

IMPACT AND VALUE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

CAN QUALITY JOURNALISM SURVIVE DIGITAL AGE?

SHERRY RICCHIARDI, Ph. D., Indiana University of Journalism, experienced journalist

SAŽETAK

Rasprave o utjecaju i vrijednosti digitalnih medija zauzimaju dva stajališta. Jedni predviđaju da kvalitetno novinarstvo ne može preživjeti nestajanje tradicionalnih medija. Oni vide Facebook, Twitter, blogove i druge nove oblike komuniciranja kao suprotstavljenu stranu, potkopavajući ulogu tiska u društvu.

Drugi pak prihvaćaju medijsku revoluciju 21. stoljeća. Oni traže nove načine komuniciranja i povezivanja s publikom, ne samo u njihovim zemljama, već i šire. Za njih, novinarstvo je daleko od umiranja. Ono se razvija u novom i uzbudljivom obliku. Ovaj članak istražuje rasprave o novim medijskim oblicima.

Zaključuje se da je vrijeme za eksperiment; testiranje suvremenih komunikacijskih teorija i iznalaženje novih modela kako bi se novinarstvu pomoglo da se razvije u što je moguće pozitivnijem obliku. Medijski stručnjaci, profesionalni novinari i predavači novinarstva moraju biti dio tog procesa.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: tradicionalno novinarstvo, digitalno doba, novi medijski oblici

Introduction

In January 2010, a horrified Twitter user sparked headlines around the globe when he sent a Tweet from his home in Cape Town, South Africa: “Holy shit. We just saw a gigantic shark eat what looked like a person in front of our house . . . that shark was huge. Like dinosaur huge.”¹

Almost immediately the sender, Gregg Coppen, became a media sensation. Newspapers, TV and radio networks clamored for interviews based on the 130-character message he sent after witnessing a truly shocking event at a popular tourist spot near his home.

Coppen’s message, traveling at lightening speed through cyberspace, illustrates the extraordinary power of social media and eyewitness reports from mobile phones, tablets or any other devices that allow journalists – and average citizens – to communicate to a worldwide audience.

Beyond traditional journalism, the public is informed through layers of social media networks and multitudes of independent newsbrokers, some professional, some not. Information moves at unprecedented and breathtaking speed. In some parts of the world, it can be a lifeline.

During Arab Spring, Gigi Ibrahim, 24, drew worldwide attention with her tweets, posts, and images from Cairo’s Tahrir Square, a focal point of the uprising to overthrow President Hosni Mubarak in early 2011.

Armed with little more than her smartphone, Ibrahim sent out messages about where security forces were massing, tear gas attacks, and the number of protesters gathering in the square. When protesters were brutally attacked, she let the world know. “I’m trying to spread accurate information and paint a picture on the ground for the people who aren’t here, via Twitter and Facebook,” Ibrahim told *The New York Times*.²

Coppen and Ibrahim’s use of social media drew a powerful international reaction, but is it fair to call it journalism?

Safeguards such as fact checking, sourcing, attribution and accountability do not come into play. Ethical principles that guide the profession are glaringly absent. There is no context or perspective to guide the reader, only one person’s eyewitness account.

How do we define the role of journalists in today’s new media world?

At the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Center for Civic Media, researchers and students are experimenting with new techniques, from technologies for protests and civil disobedience to phone-texting systems that allow instant, sophisticated votes on everyday activities. “Some of what emerges here looks like traditional journalism, while some moves in radical new directions,” the MIT Website proclaims.

During an April 5, 2012, podcast “Adapting Journalism to the Web,” researchers discussed the fact that the “avalanche of news, gossip, and citi-

1 “Killer Shark Attack in South Africa Witnessed on Twitter,” January 14, 2010, *Herald Sun*, Melbourne, Australia: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/killer-shark-attack-in-south-africa-witnessed-on-twitter/story-e6frf7lf-1225819256930>

2 <http://journalism.about.com/b/2011/01/28/citizen-journalist-gigi-ibrahim-uses-tools-of-the-web-to-spread-news-of-cairo-protests.htm>

zen reporting available on the Web is immensely valuable, but often deeply unreliable.” Their main concern: “How can professional reporters and editors help to assure that quality journalism will be recognized and valued in our brave new digital world?”³

Differing Schools of Thought

Debate on the impact and value of new media tends to fall into two camps: Doomsayers on one side and idealists on the other.

If they had their way, some journalists would turn back the clock to a time when newsroom managers and media owners controlled the public’s news diet. Editors decided what stories and images appeared on the front page of the newspaper or led TV’s nightly news.

This camp tends to view Facebook, Twitter, blogs and other social media as archenemies, undermining the press’ watchdog role. They cite a litany of negatives, loss of editorial control, quality and oversight by experienced professionals chief among them.

Idealists embrace the challenges and potential of the new media landscape. They apply their talents to discovering better ways to communicate and connect with the public not only in their own countries, but also across borders. To them, quality journalism isn’t dying. It is evolving into new, exciting forms.

