

■ 2013 Social Media Guidebook

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The 2013 Social Media Guidebook explores the potential and the challenges of social media and the right to freedom of expression as new media develop. The authors address contemporary issues affecting journalism and media in general. For journalists, consultants, regulatory officials and undergraduate and graduate students.

The views expressed by the contributing authors in this publication are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

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Social media and journalism

Leah Betancourt

The backchannel of life that is social media doesn't take a break. Social media doesn't stop when you go to sleep. Not only is it always on, but it is growing in size and its voice is getting louder.

This real-time flow of information, photos and video from all over the world funneling through social networks cannot be ignored. For journalists, the balance of using social media for newsgathering, reporting, verifying – with the ethical issues that go with it – remains a challenge that continues to be tried and tested as older standards evolve to meet the demands of new technologies. Social media's immediacy, ease of use, low barrier to entry and global footprint have made information, news, content and sentiment, travel farther and faster than ever before.

What used to happen before “going to press” – information distribution – in the forms of verification and fact checking now play out simultaneously in social media. Process and transparency is as newsworthy as the newsgathering and reporting itself. It is becoming a part of how stories are told with social media, and the whole world is paying close attention.

Facebook hit 1 billion users in October 2012, and 81 percent of its monthly active users are now outside the United States and Canada. Twitter today has more than 140 million active users and generates 340 million tweets per day.

Journalism has begun addressing what this change means for the industry. Harvard University's Neiman Report focused its Summer 2012 issue “Truth in the Age of Social Media,” on how news organizations such as the AP, BBC and CNN handle verifying user-generated content from social media. (<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/assets/pdf/Nieman%20Reports/backissues/NRSummer2012.pdf>).

One of several early tests of social media that grabbed the world's attention and validated these networks as a news source was the protests that erupted from the Iranian election in June 2009. Twitter users turned their profile icons green to support the protests. #IranElection tweets maxed at 221,744 per hour at the time

and 3,000 videos on Iran were posted on YouTube in one day, Mashable reported in 2009.

Twitter's role was significant: The U.S. State Department asked Twitter to postpone scheduled maintenance during the upheaval so as not to interrupt the updates. Social media put a face on the protest victims. News reports identified a woman shot in the streets during the melee as Neda Soltan. A YouTube video captured her graphic death and attempts to stop the bleeding after she took a gunshot to the chest. Her death fueled an outcry to stop the violence.

During the 2011 Arab Spring, Andy Carvin, senior strategist at National Public Radio in Washington, D.C., used Twitter to curate, crowdsource, build sources and verify updates from the region remotely. At one point, Carvin tweeted for 20 hours, generating 1,400 messages, the Washington Post reported in 2011. He turned to the region to find out what was happening, but the world turned to Carvin on Twitter for real-time updates. He won a Knight-Batten Award, Shorty Award for best journalist on social media and was one of TIME Magazine's 140 Best Twitter Feeds of 2011.

When the U.S. stormed Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan, a witness took to Twitter during the takedown and capturing of the elusive terrorist. The Atlantic reported that IT consultant Sohaib Athar live tweeted and blogged the raid as it happened. Athar's firsthand, real-time account garnered him worldwide attention.

However, the real-time news feed of social media content has not come without pitfalls. Posting updates on social media and verifying content has become more critical – and downright tricky. Editorial and social media teams at operations such as Storyful, BreakingNews.com and Reuters follow social media reports closely, working to verify and distribute reports from originating sources.

Social media's international scope has worked to narrow the gap between national and international events. In June 2011, *The Gay Girl in Damascus'* blog that supposedly was run by lesbian Amina Arraf, claimed she had been kidnapped by Syrians, but the blog was outed to be a hoax: it was being run by an American man in Scotland, according to the Guardian. The Guardian's website reported on the blogger's identity and his response. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/26/gay-girl-damascus-accused-defending>).



“Innocence of Muslims,” a trailer posted on YouTube for a film about the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in September 2012 resulted in a violent backlash among Arab populations worldwide. The upheaval culminated with the bombing of the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, which killed four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. Social media accounts continued to capture the outrage and spreading militia violence resulting from the video, as well as the anti-militia sentiment that went through Libya after the Ambassador’s death. The social transformations that fueled the Arab Spring did not end with successful revolutions, but continued to play a pivotal role in shaping the peace that followed.

Leading up to the U.S. presidential election on November 6, 2012, social media became more influential than in the previous two presidential elections. Presidential hopeful and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich announced his run for president on Twitter. Campaign ads made instant fact checking a new hobby – or even a national pastime with apps such as Ad Hawk, which checks ads via audio content against its database for accuracy. Instant fact checking became a feature of the presidential and vice presidential debates. On election night at 11:19 p.m. EDT as news networks called President Barack Obama’s re-election, tweets per minute peaked at 327,452, according to Twitter’s blog.

On October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy slammed into the Mid-Atlantic U.S., devastating the New Jersey coastline, Manhattan and its subway system, Long Island and other areas in the region. As the storm made landfall, Northeasterners took to Twitter and Facebook during the unprecedented weather event. What unfolded was verification, curation, crowdsourcing and fact-checking – all happening in real time. False reports about Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s subway system were quickly debunked. A Twitter user (@ComfortablySmug) who tweeted false information during the storm was outed as the campaign manager for New York Congressional candidate Christopher Wright and ended up resigning, according to a report by Buzz Feed political reporter Andrew Kaczynski. The storm knocked out websites of Huffington Post, Buzz Feed and Gawker, Kaczynski immediately started a Tumblr site specifically to keep the Sandy storm updates and comments coming¹.

So what do these news events playing out on social media mean for journalists? The notion of what is news continues to broaden. So does distribution. There are

¹ <http://buzzfeedandrew.tumblr.com/page/6> and <http://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewkaczynski/councilman-pushes-for-charges-against-twitter-user>

more devices for getting content out to users, and more platforms for distributing content.

The downside is that users, the audience, media companies, developers and APIs are at the whim of these platforms – unless the company reverts. When social networks change their interface or are bought out, users and apps must adapt, keep up, find another similar service or complain loudly. Sometimes these services retreat due to users' backlash such as Instagram changing its terms of service in December 2012, but sometimes they don't

Social media as a news source means changing roles for journalists in how they approach and cover news – as Andy Carvin demonstrated with his Arab Spring coverage. The changing role for news organizations on social media continues to be the tone and the approach they use in posting content, the process of vetting content and reaching their audience in the space.

In a presentation I made in April 2012 at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, I pointed out the trend of journalists being hired at high-profile blogs and news websites such as Mashable, BuzzFeed and Tumblr. Similarly, media companies are hiring leading social media influencers to run their social media presence on these platforms. With that hiring trend, is there also a role reversal between these online sites and news organizations or are they just resembling each other?

GigaOm's Matthew Ingram suggested that mainstream media is trying to be like Tumblr by injecting memes and animated gifs into their content and that Tumblr is trying to become more like mainstream media by doing things such as hiring bloggers to cover the national Democratic and Republican party conventions. (<http://gigaom.com/2012/10/26/what-tumblr-can-tell-us-about-the-future-of-media>).

A large part of the digital shift of newsrooms has social media taking a central position.

The same issues traditional journalism faces – verification, sourcing and timeliness – have infiltrated and challenged social networks. For journalists, social media is a news tool, but it also has evolved into a news platform itself.

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