Threats and Benefits of Competing with Web 2.0, as well as using it in Conjunction with Traditional Journalistic Methods
Social Media: A Journalist’s Friend or Foe?

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Abstract

Within the last year, social media has gone from a purely trivial means of communication to an arguably legitimate news provider. It offers a free, easy way for anyone with a computer to convey information to the world as it happens. The recently acquired ability for the public to become its own news source has raised ethical issues concerning fact checking and fostering an environment of ignorant skepticism of the traditional media. This new channel of information has also become traditional media’s rival for breaking news and advertising dollars. New technology may be changing the role of the journalist as well as the landscape of journalism as a whole.
Literature Review

Traditional Media’s Economic Challenges Throughout History

Social media, although a new phenomenon, is not a new idea (Patrick Washburn, personal communication, May, 29, 2009). In 1947 the Hutchins Committee examined the press and told the press that they should open up and allow readers to express their views to make the media a marketplace of ideas (Patrick Washburn, personal communication).

“They said it, and everybody kind of agreed that it was a great idea and then nobody did too much about it” (Patrick Washburn, personal communication).

During the Great Depression, newspapers were forced to close their doors, but came back during WWII because of the high news demand (Cagle, 2009). In the almost equally as devastating economic crash of September 2008, the traditional media was hit hard once again (Cagle, 2009).

Reporter Andy Hirsch from WBNS Columbus said, “every day I read about stations cutting back, sharing content, newspapers stop publishing and moving to only content online, which means layoffs.”

The advertising market collapsed, 5 million jobs were lost as consumer spending became consumer saving (Cagle, 2009). Advertising’s place as the engine driving journalism has diminished as the advertising industry itself is being rethought with the web (Cagle, 2009). There has been a decoupling of news and advertising, to the point that now people expect and share news for free (Raasch, 2009).

The Online Threat

The current crisis will end, but it’s unlikely that newspapers will recover with the rest of the economy due to the “Triple S Threat”, search engines, semantics and social media (Cagle, 2009). These technologies give a competitive edge to the newest generation of publishers,
everybody with a computer (Cagle, 2009). It’s also unlikely that any purely offline publication will survive the jump into the current environment because a dedicated offline subscription base does not translate to a dedicated online readership (Cagle, 2009).

The web presented a huge threat to the media during the 90s when everyone was trying to figure out what communication medium the Internet was most similar to, the answer being all of them and none of them. Its fluidity became the first, most obvious, threat to existing media (Cagle, 2009).

Hyperlinks and search engines devastate the traditional media by providing alternative paths to content that bypass the expensive homepages of news websites by making content searchable by subject (Cagle, 2009). Semantic information gathered about users is one of the newest innovations in advertising on the web (Cagle, 2009). Programs like AdSense make bloggers and individual site owners into ideal ad space sellers, drawing advertisers away from general news publications (Cagle, 2009).

Newsworthy information does not need a publisher, editors, printers, graphic designers or newsboys to reach your inbox thanks to RSS feeds, really simple syndication, that automatically alert blog subscribers of new information (Cagle, 2009). The whole process from the publication of an event to a notice landing in your inbox can take place within an hour’s time (Cagle, 2009).

A Blog is basically do-it-yourself content on web created with easy-to-use management tools (Cagle, 2009). The cheapness of blogs changed the dynamics of publishing content on the web (Cagle, 2009). During the 90s, large media corporations spent millions to create their Web presence, whereas now anyone can easily create something almost equally as sophisticated for free (Cagle, 2009). In the past decade, Internet use has increased 49% and 13% of those users are active bloggers (Aini, 2009).
The Evolution of Social Media

Blogs evolved from diaries to news articles, some began concentrating on analysis writing, particularly in hot topic areas (Cagle, 2009). Some offer reviewers or useful tutorials on just about anything. The creation of news content is shifting from the domain of the “professional journalist” to the “dedicated amateur” (Cagle, 2009).

Blogging represents the most immediate threat to traditional journalism to the extent of likely replacing it completely within the next decade (Cagle, 2009). Bloggers have been producing articles since 2003, which means they have had six years of exploration to figure out what works in the new medium while simultaneously comparing and contrasting their work to the work of established journalists (Cagle, 2009). Bloggers know the web medium far better than traditional media professionals (Cagle, 2009).

