

The Socially Challenged: Exploring Obstacles to Social Media Integration in Newsrooms

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Abstract

This research explores the challenges many journalists face in integrating social media tools into their daily workflow. Using a qualitative approach, 25 journalists from a variety of media backgrounds provide insights into what obstacles kept them and others from seeing the practicality of social media tools. Results point to four main themes including concerns about quality and accuracy, the increase in workload and job-related stress created by social media, the competitive environment of breaking stories via social media, and the age and experience of the journalist. Results are considered within the framework of Rogers' (1983) diffusion of innovations theoretical model.

Keywords: Social media, Journalism, Social media integration, Convergent journalism

Introduction

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The proliferation of social media into newsrooms across the country has created a shift in the way journalists go about their daily business. For some, the practicality of social media was immediately evident and quickly integrated into the workflow. For others, older journalistic methods seemed more useful than untested promises made by proponents of the new technology. There is little debate that social media has seismically changed newsrooms, creating in its wake a new

communication model for newsgathering and news dissemination. Some news outlets were visionary in recognizing how social media could add to or replace old methods. Within those outlets were journalists who grasped how these tools could improve communication channels between the journalist and the public at large. Other journalists were guarded, acknowledging some of the drawbacks that emerged. Using interviews with journalists across the country, this analysis explores the obstacles many of them have faced as they began using social media tools in the workplace. It begins with a brief look at the

history of digital technology integration within the news media and is followed by an in-depth analysis of the challenges that emerged when journalists, often mandatorily, began using social media. It concludes with a discussion of how the findings assimilate with proposed theory.

Literature Review

The academic community has already turned considerable attention to the new forms of media emerging in the Internet age. Much of that research has explored the role technology has played in changing the way journalists do their jobs. Reddick and King (1994) were among the first to suggest the imminent influence of the Internet on modern journalism. Before long academics were attempting to document some of these impacts, including changes to newsgathering procedures and the impact of digitization (see Cochran, 1997; Brill, 1997; and Waisbord, 1997). Pavlik (2000) tracked the acceleration of Internet use for daily tasks within the newsroom, finding that by 2000, 93 percent of journalists were relying on online resources. Five years earlier only one third of 2,500 surveyed journalists had access to the Internet. Cottle and Ashton (1999) used an ethnographic approach to explore the way technology changed the day-to-day work of journalists. Interestingly, one interviewee commented that new technologies in the newsroom left them little time to scan the Internet for news and information. Today, a journalist lives and dies by the flow of information across Internet platforms. The early 2000s brought about the converged newsroom, one where multitasking was

compulsory. Singer (2004) defined convergence as a “sharing of news staffs, technologies, products and geography” (p. 838). Where in prior years a newspaper’s platform was exclusively its print edition, the added online digital version redefined the communication model. Journalists soon faced pressure to augment their skill set to fit the new model. Television reporters adept at writing for a visual audience had to learn the new skill of writing for online readers. Newspaper columnists were appearing on live television to be interviewed about their latest story. The list goes on.

Findings by Boczkowski (2004) draw attention to limitations some journalists faced in adopting new technology. She noted that “actors who shared a general awareness of, and basic access to, the multimedia and interactive capabilities of Web technologies took advantage of them differently” (p. 208). Various dynamics present in the adoption of new technology played a role. In simple terms, the research suggested that many factors contribute to why some journalists readily adopt new technology while others drag their feet. One issue, as Klinenberg (2005) found, is that many journalists think new technology adds to their already excessive workload. In the mid-2000s journalists who were becoming accustomed to the emerging web-based tools found themselves dealing with a new form of Internet communication: social media. Recent inquiries have focused on the catalytic role of social media in changing how journalists and news consumers view the news communication process. Facebook,

a harbinger of other social networking platforms to follow, began as a means of connecting people. Soon many journalists realized the potential benefits of employing social media to connect with people who previously may have been difficult to reach (Lysak, Cremedas, & Wolf, 2012).

