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Social, Interactive, and Everywhere All the Time

Let's look at some trends that impact how we plan and think about managing the media in a crisis in today's digital age.

- News is social.
- News comes from multiple platforms.
- Old media are being forced to use new media.
- Hyperlocal news is on the rise.

News is social, says the "Grand Dame," Arianna Huffington, that is, of Huffington Post fame. Arguably one of the most influential people in U.S. media today, Huffington says that "we now engage with news, react to news, and share news," and we will become increasingly empowered. News is no longer a passive, one-way street in the hands of a few. We own it!

It is our conversations, our opinions, and our reactions that determine, to a great extent, the news today. We participate in the news, if not by contribution, by sharing and linking. The death of pop icon Michael Jackson and the indiscretions of Tiger Woods showed just how much we care and haggle over opinions. Twitter went into a meltdown when the King of Pop left this earthly plane. The big disasters will also get our attention and drive our comments. Any big brand in trouble will be dissected, as we saw with BP, United Airlines, and Dominos.

* From Arianna Huffington's (Huffington Post) testimony to the U.S. Senate Commerce Communications Subcommittee on the future of journalism and newspapers, May 5, 2010.

TODAY'S NEWS FROM MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

Another major trend that crisis communicators need to consider is how we access our news. It seems we have no loyalty anymore, at least in the United States, where recent research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project study, showed that a massive 92 percent of Americans *use multiple platforms* to get their news on a typical day, including national and local TV, the Internet, local and national newspapers, and radio.

According to the Pew study, Americans say that they "get news from four to six media platforms on a typical day. Just 7 percent get their news from a single media platform on a typical day."^{*}

On the other side of the Pacific, the story seems much the same. Australians are using various platforms, often simultaneously. According to Nielsen's 2010 Internet and Technology Report, almost half of Internet users (49 percent) surveyed multitask television and the Internet at the same time, and 39 percent multitask radio and the Internet.[†] And despite the rise in Internet usage, the traditional media such as TV, newspapers, and radio all saw a rise in consumption.

Consumers have choices—there simply has been an explosion of channels, and everything and anything can get republished, particularly with the ease of access from one channel and platform to another. As Paul Gillin, American writer, speaker, and social media strategist says: "Many people cross-post with Facebook and Twitter. The fire jumps the tree line very quickly (in a crisis)."[‡]

OLD MEDIA PLAY A ROLE IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION: SOCIAL OR LEAVE

For the old media, it has become an *imperative to be part of the social media revolution*. If they are not part of the action, they will miss out. So they follow each other voraciously—it has always been so. The media have always been competitive, but it is more evident today with the speed and acceleration of news. The old media simply cannot afford to miss that breaking news

^{*} Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project Report "Understanding the Participatory News Consumer," March 1, 2010.

[†] As quoted on Mumbrella, an Australian marketing and media news Web site (mUmBRELLA), <http://mumbrella.com.au/nielsen-traditional-media-consumption-rises-with-the-Internet-19346>, March 1, 2010.

[‡] Paul Gillin, interview with author, June 30, 2009.

story on Twitter or BNO (Breaking News on Twitter), which has broken numerous stories.

One of the Old Guard has drawn a line in the sand and told its journalists to use social media as a primary source—or leave.

Peter Horrocks, director of BBC Global News, said it was important for editorial staff to make better use of social media and become more collaborative in producing stories. “This isn’t just a kind of fad from someone who’s an enthusiast of technology. I’m afraid you’re not doing your job if you can’t do those things. It’s not discretionary,” he is quoted as saying in *Ariel*, the BBC in-house weekly newspaper.

Citizen-journalists abound and are increasingly a major force in the news-gathering process. CNN has its “iReporters,” and the majority of the major mainstream media (MSM) encourages some form of journalist citizenry or at least the sharing of their news. For example, one of Australia’s leading daily newspapers, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, encourages sharing on Facebook from its online version. *The Wall Street Journal* has an active Facebook presence, as does the BBC. Nearly all MSN news Web sites are multimedia, and many have some presence on Twitter.

