

## THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORK OF LOCAL NEWSPAPER JOURNALISTS

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### Abstract

As the news industry embraces the various forms of social media to help them remain competitive in their news gathering and maintain market position several authors have claimed that these media are beginning to have a large impact on the way journalists work. Several national British news organizations have recently made efforts to promote the use of social media among the workforce, encouraging journalists to take them more seriously and implying that skills in this area are no longer optional. Advocates of the use of social media in news work see them as important tools for building audiences and building relationships with sources. Some see social media as especially suited to local journalism which depends upon its connectedness with its local community and its links with local newsmakers. Social media are viewed as an aid to digital participation, helping newspapers reflect and serve the interests of their readers. Despite suggestions of the apparently high level of social media use among news workers, up to now we have learnt very little about the extent to which journalists are incorporating these tools into their routine work or, when they do, how they affect their reporting practices. This paper explores the evolving working practices of local journalists. It reports on a series of interviews with journalists working on a newspaper located in the East Midlands region of England which examined the extent and nature of social media use in local news work.

**Keywords:** social media, Twitter, local newspapers, journalistic practices

### Introduction

In the past five years the news industry has made significant use of social media to promote their output, to enhance their efforts in news-gathering and to reach and stay closely connected to their audiences. Among the social media being used the micro-blogging service Twitter is beginning to have a large impact. There are now Twitter-based 'wire' services (e.g. BNO News, formerly 'Breaking News Online'), Twitter aggregation and listing services covering specialist news topics (e.g. those run by Tweetminster), and the majority of established news organisations now have their own Twitter-based breaking news feeds. Twitter's role in journalistic practice is increasing, and news organisations are recognising its growing importance as a journalistic tool. Several national British news organizations (e.g. the Guardian, the BBC) have made efforts to promote the use of Twitter among the reporting workforce, inviting journalists to take the service seriously as a reporting tool and implying that skills in this area are no longer optional. Some BBC journalists are using Twitter for newsgathering ('crowd sourcing', canvassing for story ideas, asking for help from

their 'followers' with story development and collecting background); others use it to add instant 'colour' as a supplement to their regular reports; specialist journalists use it to share articles, monitor source activity and attract a following for their other journalistic output whether online or offline; and news editors use it to solicit comment and reactions to output. Advocates of Twitter therefore see it as an important means of building, and building relationships with, audiences and sources, and as a way of building and maintaining loyalty and connectedness to a media brand. Given that local journalism traditionally has depended upon its connectedness with its local community and its links with local newsmakers Twitter might thus be seen as an especially powerful means of aiding digital participation that can help local news media reflect and serve the interests of their audiences.

Numerous industry surveys (e.g. Oriella PR Network, 2011) show continuing growth in the use of social media in newsrooms globally, but analysis of the relationship between social media and journalism has been less common than descriptions of the rise of social media and their popularity with journalists. At present we know very little about the extent to which journalists are incorporating social media such as Twitter into their routine work or, when they do, how – if at all – it is affecting their reporting practices. In part the research reported in the present paper is a response to calls for more research into the extent to which and the ways in which journalists are using social media in general, and Twitter in particular, in their work (Hermida, 2010). Some valuable work has already begun on this by examining journalists' Twitter postings ('tweets') (Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton, 2011) but in the present paper the focus of attention is on journalists' own accounts of their activity on Twitter.

The study is at the same time an attempt to shift some attention away from the activities of journalists working for national news media and onto that of local journalists. Local journalism is a relatively neglected area of academic enquiry (Aldridge, 2007). As they face the twin challenges of working for organizations that are on the one hand manifestly oriented more towards business success than to local democracy, while on the other are trying new ways to connect with audiences whose media habits are changing (Franklin, 2006), local journalists offer a potentially highly fruitful source of data on the media and social change.

In recent research on the audience for local news, Fenton, Metykova, Schlosberg and Freedman (2010) describe a 'crisis' in local news provision. My concern in this paper is to explore the production side of the process and begin to provide a socially situated account of local journalistic practices during a period of rapid change in this media sector. Although there has been some fairly recent discussion of the plight of local journalists in changing times (Pilling, 2006; Aldridge, 2007, Singer, 2010), they have to date received relatively little academic scrutiny, yet given their role in the crisis that Fenton et al identify, their experiences warrant closer academic attention. The paper thus reports on an exploratory study of journalists working for a regional daily newspaper in the East Midlands of England. The body of data generated by this study is modest, but it begins none the less to point to patterns of social media use among contemporary local journalists and is suggestive of potential lines of future enquiry.

