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Social media & journalism: reporting the world through user generated content

Book section

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SOCIAL MEDIA & JOURNALISM: REPORTING THE WORLD THROUGH USER GENERATED CONTENT

Nowadays, social media are ubiquitous, offering many opportunities for people to share and access information, to create and distribute content, and to interact with more traditional media. For news organisations the social web has become an important platform for distributing content as well as a space where reporting and newsgathering takes place. This interview, with two news professionals who work exclusively on bringing social media content to broadcast news, explores some of the challenges and opportunities facing journalism as it moves into the digital age.

Max Hänska: Social media has come to play an increasingly important role in newswork, why is that?

Malachy Browne: I think it is starting to dawn on news organisations that there are many valuable conversations out there across the social web that you can listen to. As our political editor explained it to school kids: "it is like being superman, you can hear everyone's voices but you need to know which ones you should listen to." I think this is what news organisations are trying to achieve now. They are trying set up systems that allow them to pick up relevant signals from the noise across social media. More traditional newsrooms struggle to move into the digital age, they struggle with these new sources of information.

Also, I would say that social media is now

the platform on which hard news stories are delivered. Barack Obama famously announced his winning the US elections on Twitter before traditional media did.

Max Hänska: Do these developments mean that journalism's role and values are changing?

Claire Wardle: I think news values are staying the same but there has to be a recognition now that audiences are looking at the same raw content that journalists survey. Audiences can compare what's happening in the social web and what's happening on the BBC in real time, and when there's a discrepancy it might look like censorship to them. Particularly on high profile stories this means that there is no room to hide things anymore. For instance, at one point during the student protests in London the BBC was focused on three boys throwing stones. Quite a few people started tweeting to the news editor, basically asking: why are you focusing on these boys throwing stones when there are whole groups of students sitting peacefully playing guitars? This is not representative of what's happening on Parliament Square. And he tweeted back to them, essentially saying something along the lines of we're a news channel, we need good pictures. This was fascinating to me; here was the editor having a conversation with the audience over news values during the actual reporting. Holding his hand up and saying, my job is not to be representative, my job is to tell a story, and to tell a story that is visually appealing. He was justifying himself, making transparent a process that most people don't even consider because they see it on the news and they think it's the truth. No, these are subjective decisions being made every minute by picture editors about how to tell a story.

Max Hänska: With this immediacy of content streaming across the social web, how is the role of journalism changing?

Claire Wardle: As the raw data is available to everyone, journalists add value by adding context. At Storyful we call this raw data 'atoms of content', which we supply to news organisations and it's up to them to supply the context, to explain why it matters. For me the London riots were a key turning point for news because everything I needed I could get from twitter. By the time the BBC did a two and half minute package or wrote a 600 word piece on their webpage there was nothing in there that I did not already know. But what I did want at the end of the week was the 2000 word piece with the analysis, why did this happen, how did it happen, how can we prevent this from happening? The difference between the long reads and the atoms, that's where we are moving, and the middle ground is struggling. So journalist will have to do more of what journalism was originally about. What we need is on the one side fact-checking and on the other analysis and context. And I think that is what will make journalism stronger. From just following twitter I don't know who to trust, what's the historical context of all this. I'm still going to follow that, but amidst all the noise I want news organisations to tell me which tweet is accurate and what it means.

Max Hänska: Who then decides what becomes a story in the social media age, are journalists still important gatekeepers?

Claire Wardle: When I first joined Storyful I said we have this tension: On the one hand we know that our news clients have particular stories that they want content about. So we have a

responsibility to supply them with content for stories that we already know they are going to cover. But we also have a responsibility as separate type of news organisation to say, hang on, there is something happening in Buenos Aires which isn't on anyone's agenda right now, but we can see across the social web that it's important. So we need to balance our efforts so that we are doing both at the same time. Because if we only said, look here is a really obscure story from the Solomon Islands, then no one will be interested, because our clients want content for stories that are already on their radar.

Max Hänska: As a news organisation working exclusively with social media, what does your typical workday look like, what are your routines?

Claire Wardle: Just like any newsroom we have a structure and routine. There are some stories that we know we will cover, so we gather UGC on those. But we also have some staff that are just tasked with sitting heads down wearing earphones running searches on places and across locations that we known news might go on, just seeing has anything new happened, searching for new news. So it's a mixture of that and the things that we know are on the news agenda.

Max Hänska: An important part of your workflow has to do with verification. Could you explain how you go about processing social media content to make it suitable for your clients?

Malachy Browne: With new UGC on a story we're investigating there are three primary things we look at: date, location and original source of the content. We often begin with location because it is often easy to verify based

on topographical details that can be matched using google maps, wikimapia, or panoramio (geo-tagged photos). You can match a minaret or a bridge within a video using one of these sources, so you can absolutely establish the location. Then we have a look to see if other videos emerge that support the same story (shelling, bombing, event etc.). Then we look to people who are actually writing on Facebook or twitter, people that we know are based in that same area who are reporting the same thing. We look not only at re-tweets of the same stock phrase being share and re-shared, but for people describing the event slightly differently. So when the population reporting an event is sufficiently large and diverse this suggests wisdom among the crowd - that multiple sources are reporting the event, rather than a single source being quoted.

I'll give you an example. The morning that Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik were killed in Syria we first got that information over our Twitter list. We use twitter lists as our main signal. As soon as this information emerged we started to investigate it. A video emerged very quickly from an activist based there. So we knew that it was probably legitimate. Then a second activists that we knew was based there uploaded a video of the same building, same angles similar quality. There were also people talking about it in Arabic. By identifying and engaging with the conversations closest to the event we identified an Egyptian who's cousin was an activist working in the same media centre as Colvin and Ochlik, this supported other evidence we had of an attack on the centre, allowing us to establish the veracity of these reports. Social media is not only a good signal for new stories, but also allows us to investigate stories in greater detail.