To illustrate just how much the new media is part of the old media is *The New York Times* interview in May 2010 with Facebook’s public policy executive, Elliott Schrage, amid the privacy controversy. The Times crowdsourced the interview questions through their original blog post and their Facebook page. They collected roughly 300 questions, which they then presented to Schrage. In another interesting, if not alarming trend for crisis managers, the veritable *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) now uses the frequency of readers’ daily key-word searches on its Web site as one determinant for future WSJ coverage. As Eugene Donati, a colleague, remarked to me, it certainly is an interesting concept “dripping with peril” for crisis managers, “with journalists surrendering the role of gatekeeper in this way.”[†]

That is the new reality: a hybrid melting pot of ideas, platforms, channels, and sources; technology-enabled savvy news consumers to collaborate to produce the news; the old and the new working together.

Table 3.1 outlines key differences and similarities between new and old media.

* Posted by Mercedes Bunz, “BBC Tells News Staff to Embrace Social Media,” PDA: The Digital Media Blog, www.guardian.co.uk, February 10, 2010.

† Eugene Donati, Adjunct Professor, New York University, e-mail with author, September 6, 2010.

Table 3.1 Comparing Old and New Media

Social/New Media	Old/MSM Media
Active participants—No control, but influence. Ownership not clear, but the power belongs to the community. The reach of key influencers is phenomenal.	Passive audience—You have some control. Media perform the role of gatekeeper. They select and package the news.
Targeted communication—Target niches. You are engaging with “real” people. It matters far more what the community does with your content than what you do with your content. We are all news producers today. Two-way: Multiple conversations occur simultaneously.	Mass communication—One message fits all. Very linear, very predictable, homogenous as you switch from channel to channel. One-way: Broadcast.
Conversation—They talk. You listen. You talk. They listen! Dialogue as important if not more important than message delivery.	One-way communication—You talk. They listen (you hope!).
Earn attention and trust—They can leave anytime. You’d better add value to the conversation. They have choices; they can and do exercise their ability to choose. Demand for hypertransparency.	Buy attention—Your advertising pays for the media, so they’d better listen! The lack of choice almost forces people to listen.
Easy to use, quick, affordable, accessible.	Can be time-consuming, not easy to navigate, need time to cultivate relationships with key reporters.
Everyone’s a journalist (treat them that way); fewer barriers to access, but many more journalists to consider when developing relationships. Very resourceful.	Trained, experienced reporters with areas of specialty/special interest. Barriers to access.
Available 24/7, no deadlines. Everything happens at lightning speed.	Deadline driven: Under increased pressure to get stories out quickly. Trending to “churnalism.”
Very powerful medium to channel emotion, context, and experience. Potential of bias high. “Purists” tend to hang in the social media space. Potential for inaccuracy and rumor.	Provides independent, third-party view: Newspapers can provide context and offer analysis. Influential newspapers and business magazines can provide “moral” authority.
Can help you organize people based on location, business, and interests—trending to hyperlocal and/or hyperspecial interests.	Broader reach: Local newspapers reflect and highlight community concerns.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE: THE RISE OF HYPERLOCAL NEWS

It won't tell us much about the catastrophe in Haiti, but when a store closes on Lincoln Avenue a *hyperlocal* Web site can be all over it. As far as viable new media models go, for the time being *hyperlocalism* might be the best one we've got.

—*Macmillan Dictionary, Chicago Reader* (January 2010)

From Nova Scotia in Canada to Fitzroy in Melbourne, Australia, and from Bakersfield in California to Devon in the United Kingdom, you will find a thriving and growing band of *hyperlocal* news sites delivering news and content relevant to small communities or neighborhoods that have been overlooked by the traditional media.

While the business models are still evolving, most have journalists of some kind tracking the school board meetings, local government initiatives, and even neighborhood squabbles. Sports news is also big.

Some are tiny labors of love and read and look more like blogs. Others are more sophisticated with strip and banner ads on the home page. Some are linked to the traditional mainstream newspapers like Yourhub.com which is part of *The Denver Post*. The best of the online content is typically published into its regular print publication.