## Research context and data collection

The research site was a newspaper owned by one of the UK's four regional newspaper conglomerates. This title has no paid-for print competitor in its readership area and in July 2011 its average daily readership was more than 192,000, reaching nearly 28% of an adult population of almost 300,000. By the standards of the UK regional press, these figures are high and the paper ranks as one of the more successful in its group (ranked as the sixth largest circulation regional title in England in 2006), although it, like other titles in the sector, is experiencing steadily declining sales (JICREG, 2011). The findings presented below are from interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011 with members of the editorial staff of the newspaper. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two waves, roughly six months apart, with newsgathering journalists from different specialist areas. At the time of writing (July 2011) fourteen members of the paper's reporting staff of around twenty-five (out of an editorial staff of around sixty-two) were Twitter account holders who identified themselves on Twitter as employees of the paper. Members of editorial staff were under no obligation to use Twitter but were in a working environment that encourages innovation and an awareness of the potential of digital media for newswork.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted with nine Twitter account holders at the paper. Questions explored three areas: motivations and practices; problems and causes of concern; and use of other forms of social media (e.g. personal weblogs, Facebook). At the time of writing, the Twitter activity profiles of the interviewees were as follows:

### Table 1 about here

## Motivations and Practices<sup>2</sup>

Why do local journalists use Twitter and what benefits do they perceive in doing so? First and foremost, Twitter evidently affords some practical benefits in terms of reporting. Informants commonly reported on the use of Twitter to attract attention to reports or articles to be published the next day in the print edition or online, but over time in most cases this has become of lesser importance than other uses of the tool.

All the journalists interviewed agreed that Twitter can be used as a way of testing ideas for stories: reporters might tweet these ideas and followers may give input on the way a story could be developed. Or a reporter may follow sources to pick up story ideas or tips to follow up. The General and Trainee reporters interviewed both use Twitter to monitor their colleagues' activity and to seek advice about stories they are working on. Twitter's direct messaging service allows users to send private messages to individual users. Private tweets – which might be thought of as 140-character off-the-record briefings – can also lead to new stories: the reporter will tweet a link to a story s/he has written in the paper; this can prompt followers to respond with tweeted comments or, occasionally, with direct messages suggesting new leads that can then develop into new stories. Twitter can also generate new news sources: 'Yes, definitely. The longer I've been on there, the more people are coming forward. Just people who I wouldn't deal with without Twitter.' (Senior Political Correspondent, interviewed 15.09.10). He goes on: 'You get on Twitter, it's dead easy for people to follow you, you can follow them, it gets a bit of awareness and it also means that you can stay in touch with so many people virtually that you wouldn't have a chance of doing because of time constraints in real life.' For him, having joined the newspaper just

over eighteen months before, Twitter provided a way of quickly building contacts and getting known in the locality.

Both the Senior Political Correspondent and the Senior Football Correspondent reported using a combination of Twitter and personal blog posting to facilitate reporting. The former explained how, in response to a refusal by the County Council's newly-recruited communications consultant to allow direct access to the Chief Executive for comment on an emerging story, he wrote a post on his blog about transparency and access and tweeted a link to it. Within minutes, the Chief Executive (one of his Twitter followers) had contacted him directly with an offer of an interview. The football correspondent had, on recently joining the paper, found it difficult to establish contact with senior staff at the local football club. There was some mistrust as a result of a misunderstanding on the club manager's part over the angle taken by the correspondent in his questioning. A blog post and alerting tweet rapidly restored relationships.

Despite these similarities, there is a noticeable contrast between the political and business correspondents on the one hand and the sports correspondents on the other. For the former, Twitter seems to be a tool that journalists use to keep in touch with, cultivate and utilize news sources; for the latter it is more a way of connecting with readers. The political correspondent described how Twitter is useful in the reporting of council meetings. He has, on occasion, tweeted questions to council officers during meetings where the press can be present but have no 'right of audience' (i.e. cannot take part). This, he felt was a good example of the way Twitter can help to bring public servants to account at a level that was impossible to reach in the past. He follows the Twitter feeds of local councillors and politicians which give him background intelligence that can be used to develop news stories and facilitate questioning in interviews and at press conferences. Both Business reporters use Twitter as a source and as a media monitoring tool to alert them to breaking stories and as a way of gauging local opinion about current and emerging issues relevant to their newsgathering area.