Social media integration into television newsrooms was swift. Research by the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) in 2010 found that 91% of stations were using Facebook, up from only 64% the previous year. By 2012, only 2.1% of stations were not utilizing Facebook. Twitter use trailed Facebook in 2012 by only a slight margin, with 5.6% of stations reporting no usage (Papper, 2012). Social media usage in the newspaper industry mirrored that of broadcast. In 2009, 62% of the top 100 newspapers listed a Twitter link on the newspaper's website, according to research by the Bivin's Group, currently The Brick Factory (The use of Twitter by America's newspapers, 2009). Boyle and Zuegner (2012) note that Twitter is a widely used tool among mid-sized newspapers. Community newspapers have also embraced modern technology tools to reach readers, however are not surprisingly lagging the efforts of their larger counterparts (Greer & Yan, 2010). Social media adoption in the newsroom has been abundantly researched, but specific ways it is being used has only recently been addressed. For example, Adornato (2014) uses an ethnographic approach to explore how technology tools are changing the work routines of television

newsroom staff. However, the research community has yet to adequately explore the obstacles that have thwarted the adoption and integration of social media tools. As Weaver (2014) points out: "We know little about the fears that older journalists might have about the changes in journalism brought by new technologies, social media, and the dramatic changes in the economics of journalism."

Research Question

It is important for researchers, the news industry, and journalism students to understand why some journalists face impediments to integrating new technologies, specifically social media. In understanding these challenges, the divide between those who have easily adopted and those who "lament the dying of the old way," (p. 27) as Adornato (2014) puts it, can perhaps be rejoined. Accordingly, the following question emerges to guide this body of research: *What are the obstacles that exist within media newsrooms that limit or delay the integration and usage of social media tools?*

Method

A qualitative research approach is used here to gain a better understanding into these challenges. In-depth interviews with 25 journalists were conducted during June 2014 and July 2014. This purposive sample of journalists represents experiences in newsrooms in 26 states and one European country. It was the goal of this researcher to find and interview both journalists who began working in the industry prior to the advent of social media in the late 2000s and those

who began their careers after. The median career length of respondents is 9 years. The longest career is 30 years with the shortest less than one year. Of the respondents, 16 began their careers prior to the integration of social media into the newsroom workflow. They are labeled here *legacy journalists*. Eight of the respondents entered their media careers in the years after media outlets began using social media. Most were already using social media platforms for personal communication and expressed progressive ideas of how the modern newsroom should function. They are labeled *neoteric journalists*. Respondents represent an array of media duties including television and newspaper reporters, television and radio anchors, newspaper and magazine columnists, and television producers. One respondent is a television social media journalist. Although journalists from various traditional media outlets were interviewed, there was no effort made to distinguish between challenges faced by one type of outlet over another. In other words, the objective was not to explicate challenges faced by newspaper journalists when compared to those working in the radio or television industries. Rather, the themes presented are those apposite to the media industry as a whole. There are certainly unique and multifarious obstacles each outlet faces when integrating new technology tools. A careful examination of those differences is not the goal here. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone ranging in length from about 20 minutes to 2 hours. In one instance an interviewee asked to respond via

email. Responses to several core questions were sought throughout the interviews with follow-up questions employed as needed. To help ensure candid responses without fear of employer retribution, respondents were guaranteed anonymity and permission from employers to conduct the interviews was not sought. Identifying information is changed throughout. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed to text for analysis. Emerging themes based on the “thick, rich description” (Patton, 2002, p. 437) provided by the interviews form the foundation of this qualitative interpretation.

Results

This analysis represents the direct reports of both legacy and neoteric journalists. Legacy journalists describe the obstacles they themselves faced in learning and adopting the new technology tool of social media. They speak from the perspective of having worked in a media environment both prior to and following social media integration. Neoteric journalists speak of their experiences from a much different perspective. Social media skills were already a part of their daily activities and an expectation that it also be used in the work environment seemed no less unorthodox than an expectation to show up on time or meet a deadline. While in each group there were exceptions (which are noted throughout), overall a consensus materialized into an understanding of what made it easier for neoteric journalists to integrate a new communication tool. Interestingly, both neoteric and legacy journalists agreed social media made several aspects of their jobs simpler. What emerges from

