paper everybody on staff must do a little bit of everything. And at her paper, "thinking about social media is part of everybody's job." Engaging people on social media is part of customer service, Spradlin said.

It's just another way people are communicating with us. And we're glad to have interaction We want to be relevant. There are a lot of people on social media and that's the way we're communicating.²⁰

Nonetheless, in the survey, editors at papers of less than 150,000 circulation newspapers ranked their No. 1 concern with social media use as “an increase in demand on an already stretched-thin staff.” Editors at newspapers with more than 150,000-circulation ranked that concern secondary to “blurs line between professional and personal.”

Despite those concerns, almost 91 percent of editors responding to the survey question said the benefits of using social media outweigh concerns.

For Tena Tyler, senior editor at the Albany Times Union, a midsize paper, any concerns about time or staffing must be overcome because social media is where readers are. “It's pretty simple. Evolve or die. Maintaining the quality/credibility of the journalism is what's important. The rest (concerns) can be managed.”

If even 15 percent of Internet users are getting news from social media, she said, it can't be ignored. “Our Sunday circulation is 100,000. If we lose 15 percent of that, it's a big hit. We'll lose bodies. That's a pretty easy math equation to do.”²¹

For some editors, it's a matter of going where readers have gone and seizing an opportunity to reach and engage those audiences.

Jackie Stone, social media editor at the Austin American-Statesman, put it this way: “In an era where a lot of people don't pick up a newspaper every day and read . . .you want to give them the news they are looking for in a way that they are used to getting their news.” Stone said being responsive helps readers recognize the newspaper's social media platforms are a forum for news and information. “You let people know that

you're the person to turn to. You're responding to their questions and concerns." Stone said readers ask a lot of questions on social media, and she tries to respond to them all.²²

Daniel J. Schneider, an online news producer at The Denver Post, said using social media effectively takes time. "We handcraft every tweet that comes out of The Denver Post. It takes a lot of time. You have to ask yourself, 'Is it worth that much effort?'" His answer is yes.

At The Post, like the majority of news outlets, the No. 1 reason for using social media is to promote stories and content. But Schneider believes interaction with readers leads to better content too. He points to the Post's coverage of the Aurora, Colo., school shooting, which won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news reporting. The Pulitzer judges noted how the use of Twitter and Facebook as journalistic tools added to the Post's coverage. Schneider said the shooting coverage was a prime example of how interaction with readers via social networks supplemented the reporting of the Post staff. "We were non-stop watching Twitter... connecting with people directly on Twitter and Facebook," Schneider said. "A lot of things that we had that other people didn't come from social media."²³

For many editors, gauging the impact of social media efforts is anecdotal. Only half of those who responded to the survey said they quantify the overall impact of social media efforts. Of those who try to quantify impact, the primary ways they use are: examining fans and followers on Facebook and Twitter (93 percent), counting traffic channeled to their websites from social media referrals (92 percent), examining the number of links shared on social media sites (79 percent), and examining the number of retweets on Twitter (53 percent). Of those who try to quantify impact, 24 percent were

very satisfied and 57 percent were somewhat satisfied with the effect of their social media efforts on audience or readership.

In an interview, Richard Schneider, executive editor of the Pensacola News Journal, recalled the days when editors reacted to stories or story ideas based on a reporter or editor who came in to the office and said he'd heard his friends talking about something. That, he said, might mean that five people in your community were talking about it and yet editors often pursued a story based on that limited encounter. Social media give editors a much more complete picture of what people in a community are buzzing about. And it gives editors a better sense of the reach and response they get after they post something on a social media platform.

After the Boston Marathon bombing, for instance, the Pensacola newspaper posted a photo of a local bridge – well-known for its graffiti messages and love letters over the years – painted with “Pray for Boston.” More than 100,000 people saw the photo on the Pensacola newspaper’s Facebook page, according to the paper’s Facebook analytics. It was “shared” and “liked” more than 1,000 times. Spredfast, a service Schneider uses to monitor and measure social media impact, said the photo had close to 200,000 impressions (impressions measure the number of times a post from your Facebook page is displayed on Facebook). That’s more than triple the newspaper’s Sunday circulation.