For sports reporters, Twitter seems to be used chiefly as a means to connect with fans and potential readers of the newspaper. The football and rugby correspondents both see sports fans as among the most important members of their Twitter following. They regularly send 'live tweets' during games (though with some caution on the football correspondent's part because of concerns over commercial reporting rights) and at the same time reply to direct messages on Twitter in response to questions and give their reactions to events during games. In doing this they see themselves as adding value to their reporting. They see Twitter as a useful tool for disseminating inside gossip – potential transfer 'targets' during the football transfer season, for example – and they find that fans will frequently ask questions that can help to flesh out a report or can be followed up in a story. In this sense they see their role as providing a service to the fans and believe that Twitter enhances this. Twitter can help to cultivate friendship with fans and link the reporter to fan forums which can provide material for reports: 'Twitter is a great way of reducing the distance between fans, the club and journalists.' (Senior Rugby Correspondent, 06. 07.11).

[Twitter] lets me bring in things about where I am, what I'm doing because being a rugby journalist I'm in quite a lucky position to be in positions that other people would like to be in: in the commentary box, in a press conference minutes after the final whistle, talking to players and head coaches and managers, and so trying to convey that in a sort of, you know, exciting and interesting manner to let people know what

goes on and perhaps trying not to concentrate on just 'this is a story, that's of interest or this is a story I have written' but things that are going on around that and to give people a bit more idea of the role that I've got and also of some of the things that might not get reported to some extent...some off-the-record stuff.

Senior Rugby Correspondent, 15.09.10

A Twitter user's 'following' and 'followers' status (the number of Twitter users from whom an individual wishes to receive tweets and the number of users receiving that individual's tweets) should be interpreted with some caution, but using the figures in Table 1 to calculate a 'follow ratio' can give a crude indication of the balance in the direction of flow of tweets between given users and their followers<sup>3</sup>. This lends support to the notion that there are differences in Twitter use depending on newsgathering area for here the sports reporters score highest with the political reporter some way behind and the rest a considerable distance behind that (the education reporter, whose profile differs markedly from the others, showing a low level of activity overall, can be disregarded here).<sup>4</sup>

How might these differences be explained? Research carried out in the pre-digital era has relevance here. In accounting for the activities of specialist journalists Tunstall (1971) showed how the segmented nature of the occupation meant that journalists working in different news gathering fields are oriented to the revenue-generating and non-revenue goals of news organizations in differing degrees. In some fields (such as football) the attraction of readers was paramount, in others (such as political reporting) contributions to the news organization's prestige or public standing carried greater value. Further and more systematic enquiry is needed to explore this idea, but the evidence here suggests that the concept of 'goal orientation' still has some explanatory power in accounting for journalistic practice.

All those interviewed felt that using Twitter had increased their productivity.

Yes ... I'm keener to produce more work that can go up and that people can look at because you feel more than ever that there's a window of people looking at you and wanting to see what you know and what they can get from you because they are physically following you to find out certain information about... what [the rugby team] were up to and I'm hopefully in the fortunate position of being able to know more than a lot of people. So there's a little bit of pressure there to do more and try and make sure that you don't miss anything.

Senior Rugby Correspondent, 15.09.10

The Senior Political Correspondent commented from the perspective of the newspaper's overall productivity: 'Yes, definitely because I do feel that, say, the blog for example, improves the [...] perception of the [newspaper]'s political output unquestionably.' (15.09.10).

There are also personal and career benefits to be derived from using Twitter. One journalist felt it helped to strengthen relationships among the reporting staff in the newsroom: 'Twitter helps me feel more part of a broad journalistic community' (Deputy Business Editor, 06.07.11) and another noted that it enables direct communication with the editor – "editors are now only an '@mention' away from their journalists" (Senior Political Correspondent, 6 July 2011).

The political correspondent explained that his Twitter 'voice' is different from the voice he uses in his reports in the paper: "it's a good way of putting a bit of 'me' in there" (6 July 11). Others felt that Twitter was valuable because it offered an easy way of collecting feedback on their output, 'helping to close the gap', as one informant put it, 'between the newspaper and the reader'. Another said: 'this is a way to find out whether people think you're talking rubbish or if you're saying the right things.' (Senior Rugby Correspondent, 15.09.10). In the past, especially for sports reporters, feedback of this sort was rarely available. Match reports in the online edition of the paper seldom receive reader comments, for example.