this analysis are four distinct themes that, when analyzed from the perspectives of both legacy and neoteric journalists, present a useful commentary on the dichotomy between an old communication method and new. First, concerns over the quality and accuracy of information gleaned from social media platforms is a genuine source of frustration for legacy journalists. Neoteric journalists view social media as a tool to enhance quality, not detract from it. Second, both legacy and neoteric journalists note that social media adds to the daily workload, but the added work is worthwhile because it makes other tasks, such as research, much easier. Third, there is no consensus as to whether social media creates a competitive advantage. While some see the benefits of using social media to drive customers to traditional platforms, others note that the environment of instant publication and broadcast—what Hermida (2010) calls “ambient journalism”—creates a myriad of other complex problems that have to be solved. Finally, both legacy and neoteric journalists recognize age as contributing to resistance to and ease of integration. While legacy journalists recall life in newsrooms without an Internet, many neoteric journalists struggle to remember a world before the Internet. Each argues for the benefits of the model with which they are most comfortable.

Quality and Accuracy Concerns

The journalists interviewed here are passionate about producing quality information in a proficient manner. A superior news organization must disseminate correct and timely information before

its competitors do so. The pressure to be first creates a challenge for journalists who are now relying on social media for information from sources as well as tips on stories. While some research has suggested these pressures have led journalists to spend less time checking facts (2014 study impact of social media on news: More crowd-checking, less fact-checking, 2014), the journalists interviewed for this research tell quite a different story. They all agree that information culled from social media must be verified before publication or broadcast. The verification process always involves checking information with reliable sources. Furthermore this implies that verified social media accounts from public relations officials are fair game and require no additional crosscheck. Unlike their neoteric counterparts, legacy journalists seem more concerned about giving viewers and readers an accurate account of whether the information was procured via digital tools or by an actual conversation with a source. Steve, a television reporter who began working in the industry in 2000, notes: There’s nothing wrong with using verified Twitter accounts because you know it’s authentic and you’re actually citing where you’re getting the information from. I think at the same time that it’s important to note that this is a tweet. (personal communication, July 3, 2014) Other legacy journalists voice concerns surrounding crowdsourcing, defined by Howe (2008) as the practice of placing an open call to the public to supplement or replace work formerly done by an employee. Delonte, a television producer at a mid-

market station on the East Coast, says managers at her station were so adamant about incorporating viewer content, the quality of the on-air product suffered:

I remember one time when we had a large sink hole open up on a busy street. Witnesses started sending us pictures via social media and our news director insisted we use them even though the images we were receiving were of poorer quality than the video our own crews were sending back from the scene. In other words, we were using it just because we could, not because we should. (personal communication, June 18, 2014) This highlights a concern legacy journalists have had to grapple with as social media moved from fad to daily reality. Several respondents talk about a blurred line between professionals and amateurs threatening the strength of the industry. “Anyone can be a journalist,” lamented Steve (personal communication, July 3, 2014). “Leave the journalism up to the professionals,” said Janet (personal communication, June 12, 2014), a former radio and television journalist. These journalists give the impression that social media could damage their professional careers. Their concerns are not without precedent. As native digital news sources continue to add staff, those working in traditional newsrooms have faced layoffs (Jurkowitz, 2014). The digital threat is very real for these journalists. Nevertheless, not all see it as a premonition of demise. Schmidt, a newspaper columnist and 30-year industry veteran, thinks there will always be an appetite among the public for sound information. The creation of

sound information on a consistent basis, he notes, requires a professional organization (personal communication, June 24, 2014). That should give legacy journalists optimism as the industry continues to figure out how the new journalism model will function. For the neoteric journalists interviewed, social media has helped them improve the quality of the product overall. Virginia, a television news producer working in the industry less than a year, fears receiving a phone call from her manager questioning why she missed a story that a competing station has covered. She views Twitter as her lifeline. Twitter is where I get most of my news tips now. I don’t really hear the scanners. Twitter lets me know what’s going on. (personal communication, June 24, 2014) To Virginia, social media gives her confidence that the content she includes in the broadcast is a reflection of all that is happening in her community. Other neoteric journalists say the pressure to cover such a superfluity of news events leaves them wanting to do the in-depth investigative work lauded by their journalism professors only a few years earlier¹. Carly, a young television reporter, calls it “run-and-gun” news. Like spit it out, get it on air. But there’s no, like, depth to it. It’s basic facts. They don’t give you time anymore to do a good investigative piece because the next accident happened or the next person ran into a school with a gun again. In my perfect newsroom I would have one or two investigative reporters who don’t have to be on the air every day who can take the time to dig into it

¹ Several legacy journalists noted this as well

more. (personal communication, June 26, 2014) These neoteric journalists see social media for what it is. They believe it can indeed help them go about their daily tasks while also improving the quality of the product. While they did not vocalize any concerns about employment sustainability the way legacy journalists did, Carly and others were careful to point out that the benefits of social media are limited. What both legacy and neoteric journalists seemed to share is an understanding that social media is here to stay.