Twitter evolved from a “social nightclub” after the staff decided to add the ability to embed shortened (tiny) URLs into status messages if longer site URLs were supplied (Cagle, 2009). People could start passing articles on to “followers”. The set-up became equivalent to “headline news” (Cagle, 2009). Tweets were short, breaking snippets that could also link to longer stories, images, videos and analyses (Cagle, 2009). If a post is interesting or important it will get spread to others and among those others, someone will follow up on the story via Skype, posting a video to YouTube, uploading images to Flickr or writing up a more in-depth article or Podcast and then linking it back to Twitter or Facebook (Cagle, 2009).

The coming out moment for real-time journalism was when New York observer Janis Krums caught the emergency landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River with his cell phone camera (Cagle 2009). He uploaded the images to Flickr and sent out streaming
“tweets” as events unfolded. This “average joe” was able to supply full coverage of critical news before any professional news teams even arrived (Cagle, 2009).

More recently, the blogosphere and twittersphere tracked Obama at the G20 Summit in real-time. Aides on the floor of the event provided constant coverage to people all over the world (Cagle, 2009). This gave public observers a highly exclusive level of access to a very significant event (Cagle, 2009). BreakingTweets.com has added even more journalistic depth to Twitter by differentiating news content and breaking stories from the rest of the Twittersphere (Sauter, 2009).

*The Differences Between Social Media and Journalism*

Social Media is a versatile medium combining online and mobile technologies (Delaney, 2009) and the major wake-up call for journalists to jump on board has been the decline of audience in their medium platform and the growth of the audience in social media (Bell, 2009).

“It’s a strange time for journalism to say the least. The popularity of social media pushes traditional media to rethink how it does things, especially online content” (Andy Hirsch, personal communication, May 12, 2009).

E.W. Scripps School of Journalism professor, Sandra Haggerty said, “I see it as a financial competitor, but I don’t see it as an enemy. I see it as kind of a wake-up call.”

With social networking, the traditional media is less of a gatekeeper because the general public can shape the conversation surrounding high profile people or events where they couldn’t before (Bob Stewart, personal communication, April 10, 2009).

“So, the question is, what role is there for the journalist?” The answer could be authority and authenticity, Stewart said.
“The difference will be if the journalist can get the story that will get people to pay attention, which means that more than ever they’ve got to dig for the real story,” Stewart said.

“Through good old-fashioned shoe leather work, journalists will be able to distinguish themselves from bloggers,” Stewart said.

Journalism professionals are on both sides of the social media craze (Andy Hirsch, personal communication, May 12, 2009). According to Hirsch, some think it’s a great tool and others are not comfortable using the technology or opening up with the viewers. He also said that the informality of Twitter and Facebook engages people, but there is a line to be drawn and some people don’t want to get involved in privacy issues. The biggest potential problem with taking information from social media sites is running with the information before it’s verified, Hirsch added. There is also a time issue, since many times reporters have to sift through a lot of junk to find really good stuff (Andy Hirsch, personal communication).

The problem facing non-traditional media at local level is that people have to trust content and building credibility takes time (Hirsch, personal communication, May 12, 2009). Hirsch thinks that when a reporter calls a source, they can say they are from a well-known television station as opposed to some website nobody has heard of. Sources may be more willing to talk, which makes a difference for news consumers out there, according to Hirsch.

Blog sites like Politico or The Huffington Post can compete with larger markets from a news point of view although some would argue about their objectivity (Hirsch, personal communication, May 12, 2009).

“I think social media is helpful and harmful, the immediacy is good, but the quality and accuracy of the information is a concern. Too much information from too many sources can lead
to misinformation. In the end, I don’t think the question is whether social media is helpful or harmful for journalism, it’s how will journalists use it to their advantage?” Hirsch said.

**How can journalists use social media to their advantage?**

One idea is that instead of filing web stories, stations should let reporters blog about the beats they’re interested in and embrace social media as “more paint for the storytelling palate” (San Miguel, 2009). If the world is using social media, it is perverse for news organizations to pretend otherwise (Bell, 2009). New media provides opportunities to tell stories better, faster and for traditional media to become more embedded in the Internet rather than a “series of articles floating above it” (Bell, 2009).

“The beauty of citizen journalism is that it can reveal hidden facts media reporters had yet to cover or had no access to” (Aini, 2009).

Wimar Witular said, “There are so many sides to every story, so citizen journalism is needed” (Aini, 2009).