All informants expressed some awareness of the value of Twitter and other online tools for 'building a personal brand'. This can happen in a number of ways. For example, tweets can lead readers to a journalist's blog and, apart from the benefits this might have for newsgathering, this helps him/her to build up a following. Some tweets may also be re-tweeted by others who have a larger and perhaps more influential following which helps to increase web presence. As the political correspondent explained:

I think my view comes from my awareness of other journalists who use blogs and Twitter. One of my favourite blogs is by Paul Waugh at the Evening Standard and if he didn't blog I wouldn't have any idea who he was. I read blogs from political reporters at the Manchester Evening News, for example, and I just know the effect that it has on me where they just seem, sort of, ten times more high profile if they've got a blog and Twitter and [they're] engaging with people compared to other people on the paper who just write stories. You don't notice the by-lines on websites but if you're going on somebody's blog, you know and I just think, vice versa, you know, you think it has ... perhaps the same thing happens. That's the thing that's driving it... I know it's a kind of passive benefit... And I also know that, from the Google stats programme as well, you know, you'll find a lot of hits from the likes of various newspaper groups, so, you know, the Trinity-Mirror group, so there are definitely people logging on from other newspaper companies and the Mail as well...

Senior Political Correspondent, 15.09.10

After ten weeks as an employee on the paper, the Trainee Journalist showed an acute awareness of the potential that these tools contain:

It could come to the point where it is an essential part of being a journalist, having at least a created version of yourself in the online world, even if it's not the real you, because when it comes to the point [...] it will definitely be of benefit to have an online presence and all that because it's almost like your own brand that you can move from company to company regardless of where you work so if your reputation precedes you in that way then hopefully that would be a good thing.

15.09.10

## **Problems**

All the journalists interviewed felt that Twitter should be used with caution, first because of the need to preserve the printed paper's readership:

In the print media it's actually getting harder and harder to break new news in the newspaper because there's twenty-four hour news everywhere and so I'm sure Twitter will get more and more useful for that reason. But from my point of view I have to be careful that I don't just stick everything on Twitter immediately, a) because I know I'm followed by other journalists who could pick up something I know and it's in tomorrow's paper as well, but also because we've got to be aware of sales of the paper...

Senior Rugby Correspondent, 15.09.10

There was also a need to avoid giving away scoops; all these journalists felt that this was all too easily done.

The rugby correspondent follows local rugby players' Twitter feeds, although this has led to greater caution and the club introducing a 'private-use-only' policy on Twitter for its players for fear of news about team selections, individual players' fitness, and leaks of other information of potential value reaching their competitors. There is also a need to be cautious about communicating directly with fans and supporters to avoid revealing too much privileged information. Off-the-record and insider gossip need to be used sparingly in case source relationships are damaged. Both sports journalists indicated that their relationships with their key sources – the local clubs they covered – depended upon an understanding of their mutual interests, a certain amount of trust and a good deal of respect for one another. Careless use of Twitter with the information they received could easily compromise a sometimes finely balanced relationship.

The football correspondent observed that Twitter has made it difficult to break exclusive reports. A conversation with 'a mate in the know over a couple of beers' used to be a source of exclusive stories but now anyone who has inside information can, and often will, tweet it. There is no need therefore to wait for the journalist to write the 'chapter and verse' of a story once its main elements have been tweeted. This was a further source of frustration, he felt, because 'non-professionals' can tweet information without fear of souring source-media relationships.

### **Use of other social media**

Most of the journalists in this study had some experience with other social media and with weblogs. Facebook was regarded by most as a private, non-work tool that was, none the less, occasionally useful for story ideas, for contacts who could be interviewed or for access to interest groups. The benefits of the Twitter-to-blog combination have already been mentioned, but blogs were also seen as valuable spaces where additional colour or background could be added to a story that would not otherwise reach the public domain. The Political Correspondent set up his blog because 'on Twitter there wasn't enough space to get across what I wanted to say [...] Twitter has been more useful in doing my job whereas the blog has been more useful in raising a bit of profile or whatever...'

[The blog] is off-cuts of news stories that are too nerdy for readers to care about, but I know that there's an audience there of about, I don't know, perhaps 500 to 1000 people in the public sector in [the region] who are quite interested in 'guess which councillor embarrassed themselves at a committee?' or a sketch about something

that's gone on in the [council] chamber, and so that one is a bit more niche than how I use my Twitter account.