Addition to Workload and Job Stress

Recent studies confirm that workplace stress is on the rise as additional duties are being required of convergent journalists (for example, see Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Aviles & Leon, 2002; Singer, 2004; Klinenberg, 2005; Smith, Tanner, & Duhe, 2007; Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2012; and Adornato, 2014). Adornato's (2014) ethnographic research in a single television newsroom concerning the way social media has impacted job responsibilities is corroborated here by the 25 journalists representing newsrooms across the country. For legacy reporters, social media has forced them to adopt a new way of gathering and disseminating news and information. Jerome, a television news anchor and reporter in California, describes the impact on his workday: Before, it was you show up at the scene, you tell the story, and you go home. Now you show up at the scene, you take some pictures for the web, you write a web script, you set up, you go live, you write your story, you break down, you shoot some more web pictures, and you send another web script in. The work

level has truly doubled. It's just a matter of how quick can you get accustomed to it and adapt to it to make it easier for you. (personal communication, June 19, 2014) While the number of tasks associated with each journalist's job may have increased, the time it takes to do some of those duties has decreased. Both legacy and neoteric journalists describe using social media for tracking down interviews, finding news tips, and gaining an overall sense of what people in the community are interested in on a particular day. Previously, these types of tasks were arduous. Yvette, a 21-year industry veteran, remembers when the only computer in her newsroom with Internet access was located in her boss's office. Each evening when he left he locked the door to that office, leaving reporters with no ability to get online for news purposes (personal communication, June 20, 2014). John, who has worked at three newspapers, says he used to comb through the yellow pages and other business directories to find contact information for stories. It takes him a matter of seconds to find the same information using the Internet (personal communication, June 23, 2014). Schmidt spent several years working as a freelance writer in France. He recalled mailing stories to publications back in the United States. That meant he had to finish days before his deadline (personal communication, June 24, 2014).

Within the context of life before and life after digital technology integration in newsrooms, these journalists see clear advantages to using the tools. While social media has added to the daily frenzy, the benefits seem to outweigh the costs. Asked if

social media has made their jobs easier or harder, most quickly answer “easier.” Upon further thought, however, they do recognize it as contributing to additional workplace stress. Karissa is working at her first job as a reporter. She says she has been using social media so extensively, it is second-nature to her. Despite her proficient use of the platforms, it still can be an additional stress as she works to perform her job duties. She adequately sums up the sentiment expressed by most of the journalists both legacy and neoteric: I think social media makes my job easier—sometimes. I think that it makes it harder in that it’s just one more thing that I have to do, especially if I’m on something that’s moving really quickly. If I’m covering spot news or a police chase or something like that, there are a lot of different things that I have to juggle. (personal communication, July 1, 2014)

Competitiveness

Many legacy journalists often hold off on publishing information via social media for strategic reasons, contradicting any perception that social media is a live, continuously updating, complete categorization of news events. Legacy journalists interviewed here drew attention to the struggle they face when choosing to break a story via social media instead of using the traditional medium. There was a clear distinction of opinions between legacy and neoteric journalists. Neoteric journalists view social media as an extension of the traditional medium. Simply stated, it is a way to keep viewers, readers, and listeners updated in the interim. Carly says she sends out tweets