Patch is one of the more sophisticated examples. According to *The New York Times*, Patch was conceived and bankrolled by Tim Armstrong from AOL after he found a dearth of information online about where he lives.* Patch has created numerous sites for communities across the United States, including ones in New Jersey, California, and New York. Manhattan Beach Patch is one such site with plenty of sports and government news on the home page.†

Collaboration is the name of the game for most hyperlocal sites, and many have great names! One site I love is The People's Republic of South Devon in Great Britain. Like many of the hyperlocal sites, they encourage participation: "Anyone can join in. In fact we actively encourage it on our quest to take reporting and community reporting up to the next level (whatever that means)."[‡]

Local content and news that would not otherwise get published are the lifeblood of the hyperlocal. Their very existence is further evidence of

* Henry Blodget, "Tim Armstrong's 'Patch' To Cash In On Death Of Newspapers?" *The New York Times*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/tim-armstrongs-patch-to-cash-in-on-death-of-local-news-2009-2>, February 22, 2009.

† ManhattanBeachPatch, <http://manhattanbeach.patch.com>, January 14, 2011.

‡ The People's Republic of South Devon (Great Britain), www.peoplesrepublicofsouthdevon.co.uk, May 16, 2010.

the shift in the media landscape from consumers of news to participants in news. They will only grow more as we the people take back our news, and the big journalism heavy hitters like the Knight Foundation (www.kcnn.org) support citizen news networks.

Hyperlocal news sites are worth noting for crisis media management because:

- They are staffed and/or owned by professional journalists, many of whom are refugees from the MSM.
- Many are local investigative reporting projects.
- They are part of the linked economy—linking to their bigger MSM cousins or influential bloggers, including neighborhood blogs with clout and/or supplement from other sources like government.
- They care *passionately* about what is happening in their local neighborhood.

If you are a business with a large community presence, such as a community bank, then you need to be participating in the hyperlocal news scene. It is as important as the big, scary MSM when it comes to a crisis, if not more so.

MAINSTREAM MEDIA ARE STILL A FACTOR

The traditional MSM are digitized. They enable sharing and aggregating and encourage commentary. So what? Do they still have the power to swing public opinion in a crisis? The answer is yes and no, somewhat but diminishing.

As usual, the statistics tell the story. In the United States, for example, according to the 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project studies:

- 78 percent of Americans say they get their news from a local TV station.
 - 73 percent get their news from cable stations like CNN or Fox.
 - 54 percent listen to radio at home or in the car.
 - 50 percent say they get their news from their local newspaper.
- The report, issued in March 2010, also shows that *61 percent of Americans get at least some of their news online.**

* "Understanding the Participatory News Consumer," Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-News.aspx>, March 1, 2010.

SOCIAL, INTERACTIVE, AND EVERYWHERE ALL THE TIME

The problem is that circulation of newspapers in most major news markets around the world, with the possible exception of India, is in decline and newsrooms are shrinking. Some look like ghost towns.

While the statistics above seem to point to the MSM as the main source of news, the reality is that if you are relying on the traditional MSM to get your message out in a crisis, you will be missing out. I am grateful to Erik Deckers, whose analysis of the Pew 2010 Internet and American Life Project study amplifies this critical point:

While 78% of American citizens may be getting their news from a local TV station, the local TV stations do not have the time to devote more than 1–3 minutes to any particular news story.

If 50% of the people get their news from a local newspaper, 50% are not. 54% of the people listen to the news on the radio, but we don't know if it's national or local, NPR, or conservative.*

The bottom line is that if you are relying on the traditional MSM to reach as many people as possible in a crisis, then you are, to quote Deckers, "missing up to half of your audience and you are not getting enough time devoted to your story." In a situation like the H1N1 virus, Decker says, "You need more than 1 to 3 minutes devoted to the issue, and all the facts that people need to know."† You will need more than the traditional media release and news conference to get your message out quickly to all the affected stakeholders. Simple fact: You need social media to help you reach them—and fast.

* Erik Deckers, *Crisis Communication and Social Media for Government Crisis Communicators* (E-book: http://problogservice.com/crisis_communication_ebook/Social%20Media%20and%20Crisis%20Communication%20for%20Government%20Communicators.pdf), 2010, p. 5.

† Ibid.