The benefits of using social media with traditional journalism include beat reporting, early warning system, real-time content, traceable sources, leads and interviewees, promotional tool and expertise archive (Oliver, 2009).

Andy Hirsch further said his station promotes Twitter and Facebook daily, reporters have fan pages, he uses Twitter and Facebook to generate story ideas and connect with viewers as well as for background information and to send pictures or headlines from breaking news or to tease stories he’s working on.

*Opening up, as opposed to closing off, news organizations to the social media world*

The questions are, how distributive and collaborative are journalists prepared to be and “to what extent might the Darwinian acid thrown into news organizations by new media
transform them?” (Oliver, 2009). For many journalists, living their professional life in public
directly contradicts the traditional newsroom culture built around exclusivity (Bell, 2009). For
this reason, a journalist may use social media simply to monitor what’s going on rather than to
converse (Stewart, personal communication, April 10, 2009).

Wall Street Journal twittering rules caused a journalistic and social media storm by
suggesting that journalists keep private and professional lives completely separate when using
new media platforms (Bell, 2009). Even the Wall Street Journal, which has undergone one
redesign in 70 years, has recognized that the modern journalist needs more than a pen and
notebook to find and relay stories (Bell, 2009).

However, they aren’t really encouraging their employees to participate in social web by
severely limiting them with a lengthy list of conduct rules (Schroeder, 2009).

“You can only tell people so much before you tell them something you don’t want them
to know, but that’s what readers want” (Stewart, personal communication, April 10, 2009).

The most important question any organization looking to make rules should ask itself is,
“what can social media do for my organization?” Instead, the Wall Street Journal is asking, “how
can social media harm us and what can we do to prevent it?” (Schroeder, 2009).

“The old school journalism view of ‘don’t tell competitors what you’re working on
makes sense but it’s not what your employees shouldn’t do, it’s what they should” (Schroeder,
2009).

Any publication should encourage its authors to intelligently and creatively participate in
the wonderful world of social media (Schroeder, 2009). Discussing unfinished work discreetly
and getting feedback from the social media community is an invaluable resource (Schroeder,
2009).
“Forbidding certain types of behavior keeps stupid mistakes from happening but can prevent good stuff from happening too,” (Schroeder, 2009).

“There was a time I really did resist the new technology but it became clear rather quickly that it’s a matter of change or die” (Haggerty, personal communication, May 29, 2009).

New media is not going away, but banding together to gain strength (Bell, 2009). This new integration of social media is very significant to its growth and to the demise of the traditional model (Bell, 2009). At first, it was being done in an ad-hoc way, but lately it has become increasingly formal. Twitter was recently embedded into Facebook and Google has indicated that it is in discussions to acquire Twitter and integrate it into its own increasingly sophisticated news system (Bell, 2009).

**The downside to Web 2.0**

The web has created a battleground of publishing ideologies (Bell, 2009). Blogging is tricky because reporters want to keep their objectivity and there is potential to start injecting too much of their opinion into the news (Hirsch, personal communication, May 12, 2009). Some people are concerned that the all important wall between opinion and news is falling (Mastio, 2009).

“Bloggers are realizing they need to be more journalistic to be credible and journalists are moving more toward finding voice” (Stewart, personal communication, April 10, 2009).

The pressure created by the 24-hour, up-to-the-second news cycle prompted by the internet could create an alternative reality where people race to be first without stopping to check the facts (Bowles, 2009). The majority of bloggers are unqualified to provide news and the blogosphere has produced a climate of “ignorant skepticism” of the traditional media (Bowles, 2009). Right-wing bloggers accused the San Francisco Chronicle of suppressing some of
Obama’s statements on coal during his campaign (Mastio, 2009). The accusations were untrue, but the publication had to endure harsh criticism and defend itself against complete fiction (Mastio, 2009).

Another concern is that consumers will stay in their comfort zone with niche journalism instead of looking for weak common ground (Raasch, 2009). Warring information camps have agendas that an undiscerning public could fall victim to (Raasch, 2009).

Investment is required for good journalism and unless newspapers can find ways to be profitable on the web, journalism is doomed (Raasch, 2009).

“If we’re not there already, we could soon be living in a world where the government and politicians spend more on public relations than independent media spends to watch them. Experienced journalists are being forced out of the business and writing speeches and press releases for politicians or corporations” (Raasch, 2009).