without a thought she might possibly tip off a competitor to a story she is working on (personal communication, June 26, 2014). Colette, who has been working as a television news reporter since 2007, sees no difference between breaking a story on social media and breaking it on her station’s website or during a newscast (personal communication, June 20, 2014). Louise, a Texas news anchor working at a station that requires its journalists to send a specified number of tweets each day, believes the benefits of using social media outweigh costs associated with tipping off competitors. Several journalists note that because every outlet is eavesdropping on competitors by way of social media, a level playing field exists, giving an advantage to no one. Legacy journalists believe the decision to break news on a social media platform must be weighed. Steve has been resistant to signing up for a social media account to use at work. Only this year has he established a presence on Twitter and that by mandate from his news manager. His is a love-hate relationship with social media. As a reporter, he finds it useful in tracking down information about interview subjects. Yet the expectation that he share information about his story while he is still in the process of newsgathering feels foreign to him. He proudly shares his journalistic masterpiece, but only when it is completed. He has his own viewpoint concerning the strategy of breaking a story prior to the broadcast: If you know you have a 5 o’clock newscast, why would you break something online at noon when you give your competition four hours to try to find what you’re

looking for? You can break it online closer to news time and say, okay, after 4 o'clock the chances of this news agency gathering what we have gathered already is pretty slim. (personal communication, July 3, 2014) John also sees it as a strategic decision. At the newspaper where he works, each story is analyzed on a case-by-case basis. If there is a chance another media outlet might also be working the story, John will break it on Twitter. Sometimes he will wait until later in the evening when there is no chance radio or television journalists can catch up before the next morning's print edition is released (personal communication, June, 23, 2014). Schmidt, who holds a more progressive view, claims he no longer worries about tipping off competitors. As he says, "fear of being scooped has given way to working in public" (personal communication, June 24, 2014). Others fear working in public has been deleterious to the industry at large. Jaimee, a radio anchor in a large East Coast city, says social media has lessened the competitiveness between news outlets. Prior to social media she would hold stories for strategic reasons. That's no longer the case. Now, the second something happens it's on Twitter. Anyone can catch you, and when it turns at 5 and 6 o'clock, you really don't have a leg up on anybody. That's one of the things I think is negative in that aspect. (personal communication, June 16, 2014)

Yvette and several other legacy journalists agree that situations do exist when a news outlet should withhold content from its social media audience, usually for in-depth investigative pieces.

Again and again these legacy journalists drew attention to the struggle they have faced to introduce a tool into their workflow that undermines the personal pleasure they associate with breaking a story in the traditional way. Social media seems to provide a less fulfilling experience, although that may be one of perception only. Another researcher would do well to analyze that question.

Age

The age of each journalist was a clear factor in whether or not they struggled to integrate social media into their daily workflow. What was often described as second nature to neoteric journalists was a source of trepidation for legacy journalists, especially those in newsrooms where social media tools were being forced on them. Adornato (2014) describes a veteran reporter who served as a "newsroom innovator and leader when it comes to new media" (p. 14). The newsroom innovators described by the 25 journalists interviewed for this research were not veteran journalists. Rather, they were younger journalists savvy with new technology tools and techniques. Repeatedly, respondents used identical words to describe the most resistant journalists when it came to integrating social media. Older and old-school were the recurrent adjectives. Chance, a young television producer working at his second media job in Texas, said the older journalists he has worked with did not feel a need to use social media tools (personal communication, June 18, 2014). Louise suggests that for the older journalists she works with, a single tweet each day

is viewed as progress (personal communication, June 20, 2014). Others must be reminded entirely (Allen, personal communication, July 15, 2014). Older journalists, as some of those interviewed noted, are not entirely without excuse. Janet says she was told early in her career to stay away from social media because of privacy concerns (personal communication, June 12, 2014). As a public figure, Yvette was reluctant to allow people she did not know to have information about her personal life. She solved the problem by creating both a public and private social media presence (personal communication, June 20, 2014). Steve felt that being forced to use social media was an affront to his personal privacy. His struggle continues, although somewhat hesitant he has warmed up to the idea of using it professionally. Still boundaries are drawn that should not be breached, as he notes: I don't need to tell the world on Facebook that I'm going on vacation and I'll be in Tahiti for two weeks. My voicemail will say I'm out of the office until Monday. That's it. That's all you need to know. You don't need to know that I'm on the beach and you damn sure won't get pictures of me in my swimsuit. (personal communication, July 3, 2014) Overall, most legacy journalists who were reluctant to adopt social media have at least dabbled in it. As Jerome said, he quickly realized that if he wanted to survive in the industry, he needed to adapt (personal communication, June 19, 2014). Steve, the most resistant of the journalists interviewed, sees the most benefit in combining old and new newsgathering methods.

