

When journalists go online: ethical challenges for news and social media

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This report on the Polis/PCC seminar is by Polis Researcher Hibah Hussain.



Gibson and Abell

The meteoric rise of social networks and micro-blogging platforms raises important new ethical and practical questions for journalists and policy makers. A special panel sponsored by Polis and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) brought together experts from journalism, the legal field, academia, and regulatory bodies to explore challenges and best practices concerning journalism and social media.

Chaired by Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis, the discussion began with case studies from Stephen Abell, Director of the PCC and included statements from Janine Gibson (editor, Guardian Online), Anna Doble (litigation specialist, Wiggin LLP), Torin Douglas (Media Correspondent, BBC), Jeremy Olivier (Head of Multimedia, Ofcom), and Professor Ian Walden (Professor of Communications Law, Queen Mary, University of London and PCC public Commissioner).

Opening the evening's discussion, Stephen Abell emphasized the need to strike a balance between protecting privacy and upholding freedom of expression. Abell pointed to a case in which a local newspaper used footage from YouTube to illustrate some of the thorny situations that arise from the growing popularity of social media.

He highlighted some of the PCC's principles regarding information from social networking sites that used publicly by journalists. "The basic principles that we operate under in these situations are varied," Abell noted:

"First, we have to consider the nature of the information, how private it is, how private the person regards it to be. Secondly, we need to think about the extent to which they willingly published it and put it out there to a wide audience. These things are not absolute...sometimes things are clearly in the public domain but it would still be intrusive to refer to them. That's the balancing act that the PCC realistically needs to strike."

This focus on the complicated, blurry relationships between journalists and social networking sites was further illuminated by the Guardian's Janine Gibson. "It's an incredibly complex relationship, the relationship between a journalist and a social network, nevermind that of editors and media organizations," Gibson said. "We've had to embrace a very multifaceted relationship where social networks are distributive and promotional tools for our content."

In addition to touching upon ethical codes for using material on Flickr and other social networking sites in stories, Gibson outlined ways in which social networks can facilitate richer, more inclusive journalism. Describing the Guardian's coverage of the G20 protests, Gibson described how reporters "used twitter... to communicate on-network and off-network with what they were seeing during the protests, which was an incredibly effective way of covering a disparate, moving story."

Referring to the links between social media and journalism as "a burning issue", BBC Media Correspondent Torin Douglas pointed to the double-edged nature of social media as it relates to journalism. Douglas used examples such as the campaign to save BBC Six Music and the outlash against Jan Moir as examples of the viral potential of social media responses to journalism. "Now that Twitter is becoming more widely known, that just increases its potential," Douglas commented.



Douglas & Walden

“It does mean that you’ve instantly got a source of comment, a source of information, and all sorts of things you can do with that information...everything happens a lot more quickly. It’s a tool for good in the sense that we can now find people that we never would have found before, but the potential for problems is big too.”

Ofcom’s Jeremy Olivier dove into this potential for problems, emphasizing the importance of media literacy, especially when it comes to new media and social networking. Describing the difficult nature of understanding and controlling privacy settings on social networking sites, Olivier argued that social media is changing how much control people have over their own representations.



Doble & Olivier

“The fundamental point is that most people today don’t know what the boundaries of privacy are, what the expectations are, and even if they know, they may not know quite how to execute, to behave in such a way to be secure and in the privacy environment that they’ve determined they’d like to be in. The thing that makes privacy very tricky in relation to social networking sites is that in principle, a social networking site is a tool to project your identity beyond the physical domain that is under your control as an individual.”

These issues of privacy and the tension between social media service providers and users was further explored by Professor Ian Walden who noted that “there is a real pressure within the service provider industry to try to monetize the personal data that they collect and process and make available. A lot of information can be disclosed about you without you being directly involved,” Walden said, noting that these “collateral interferences” raise even more ethical issues and moral questions.

Despite the enormous changes and new challenges being brought about by social media, Anna Doble of Wiggin LLP reminded the panel of the legal barriers keeping these issues from the courtroom. “Legally, things haven’t changed at all,” said Doble, “at the moment, we’ve still just got the framework of how privacy laws work, but there isn’t a significant body of cases to give people an idea of how things will work in practice.”

According to Doble, the expensive nature of privacy cases, combined with the ineffectiveness of using national laws to deal with many of the issues that arise on global social media networks and sites pose further challenges.

As social media continues to grow and blur various social and institutional boundaries, it is clear that the questions explored in this panel will evolve and intensify. While some of these questions are impossible to answer authoritatively, the dialogue surrounding these issues provides a key starting points for understanding and acting on the changing new media and journalism landscapes.

This report by Hibah Hussain.

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