Predictions for the future of journalism

News outlets in the future will have to cut costs and hire younger, less experienced journalists with stricter deadlines and less analysis (Washburn, personal communication, May 29, 2009). There are fewer people producing more stories in the same amount of time to keep up with the news cycle (Thomas Peters, personal communication, June 1, 2009). In rare cases do reporters have the time and availability to get out of the office to interview a source eye-to-eye, Peters said. Updates on breaking news are shorter, more frequent and on Twitter, Peters said. One person is covering the stories with simple equipment anyone can use anywhere, rather than a reporter and trained videographer going to the scene, according to Peters.

Social media is making the newsroom obsolete by allowing journalist’s to post their information from anywhere (Peters, personal communication, June 1, 2009). E.W. Scripps
School of Journalism professor, Mark Tatge, is an example of the new journalist. He was able to leave Forbes magazine to start his own blog while maintaining and developing a loyal following (Peters, personal communication).

A total revolution in journalism is doubtful because social media’s strengths embody critical weaknesses (Delaney, 2009). Twitter will probably remain the province of a relatively small number of followers because the flip side of immediacy is narcissism and lack of reflection, Delaney said. Twitter’s 140 character limit doesn’t allow for much reflection and the service is “new but gets old fast,” Delaney said. Sixty percent of users abandon their accounts within a month, according to Delaney. For Delaney, social media won’t destroy or save journalism, it is just another channel for information. For now, Delaney said, trivial information is trumping substance.

Experimentation is vital to ensure the future of quality journalism. Newsrooms in the Czech Republic are weaving journalists into communities by making reporters available to consumers in online cafes adjacent to their television stations (Pfanner, 2009). This hyper local journalism is one way to promote connectivity between people and the news sources (Pfanner, 2009). SpotUs is an example of bottom-up news production that gives power to the people by allowing them to assign and fund the stories covered by the organization (Sauter, 2009).

“You can’t just keep doing what you’re doing and expect to survive. I think that’s why you see stations using social media. I don’t know if that’s the answer, but it’s something” (Hirsch, personal communication, May 12, 2009).

In order to prevent more layoffs, the media needs to operate like a business (Mastio, 2009). Publications should take advantage of web statistics and use the print section to promote online features (Mastio, 2009). Interactivity is vital and can be boosted with easy to use URLs
(Mastio, 2009). Because there is no need for reporters and editors, writers must become public relations directors of their web pages (Mastio, 2009). To differentiate a publication from every other outlet, it is vital to build an independent online ID that caters to its audience (Mastio).

Rupert Murdoch said the web of the future will be different from the present in that free content will need to shift to paid content (Bell, 2009). This prediction does not seem to mesh with new real-time information exchanges but some business professionals agree with him, citing social media’s lack of a funding model to match previous mass media models as its downfall. Ultimately, they believe that social sites will have to charge for content (Bell, 2009).

Recommendations for the future journalist

As far as the individual journalist is concerned, Robert Stewart said, “to have a satisfying career, the longer you go in this field you need to get your teeth deep into a subject to the point where you can be the one interviewed about it.”

By becoming an expert in a particular field, the journalist is able to become an information specialist and find a niche in which to contribute valuable information. However, in-depth knowledge of one topic isn’t the only thing reporters need.

Stewart said, “you’ve got to be able to communicate your special knowledge in a medium platform neutral way.”

For many in the traditional media, this means learning an entirely new set of skills. Today’s journalists should be comfortable working with any medium, be it web, TV, magazines, books, podcasts, etc (Robert Stewart, personal communication, April 10, 2009). New media and social networking are constantly growing and changing, which means it is vital for those in the communications business to stay abreast of the current trends and channels of information.
Social media has added more voices to the conversation and put more pressure on the traditional media to be credible in their reporting (Sandra Haggerty, personal communication, May 29, 2009). However, traditional media must be careful not to succumb to the additional pressure of providing up-to-the-second coverage at the expense of accurate reporting. Social media must be seen as a tool and not a competing news provider. It has many valuable qualities that journalists can use to their advantage without having to exactly emulate the way it works. It is a separate entity with its own pros and cons, as is the mainstream media. Industry professionals should listen to the public and heed the past to decide what aspects of traditional journalism must be preserved and what needs to adapt with the ever-changing present.
References