Schneider doesn’t discount concerns about time in newsrooms where journalists are pulled in many directions. Using social media effectively, he said, means setting priorities. And in Pensacola, one of those priorities is social media.²⁴

Efficiency also means recognizing that social media platforms are not all alike. In the survey, 50 percent of editors recognize that different social media outlets should be used in different ways (See Table 3). Editors responded differently to open-ended questions asking for best practices on Facebook and Twitter. Of those editors who responded, 46 percent said Twitter is best for covering breaking news. Facebook, on the other hand, is best for having a conversation with readers, according to 45 percent of editors who responded.

Twitter and Facebook have audiences that want two different things. Kleinberg, of the Chicago Tribune, said editors need to understand their audiences on different social media platforms. “Anyone who thinks someone follows a brand on Twitter automatically follows them on Facebook is wrong,” he said. “People choose how they interact with a brand based on what they like the most.”²⁵

Brands should avoid posting the same thing in the same way on both platforms. It’s annoying and angers your audiences. “You want people to follow you in all the places you are. If they follow you in two places and you give them two different things, that’s wonderful,” Kleinberg said.

Even if the audience is interested in the same topic, say the Chicago Blackhawks during a winning streak, Kleinberg tries to find ways to feed them news in different ways. He might post a link to a column about the Blackhawks on Twitter. But on Facebook, he’ll use a picture with a link to a different story about the Blackhawks. He also is more likely to ask Facebook followers a question – ‘how long do you think the streak will go on?’”

Others agreed. Tyler, of the Albany Times Union, said Facebook centers on engagement and conversation with readers. Every day, her newspaper asks readers a question on Facebook. It might be light-hearted: Now that summer is here, where's a good place to get ice cream? Or it might play off the news: Where should the Boston Marathon bomber be buried? Often, some of the answers are published on Page 2 of the print publication after they appear on the Web.

Questions on Facebook are effective ways to engage people in smaller communities too. Graham Kislingbury is the online editor at Mid Valley Media Group, which is made up of two small dailies and a weekly newspaper in Oregon. He routinely posts a picture on Facebook, along with a link to a story and a question or as he puts it "a call to action." As an example, when the local sheriff said he wouldn't abide by changes in federal gun laws that he believes violate the 2nd Amendment, Kislingbury posted a picture of the sheriff holding a letter the sheriff had written to Vice President Joe Biden. Kislingbury linked to the story and posed this question to his paper's Facebook readers: Do you agree or disagree with the sheriff? The post went viral, garnering more than 600,000 views, shares or likes, boosting the paper's traffic for the month substantially. Kislingbury said promoting links to stories alone isn't effective on Facebook. Editors need to ask readers questions. The idea is to get people talking.²⁶

Although social media allows for more interaction and conversation with audiences, editors interviewed agreed that traditional journalism values must remain at the heart of any social media use. When asked to identify best practices for using social media, 69 percent of editors ranked verification before posting or sharing information as a best practice.

Said Tyler: "It doesn't matter what the platform is or who you have servicing it — a veteran or an intern — you have to get it right. We have to be the credible ones. We have to be credible because the world is awash with crappy journalists." ²⁷

Added Stone: "I think a lot of the barrier to people getting involved in social media who are in traditional media is this thinking 'it's new, it's not responsible. People can just put out whatever they want.' You get to decide how you use it. As long as you view it through a traditional journalism lens, using traditional journalism values, you don't have to compromise." ²⁸

Table 3: Ranking of top best practices for using social media

Best practice	Percentage
Verify information before posting	69
Use a conversational tone on Facebook, Twitter	69
Pose questions to provoke discussion on Facebook, Twitter	69
Change the newsroom culture to embrace social media	59
Train everyone on staff to use social media	54
Develop a personality on Facebook/ Twitter	52
Avoid reliance on automatic posts	51
Use different social media channels for different kinds of content	50

Note: The percentages reflect answers from both print and broadcast editors surveyed.

