

# The Challenges and Opportunities of teaching Social Media in Journalism

The challenge for most journalism educators is that their students know more about social media than they do, they are social media natives.

But does that mean we have an opportunity to exploit that level of interest and prior knowledge to deliver learning outcomes of a more general nature as well as showing social media as a tool for journalists?

The purpose of this paper is to give background information to a discussion about using social media as tools for news gather in an educational context. The issues are set out and questions are suggested that might be used to stimulate class discussion. There are many questions that apply to the use of social media, some of which are similar to the use of other media but some are a consequence of the technology being in the hands of the general public without any training or guidance about issues such as ethics.

Where possible resources are suggested for the discussion containing more background and the sources are attributed when known.

The most popular social media platforms are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest. Twitter is the most relevant to news reporting. Instagram is very similar to Twitter but is led by pictures and has a higher audience demographic under 30 years of age. They can best be seen as a means of locating contacts, but also can be the source of quotes, photos and videos. YouTube is of course also in this category but it presents different opportunities and challenges relevant mainly to broadcasters.

## Introduction

Twitter allows anyone to broadcast their thoughts. The #hashtag allows others to join in a discussion. Celebrities, leading consumer brands, sports organisation and governments use Twitter as a vehicle to make announcements. News desks use programs like Tweetdeck to monitor many well-known Twitter accounts and in the event of a major breaking story can also be used to monitor multiple hashtags through the event. During major news events the social media sites fill very quickly, however almost anything that is missed the first time comes around again as either a Retweet or from tweets by other media outlets. Although it is a very competitive business the difference between the first and the second to report a story is measured in minutes.

Many people view Social Media s a mass communications system, in fact it's a medium range communication system. It is wider than just your friends and not as wide as general media such as television. As such it offers the chance for “information arbitrage” that is taking information from a narrow audience and publishing it to a wider audience, sometimes referred to as journalism.

### The vital linking mechanism the Hashtag #

When you publish a story on Twitter or Instagram you have the option to put a keyword at the end preceded by the hashtag#. Others who wish to reply, add to or argue with a story can create a discourse by attaching the same hashtag.

When a Hashtag is being used frequently the thread or discourse is known as a “Trending” story and a list of the “currently trending” hashtags is on the Twitter page. These are key indicators to breaking news stories.

Instagram is similar in that it is a messaging service that happens to be led by pictures. People can either “follow” their friends or idols or else they can search using hashtags. Instagram account can follow the “usual suspects” such as the current favourite pop star, model or reality TV actor. It is optimised for use on a smartphone but there is a web version available.

These are both highly reactive media and as soon as anything happens it shows on both services because the audience is reacting. Important Tweets can be retweeted amplifying their spread, but the retweets can get in the way.

Instagram does not have the same easy retransmission so is less cluttered and easier to get to fresh content. Instagram also has no word limit.

Suggested Discussion question: If elite people and organisations can now broadcast directly to their audience, what role does this leave for professional journalists? Find Examples

Learning outcomes: understanding the role of journalists, distrust of PR

### Using SM to find contacts and gather material.

Twitter and Instagram also allow journalists to locate contacts, both witnesses in a breaking news situation and those who wish to comment. Often elite people use Twitter and Instagram to post their reaction to events, e.g. the death of a colleague, co-star or other elite person. After a major event many people will start to tweet, most will tweet how they feel and a few will be eyewitnesses. Some eyewitnesses will be commenting on police activity, e.g. near a siege. Some alleged eyewitnesses are fabricating their stories.

Journalist work under pressure of time and online journalists serving social media outlets themselves are under pressure to use information going around with a very short time to verify that it is genuine, compared to the daily newspaper journalist.

Some information on social media may accidentally help terrorists by informing them of police activity in the vicinity. False information may produce panic and other threats to public safety.

Discussion: what are the issues with contacts made through Twitter, and what can be done to prevent a danger to the public? Do people make up their eye witness accounts? What can be done to quickly verify information found on social media and what can be done to reduce the impact of false information Find examples

Learning outcomes: in particular verification, ethics of social media

Resources: [Guardian Europe Editor John Henley describes how he used Twitter to make contacts in Athens](#)

## Treating contacts

Treating contacts made through social media should reflect the same best practice as in the real world. People posting in the aftermath of a trauma may be extremely upset. Journalists should pay attention to their welfare ahead of the thirst for the story. In particular members of the public near dangerous situations should never be encouraged to put themselves at any risk for journalistic ends

Discussion: How should you approach a contact on Social media to get their attention without causing distress, possibly role play.

Learning outcomes: sensitivity in dealing with trauma victims

Resources, Online News Association draft Code of conduct, see below

## Pictures on SM

Celebrities often post pictures of themselves (sometimes naked) and this becomes a story. Is it a story when some random teenager does the same thing?

Pictures are also a common source of cyberbullying. People often post pictures of themselves and their associates involved in criminal activity. Pictures are not always what they seem. Games such as “online beauty contests” played on Instagram have a very negative effect on the self image of young women.

