

Sky News on Twitter: never wrong for long

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/02/07/sky-news-never-wrong-for-long-on-twitter/

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Sky News has decided to [toughen up editorial control of how its journalists use Twitter](#). In brief, (as their presenters might say), it has told them not to Retweet the work of other organisations' journalists unless its been processed by the Sky news desk. They've also been told to stick to their beats and not stray into Tweeting subjects beyond their specialisms.

You might argue that this is a sign of a highly-respected news company getting a grip upon the slippery bar of editorial soap that is social media. Conversely, you might see it as a gagging order that will stymie Sky's hitherto inspired interventions in micro-blogging.

First I should declare a few interests. I used to work for Sky's rivals BBC and ITN and I continue to collaborate with them and others such as the Guardian. But I also appear sporadically on Sky Newspaper reviews, so I am happy to take Murdoch's shilling (and it ain't far off that in real money). More importantly, I have praised Sky News' work generally and we have featured their pioneering use of social media, or what I call Networked Journalism, [in a Polis report](#).

So perhaps that allows me to say, without fear of being accused of favouritism or a grudge, that this policy is a bit understandable, but if taken too literally, bonkers.

Of course, it is right that journalists should not re-tweet information that they do not think is reliable. The [BBC agonises about this](#) and so should Sky. But generally speaking, there are some easy first steps. Only retweet people you trust. Secondly, indicate that the re-tweet is provisional.

This is just what presenters do on-screen: 'We are getting reports from Associated Press that a bomb has gone off in central Oslo'. There are [lots of other steps you can take](#).

Criticism (and there's been lots of it) of this new policy may be a Twitter-inspired reaction to a leaked email taken out of context. I personally would prefer it if my news organisation erred on the side of veracity. The danger, however, is that this pours cold water on the rather splendid work of the Twittering Sky News team.

Sky's [@FieldProducer](#) [@SophyRidgeSky](#) [@SkyNewsBoulton](#), to name just a few, are all very contrasting, diverse sources of information and links to commentary for me over the day.

I like them as a supplement to my TV news diet because they have character, authority, independence and a degree of latitude. They also link to sources beyond the Sky News Centre. Through their variety they offer a real alternative to the universal reach and scale of the BBC.

In future I might just stick with the [@skynews](#) feed (if that) if everything I am going to get from Sky journalists has to be filtered through the desk.

Here's the point for all news organisations in the micro-blogging era. We the audience now privilege interactivity and added value over conformity. We trust you because you share, not because you have hierarchical structures. We read you because we know you will tell us what you are reading. We want to talk to you at the personal level as well



as the professional. Respect is built on a relationship, not the power of the Editor. Transparency is more important than control.

I don't think these new Sky News guide-lines should be taken out of proportion or out of context. I hope that they are just a reminder to Sky staff to be careful, rather than a Stalinist call to abandon the work they have done in turning a great TV broadcast channel into a potent social media force.

It has been suggested to me by those who would know that there have been a couple of incidents where unchecked Tweets from Sky journalists might have misled the audience and this missive is an attempt to prevent that happening again.

Perhaps Jonathan Levy from Sky news-gathering is just trying to establish the kind of control that all news-gathering teams secretly desire. News gathering is the beating heart of any TV newsroom, the rock upon which broadcast is based. They are the people who put the journalistic food on the plates of presenters and correspondents. But in practice 'the desk' is always trumped by Output or the Programme team in rolling news who have to build a programme out of what is happening now. This is even more the case with social media.

Update:

From Sky's @FieldProducer an exemplary retweet under the new guidelines:



[It's a different kind of

organisation but here's [AP's social media guidelines](#)]

[Here's the [Wall Street Journal's Twitter guidelines](#) – tougher than Sky's I think]

[Here's the Washington Post's [guidelines](#)]

[Here's [a piece about how the BBC verifies](#) UGC/social media]

[Here are some [articles from the BBC Academy website](#) on their approaches to social media and news]

[I should stress that this is a speedy reaction to news of the new Twitter policy and I look forward to adding (and re-tweeting) developments.]

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