Best practices varied somewhat between print and broadcast news outlets, perhaps reflecting broadcast's tendency to interact and engage its audiences in conversation more frequently by responding to comments and asking questions.

Table 4: Comparison of best practices identified by print/broadcast editors

Percentage who identified activity as a best practice	Print	Broadcast
Verify information before posting	68	67
Use conversational tone	65	72
Pose question to provoke discussion	61	84
Train everyone on staff	46	70
Change culture to embrace social media	53	70
Develop a personality	50	54
Avoid reliance on automatic posts	47	51
Have top editors use it to demonstrate priority	47	43
Use different social media platforms for different content	45	57
Require a certain frequency of posts	38	51
Avoid creating too many accounts	33	54

Conclusion

Trust and credibility in American news media have dropped to all-time lows. In a 2012 Gallup survey of U.S. adults, only 8 percent of respondents said they had a great deal of trust in mass media.²⁹ Michael Skoler said social media could help news organizations rebuild trust with readers by connecting with them. He said “only the savviest of journalists are using the networks for the real value they provide in today’s culture — as ways to establish relationships and listen to others.”³⁰

This study confirms Skoler’s conclusion.

Social media is not a fad. Social platforms may change or be surpassed by newly developed ones, but it’s clear that audiences use social media to get news and information. Growth on social platforms is explosive. Facebook has grown from 1 million active users at the end of 2004 to 1.1 billion active users in March of 2013.³¹

Fifteen percent of online adults use Twitter. The proportion of online adults who use Twitter has quadrupled since 2010.³² Pinterest, launched in 2010, is the fastest-growing site on the Internet with more than 104.4 million monthly visits.³³

News outlets recognize that social media platforms offer a new tool for both disseminating news and marketing their work. They've largely embraced Facebook and Twitter, although use of other social media platforms is much less apparent. Only 34 percent of editors in the survey said their news organizations use Pinterest, for instance. This study shows editors most frequently use social media platforms to promote their work by posting links on Facebook and Twitter. Although 91 percent of editors surveyed believe social media provide a way for their news organizations to interact with or engage audiences, few are taking full advantage of that opportunity.

Yet editors who quantify readership or audience growth most frequently cite increases in engagement with readers as a positive impact of social media use. Almost 80 percent of those editors said their staffs pose questions to provoke discussion on Facebook and Twitter.

As Tyler of the Albany Times Union put it: "If you want to be a legitimate player in the social media hemisphere, you have to interact. It's your No. 1 goal. How you interact ... is entirely tailored to the platform because there is no one size fits all."³⁴

One metropolitan newspaper cited hard evidence to demonstrate social media interaction pays off with increased readership and referrals to its website. Before naming a social media editor, whose role is largely to interact with readers, the newspaper had a consistent referral rate (readers coming to its website) of 13.4 percent to 14.8 percent from social media platforms. In the initial seven months with a social media editor, who

also trained the entire newsroom on social media, social referrals ranged from 16.2 percent to 18.6 percent of its traffic. After adding a second dedicated social media editor and expanding its social media coverage hours, the paper's social media referrals ranged from 19.5 percent to 23.5 percent.

Yet many newspapers are not using social media as aggressively. A study by Kris Boyle and Carol Zuegner demonstrated that although newspapers are using Twitter, many were not using it effectively. Too many newspapers rely on automated Twitter feeds to provide headlines and links to published stories.³⁵

News organizations are not capitalizing on the power to engage across all forms of social media. This study provides a starting point for editors who want to increase their social media effectiveness by adopting best practices identified by other editors. Even relatively small steps — posing questions, reacting to comments posted on Facebook or Twitter — may aid editors who want to benefit from the growing potential of social media. But more research should be done on ways to overcome barriers to engagement.

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