He recently covered a murder investigation in a city that was several hours from his station. Spending the travel time making phone calls, he tracked down information about the victim and the victim's family. On his arrival, he knew where the victim had worked and had scheduled several family members for an interview. A young journalist from a station in that city was flabbergasted to learn how much information Steve had been able to uncover. "Wow, how did you find all of that stuff?" the young journalist asked. "How'd you go about it?" Steve responded. "I put something on Facebook and I asked people if they knew anything about the victim or the murder. Nobody got back to me." As Steve articulates, too many young journalists think social media is the only way to get information (personal communication, July 3, 2014). There were, of course, exceptions to the overall rule. Several of the respondents described legacy journalists who defied the overall findings. These were journalists who, although older and experienced in their careers, had little trouble adopting social media tools into the workflow.

Analysis

This research affirms the widespread impact of social media on the field of journalism. It extends the current research into that impact by offering a deeper understanding of the obstacles that have limited social media integration. While ethnographic research is limited in its generalizability, these rich descriptions of the current state of American media are transferable to situations in newsrooms across the country. The

goal, then, is not to create a general account across cases, but rather one that generalizes within cases (Tracy, 2010). As Tracy (2010) notes, “Within case generalization comes from taking small instances and placing them within a larger frame” (p.845). As these interviews represent a microcosm of the larger picture, it is important to note that much can be done to help journalists struggling with social media integration. Although some obstacles, such as age, will remain, mitigating the negative impact becomes a worthy objective. This can be accomplished through educational efforts and hands-on initiatives. Other obstacles created by social media, such as frustrations surrounding the competitive nature of the news business or concerns over quality and accuracy, can be addressed through company or corporate policy or an overall shift in newsroom practices and culture. The solution here seems to be one of education, as well as demonstration. It is also one that seeks to acknowledge and alleviate concerns that exist, not downplay them.

Diffusion of Innovation

In Rogers’ *Diffusion of Innovation* (1983), he analyzes the way new innovations spread. With social media integration being the focus of this research, Rogers’ theory provides a worthy lens through which to view the way that process works in newsrooms. Rogers describes *rate of adoption* as “the relative speed by which an innovation is adopted by members of a social system” (p. 23). It is categorized by adopter category: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Rogers notes a variety of

variables that can impede the adoption of a new technology including characteristics of the technology itself, how it is communicated through certain channels, the time involved in the communication process, as well as characteristics of the social system. Diffusion within organizations differs from that of diffusion among individuals. Within organizations, characteristics such as size, structure, and organizational innovativeness all influence the rate of adoption by the organization as a whole or individuals therein. Media outlets vary greatly in size, represent a vast array of structural makeups, and have different track records when it comes to innovation. Each of these characteristics appear to influence the amount of time it takes for journalists to adopt social media technologies. This research supports Rogers’ theory, specifically in his discussion of opinion leadership. He describes opinion leadership as “the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals’ attitudes or overt behavior informally in a desired way with relative frequency” (p. 27). At no point does Rogers purport age to be a defining characteristic of an opinion leader, although he does propose social status as a reflective measure. Therein could lie much of the struggle neoteric journalists have faced in convincing their colleagues of the usefulness in adopting social media tools.

Conclusion

To neoteric journalists, a newsroom without social media is perhaps akin to the antiquated notion of literal cutting and pasting, a concept lost on those

who have only used the function in a figurative sense on their personal computer. These journalists embrace technology for its conveniences. Some journalists find it more difficult to identify the practicality of new technology tools amid a variety of contributing factors. Their estimation of the technology is often shrouded by overzealous managers seeking to find ways to stay ahead competitively and who force them to quickly alter entrenched habits. Whether voluntarily or by enforcement, journalists in the new media environment are expected to utilize social media to do their jobs. The challenge of solving the integration dilemma does not appear to be one that falls at the feet of educational institutions. These are skills acquired outside of the classroom. Consequently, the solution seems to be one of winning over reluctant partisans. This can only be realized through proving the supremacy of the new tools. It is a communication problem that demands a communication solution.

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