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Social Media's Role in Crisis

There is news, there is insight, and then there is Twitter.
It's my feed to the second by second pulse of life.*

Social media tools are shaping how crises are communicated, and social media tools are shaping the way the media report news. The new and accessible communication platforms and technologies, such as blogs, social networking sites, Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, and other formats, have had a dramatic effect on the collection and dissemination of news, particularly in a crisis.

Professional journalists—new and old alike—are using Twitter to enhance and augment traditional reporting practices. It is another tool in their kit, and many journalists, like Australian radio producer Andrew Davies with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, are now logged on to Twitter throughout their working day. "I try and start my day by looking at what people are saying and talking about on Twitter," he said. "I love being able to read all the fantastic links to interesting Web sites, ideas, and news that people have sent out."[†]

Davies's daily habits are echoed by many of the journalists I interviewed and researched for this book. Danny Shea, media writer with the highly influential Huffington Post, says that he gets the news faster and more

* Posted by Jemima Kiss, "What Do You Use Twitter For?" PDA: The Digital Media Blog, www.guardian.co.uk, February 23, 2009. See the following—@juliansaunders: "There is news, there is insight, there is opinion, and then there is Twitter. It's my feed to the second by second pulse of life."

† Posted by Julie Posetti, "How Journalists Are Using Twitter," MediaShift Blog, www.pbs.org/mediashift, May 27, 2009.

efficiently with the microblogging site Twitter. Danny checks Twitter first thing in the morning and several times a day. Brian Stelter, media reporter at *The New York Times*, checks his Twitter account every 20 to 30 minutes.

Journalists have become heavily reliant on social media tools. According to a survey in September 2009 from Middleberg Communications and the Society for New Communications Research, the use of social media tools among journalists has increased significantly.* In just one year their use of social media networks to assist in reporting has increased almost 30 percent, up to 70 percent from 41 percent in the previous year. And a whopping 90 percent agree that social media are enhancing journalism. They use blogs to keep up to date with their beats, they use their Twitter followers for story ideas and chasing down leads and sources, and almost 40 percent say they visit a social media site once a week for research.

Blogs are popular as is Wikipedia, and journalists' use of online videos has doubled. RSS feeds are also popular, with almost 20 percent of journalists receiving five or more feeds every week, and a further 44 percent receiving at least one regular RSS feed.

As Jeremy Porter says on the Journalistics Blog, "Journalists have no choice but to use these tools to find sources fast (an instant), crowdsource suggestions, tips, and interviews."[†] Two journalists I spoke with, saw Twitter as the new police scanner. Many newsrooms had police scanners and monitored the networks to ascertain what stories to cover—the scanner was a source for news. Now it is Twitter acting as a siren for reporters.

Twitter became big news once journalists realized its power as a tool for breaking stories during the Mumbai, India, massacre in 2008. In the aftermath of the microblogging platform hitting the headlines, there was an explosion of professional journalists in the Twittersphere. Julie Posetti, who has been studying the shift, says:

This growth has been fueled by increasing mainstream awareness of the importance of social media to the future of a crisis-ridden industry and the elevation of Twitter as a platform for news dissemination, citizen journalism, and audience interaction.[‡]

* "2nd Annual Middleberg/SNCR Survey of Media in the Wired World," Middleberg Communications and the Society for New Communications (SCNR), <http://snrcr.org/2010/02/19/journalists-use-of-social-media-is-surging-according-to-2nd-annual-middlebergsnrcr-survey-of-media-in-the-wired-world/>, February 19, 2010.

† Posted by Jeremy Porter, "70 Percent of Journalists Use Social Networks to Assist in Reporting," Journalistics Blog, <http://blog.journalistics.com/2009/70-percent-of-journalists-use-social-networks-to-assist-in-reporting/>, September 23, 2009.

‡ Posted by Julie Posetti, "How Journalists Are Using Twitter," MediaShift Blog, www.pbs.org/mediashift, May 27, 2009.

The platform was used extensively during the deadly Australian bushfires in the State of Victoria in February 2009 when mainstream media (MSM) incorporated Twitter into their coverage. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, where Posetti used to work, was particularly impressive in its use of Twitter. Leigh Sales, anchor of the corporation's respected nightly news program *Lateline*, told Posetti: "I'm giving Twitter a red-hot go." So too are most MSM media journalists.

Posetti says that she is convinced that Twitter is now a "vital journalistic tool for both reporting events and breaking down barriers between legacy media and its audiences."[†] Journalists are using the platform to "broadcast" links to content they or their news outlets have produced in an effort to build a new audience. She comments that Twitter is also used as a live reporting platform by a few and some share images, audio, and links to "other online content they find interesting."[‡]

Many are using social media to *crowdsource*: to find sources and contacts for stories, story angles, background, and case studies. Julio Ojeda-Zapata, consumer technology reporter and columnist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, says that Twitter is an "invaluable fire hose of information."[§] He values the use of hash tags for following the thread of a story, critical in a crisis. For example: #BP oil spill, #Tiger Woods, or #Red Cross.

The majority of the journalists I spoke with echoed the findings of the various research, saying that they use the company Web site or blog in a crisis. Chris O'Brien of the *San Jose Mercury News* was particularly impressed with Google's response when their Gmail site went down. They had a statement up in 15 minutes. That is evidence, he says, of the superaccelerated world we live and work in.[¶]

Brian Stelter, media reporter at *The New York Times*, was "amazed" at how quickly the story of the airplane landing on the Hudson unfolded and how quickly Mayor Bloomberg held a news conference.^{**} Others, notably Martin and O'Brien, said they would automatically go to Facebook in a *big* story to see what stories were emerging and what information they could ferret out.

* Posted by Julie Posetti, "How Journalists Are Using Twitter," MediaShift Blog, www.pbs.org/mediashift, May 27, 2009.

† Posted by Julie Posetti, "Rules of Engagement on Twitter," MediaShift Blog, www.pbs.org/mediashift, June 19, 2009.

‡ Ibid.

§ Julio Ojeda-Zapata, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, interview with author, August 28, 2009.

¶ Chris O'Brien, *San Jose Mercury News*, interview with author, September 4, 2009.

** Brian Stelter, *The New York Times*, interview with author, July 17, 2009.

Blogs and bloggers were also seen as "very influential" and have had a tremendous impact on news. They can drill down much farther, they can "own" a story, and they can be obsessive. The 2010 Public Relations Industry Research Report of United Kingdom public relations consultants showed that digital media of one sort or another played a key role in igniting crises, with bloggers being the most common cause.*

Just as you would be monitoring the trending topics on Twitter, setting up Google Alerts, or having a good old-fashioned media morning with real-time reports, so are the journalists themselves. Everyone is searching and looking at each other. "While I'm looking in this mirror, I see that you are looking at me." What will they see? What will they report? Have they connected with a range of disgruntled people on Twitter? What's on Facebook; what's on LinkedIn? What will the media find on your Web site?

Face the facts: Social media are not going anywhere anytime soon. The media landscape has changed forever, so to quote "Dame" Arianna Huffington, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto."[†]

* Dynamic Markets Limited, "Public Relations in a Dynamic Era Independent Report," April 2010, p. 3.

† 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.