Discussion: What stories might be found through a picture link on Instagram (e.g. cyberbullying). Find examples

What can be done to prevent cyberbullying?

Learning outcomes: making a story from a picture, the ethics of social media and its abuses

Resources: Research Center on Cyberbullying  
<http://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying-on-instagram>

## Information gathering

Facebook will often have pages and discussion groups associated with a topic where contacts can be found simply by posting a request or directly messaging people who post on the page. Similarly Pinterest has pages put together by people with an interest, usually cultural.

When people get caught up in news stories, or even get killed or seriously injured, they did not realise that their social media profiles are open to public view, including pictures which may be compromising (e.g. a murder suspect pictured with a gun in his hand). The sites may disclose personal information and using information and pictures from this profile may be legal, but is it ethical?

[A useful guide to information gathering on social media](#)

Discussion: What are the ethics of approaching people and using their material for a story. Find examples.

Learning outcomes: Approaching people for help, etiquette and ethics. Levels of disclosure, maybe dealing with vulnerable people

The ethics of online news gathering resources: [Protecting witnesses, a recent discussion at the Perugia Journalism Festival](#)

[Eyewitness News Hub, excellent article on being at the centre of a news feeding frenzy](#)

[Online News Association draft code of ethics](#)

Video and verification

On YouTube people post video on YouTube claiming to come from the Eastern Ukraine, Syria and other places (New York in a hurricane) and an industry has built up to verify these videos.

Discussion: follow links to verification services pages.

Resources: First Draft Alliance <https://firstdraftnews.com/about/>

Learning outcomes: do not believe anything that appears on social media until it is verified

## Copyright

Copyright issues need to be understood by those working online. Is it necessary to state that copyright laws apply online as much as anywhere. While there is no copyright on news and fair dealing of text there is no fair dealing in pictures. Those wishing to use pictures sourced on Social media need the permission of the copyright holder. A member of the public who catches a picture of a news event may be quickly contacted by an agency which will buy the copyright and syndicate it. The photographer may retain moral rights. The civil penalties for abusing copyright are large, usually being set as “an account of profits”. For a major US network this can be millions of dollars.

The safe way to handle graphics is to embed them in a page. Twitter has a liberal policy on copyright and so long as you publish the whole original Tweet you are not infringing copyright. Most online journalists say “if in doubt, embed it”

Case study: [AFP and Getty Images had to pay a photographer \\$1.22 million for infringement of copyright over pictures of the Haiti Earthquake in 2010.](#)

Resources: <https://firstdraftnews.com/5-points-to-remember-about-copyright-and-breaking-news/>

## Class exercise: Tweet One

Pick a major news story and go back through the Twitter traffic until you find the first tweet about it. Who did that tweet?

Resources: [Twitter advanced search](#)

Social Media Editor job description (genuine, major UK media outlet)

- work with the content desk and supervise reporters to ensure optimum use of social media around established workflows for breaking news and live news coverage
- communicate closely with the content team on the organisation of call-outs for user-generated content from social media
- roll out training, coaching/mentoring and ensure reporters are making effective, consistent use of social media in their personal accounts
- monitor referral traffic from social platforms, measure growth and engagement using social analytics tools and present this information regularly to the team
- stay abreast of developments on social platforms and social media in journalism and recommend potential usage and benefits to the newsroom
- ensure best practice from other \*\*\*\*\* centres and publishers is implemented
- work with editors and other departments on specific audience engagement/social media campaigns, including competitions, promotions and commercial campaigns
- ensure appropriate and responsible use of social media in line with \*\*\*\*\* policies and strategic goals
- assist in general uploading, digital content creation and website management in line with established workflows or SLAs across brands as required
- manage or undertaking company/editorial projects and any other duties from time to time as reasonably requested by management
- maintain the highest personal standards of professionalism and integrity at all times within the framework of current legislation and \*\*\*\*\*'s editorial and company policies and ensure these standards are upheld across the newsroom
- possess a thorough, up-to-date knowledge of media law and the IPSO Code
- ensure content is produced with the correct metadata at all times

Suggested discussion question: What skills are required to be a Social media editor for a major media outlet? Are they different from those of a print or broadcast journalist? Is it better to recruit a social media specialist and teach them journalism or a journalist and teach them social media?

Learning outcomes: understanding the skills gap if any between their present level and those of the job they aspire to

## Writing and editing for social media

Is it any different from writing for print or online? If so what are the differences. We all know about SEO but social media requires a much more concise writing

style. The idea that online has lots of space so fill your boots does not match up to the social media experience. “Those consuming news through social media are typically younger and have less patience.” Is that true and how is that reflected in the journalism? Do they just want the quick version without any waffle or do they want it dumbed down?

Students are both content creators and the audience on social media so should be in an excellent position to resolve the questions of how the content should be created and presented.

Suggested Discussion questions: What are younger readers interested in, there are older readers than younger, what are older readers interested in? does social media allow them to filter out news that is important and just select entertainment-based news? As students are the target age range what so they actually want to read?