Senior Political Correspondent 15.09.10

In the period between interviews for this study almost all these journalists were finding that their use of Twitter was displacing their use of other media forms and had found that Facebook use and blogging were all reducing since their Twitter accounts had been opened. The speed and ease of use and the fact that feedback was rapid were among Twitter's most attractive features.

## **Conclusion**

These findings are important because they help us to see how – and to what extent – social media are helping to reshape the way journalism is currently practiced. Anderson (2011) has shown recently how the audience monitoring and measurement techniques that are now possible for online news, such as counting page views and measuring the popularity of stories, seem to be shaping journalistic decision-making, redefining the role of the audience from a passive body presented with news that journalists decide is news to an active body that can give quantitative feedback about its preferences. This works, Anderson suggests, far more effectively as a form of audience 'participation' than mechanisms for collecting user generated content (such as online comments on stories). According to Anderson, journalists take more seriously the data that tells them which of several stories on offer are attracting most interest. He foresees the creation of increasingly audience-driven rather than journalist-driven news media.

The findings from the present study suggest that tools such as Twitter may have the potential to hasten such a change. However, the preliminary findings presented here will need to be tested against data obtained from more extensive research on journalists located in a wider range of contexts. We have seen how the change in journalistic practices that can be discerned follows the pattern of segmentation in the occupation of journalism identified in research conducted more than forty years ago. This reinforces the conclusion drawn from other research on journalists which indicates that, despite the changes that have occurred as digital technologies have been adopted in news production and dissemination, alongside a desire to maintain conventional values and ethical principles in newswork, there is widespread continuity of journalistic practice between the old and the new (Singer, 2005; Lasorsa et al, 2011). Lasorsa et al (2011) also found, however, that among lower profile journalists such as those working for local media, there is a greater likelihood of innovation. The journalists in their study were more inclined to use Twitter in ways that broke with journalistic tradition in order to attract and maintain a following. This may not simply be, as Lasorsa et al (2011) suggest, evidence of lesser-known journalists seeking to make a name for themselves and an intimation of further innovation and openness to come, but instead an indication of the pressure being felt by journalists who find themselves on the front line in an industry in crisis and therefore more aware of the need to cement relationships with their audiences. In this sense, as O'Sullivan and Heinonen conclude, throughout the changes felt by the news industry, 'journalists continue to behave like journalists (2008: 368). Certainly, viewed from within a sociological framework, it appears that, as employees, journalists continue to conform to practices that are shaped by the imperatives of the organizations that employ them. It may be that it is these



imperatives, rather than any other (such as journalistic or professional values), will continue have the most powerful influence on journalistic practices in the years to come.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Interview with the Editor, 7 September 2010.

<sup>2</sup>The main method of data collection in the study was the qualitative interview. This was guided by the principle that interviews should be treated first as forms of social interaction rather than as ways of obtaining reports about social reality (Silverman, 1993). In interviews participants present themselves and explain their actions as being appropriate. Interviewees thus give 'accounts' of their behaviours and motivations that are complicated by the micro-politics of their social situation and by their self-presentations. These accounts therefore should not be taken as explanations or descriptions of reality. They are conditioned by organizational, social and personal context. This is neatly summarised in C. Wright Mills's well-known observation that 'the differing reasons men give for their actions are not themselves without reasons' (Mills, 1940: 904). I make this point to emphasize that I am interested not only in journalistic practices or what journalists do, but also in what they say they do and the reasons they give for their practices.

<sup>3</sup> This of course takes no account of the activity level of users or followers in terms of the number of tweets they post which, as is evident here, varies widely from user to user.

<sup>4</sup> To put these figures into perspective, and to highlight the contrast between the national and the local news worlds, prominent politicians and national newspaper editors and reporters with Twitter accounts were commonly being followed by around 50,000 Twitter users at the time of writing.

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**Table 1: Newsgathering area and Twitter profile of interview sample as at 28/07/2011**

<b>Journalist</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>First tweet</b>	<b>Tweets</b>	<b>Following</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Follow ratio*</b>
A	Football	31/10/2010	932	93	1559	16.76
B	Rugby	01/03/2010	5144	281	911	3.24
C	Politics	07/02/2010	3884	303	789	2.60
D	Features	27/03/2009	3517	279	361	1.29
E	Business (ed)	17/12/2009	701	166	300	1.80
F	Business (d'ed)	20/01/2010	801	233	269	1.15
G	General	14/06/2011	295	391	214	0.54
H	Trainee	02/02/2010	181	233	155	0.66
I	Education	19/11/2010	14	23	118	5.13

\*number of followers divided by number followed