Search for Alternatives

Over the past decade, mainstream media have been hit by a harsh set of realities. Like other private enterprises, the news business fell victim to the global financial crisis. At the same time, audiences were shifting allegiances to the Internet, sparking a greater decline in advertising revenue, circulation and viewership. Hiring freezes and layoffs left newsrooms gutted.

Two of the most prominent and expensive beats, investigative reporting and foreign coverage, were hardest hit. Media experts in the United States attributed the closing of the 150-year-old Colorado newspaper, Rocky Mountain News, and other large metropolitan newspapers to the increasing popularity of the Internet where information is easily accessible and, for the most part, free.

Despite setbacks, investigative journalism in the United States is far from dead. Beyond such pillars as the Washington Post and New York Times, journalists are turning to creative new models. Top investigative reporters are gravitating to privately subsidized news organizations that carry on the watchdog tradition through online publications.

ProPublica, a New York-based group of investigative reporters, funded by philanthropy, provides a collaborative model that could be replicated on a smaller scale anywhere in the world. Led by former Wall Street Journal managing editor Paul Steiger, ProPublica, launched in June 2008, has had unprecedented success.

3 <http://civic.mit.edu/blog/andrew/podcast-adapting-journalism-to-the-web-with-jay-rosen-and-ethan-zuckerman>

In 2010, ProPublica won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting on “The Deadly Choices at Memorial,” about euthanasia at a New Orleans hospital in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The story, published in partnership with The New York Times magazine, was the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded to an online news organization.

In 2011, ProPublica was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting for stories on how some Wall Street bankers, seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of their clients and sometimes even their own firms, at first delayed then worsened the financial crisis.⁴

Another innovator, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, headquartered in Washington, D.C., spearheads cross-border investigations.

A roundup of stories posted on ICIJ website on April 15, 2012, included an investigation of one of the world’s largest diamond mines in Zimbabwe that doubled as a torture camp. There also was a story on how Colombians close to the National Narcotics Agency were found to be in possession of confiscated goods from drug lords and the mafia. The organization’s roster includes more than 50 journalists from 100 countries.⁵

Despite slashed budgets many newspapers in the United States have kept up investigative reporting. Among recent prize winners:

The Norfolk, Va., Virginian-Pilot’s was a Scripps Howard winner for “A Chance in Hell,” a series about a combat hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Florida’s Palm Beach Post won an Investigative Reporters and Editors award for a breaking news story that found details about a suspect in the killing of two children, and raised questions about failures in state and private agencies.

The tiny Advertiser Democrat, of Norway, Maine., which explored shocking conditions in low-income housing after a rooming-house fire exposed blatant disregard for health and safety, was a choice for a Polk award.

The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism reports on the present and future of news media in America. Their 2012 study put the use of social media networks into perspective.

Pew found that only 9% of digital news consumers frequently get news from Facebook or Twitter. Of the two, Facebook was the greater driver, with 6% to 3%. However, 48% of digital news consumers never get any news through either of them. The survey confirmed that Facebook and Twitter are now pathways to news, but their role may not be as large as some have suggested.

The study also found that one-third of desktop and laptop users and 38% of tablet users get most of their news by going directly to news outlets’ websites or apps, a tendency that has been accelerated by the smartphone technology. In other words, they got their news from professionals.⁶

4 <http://www.propublica.org/article/a-note-on-propublicas-second-pulitzer-prize>

5 <http://www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/icij/>

6 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2222/news-media-network-television-cable-audioo-radio-digital-platforms-local-mobile-devices-tablets-smartphones-native-american-community-newspapers>

Defining Terms: Who is a journalist?

An International Center for Journalists' online publication titled "Voices of the Governed" offered the following definition: "In an ideal world, trained journalists working for traditional media outlets follow an ethical code of fairness, balance, minimizing harm, and acting independently. Truth-telling tops the list as the highest standard for professional journalists.

"Besides striving to produce news that is fact-based and accurate, journalists also try to remain personally neutral towards the subjects of events they write about. Journalism is commonly defined as an independent act of gathering, editing and disseminating information by an organization.

"The goal is to serve the public, and journalists' loyalties are with the reader or viewer. Many newsrooms have ethics codes that guide the behavior of their staffs." ICFJ is a Washington, D.C.- based media organization that conducts training around the world.

Who is a Citizen Journalist?

That same ICFJ publication defined it this way: "In simplest terms, citizen journalism has been defined as members of the public playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information."

Mark Glaser, a media expert who frequently writes about technology, described the idea behind citizen journalism: "People without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others."

According to Glaser, it might be about government responsiveness – or lack of it – to local community issues on their blog or in an online forum. They might fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or biases. They might snap digital photos during a political protest in their town and post it online, or videotape a political rally speech and post it on a site such as YouTube.

Participatory journalism flourishes in social media — the interpersonal communication that takes place through e-mail, chat, message boards, and forum and in collaborative media, which are hybrid forms of news, discussion and community.

Citizen Reporting in Action

When terrorist bombs exploded in London subways and on a bus on July 7, 2005, BBC's news teams scrambled to get details of the story. Richard Sambrook, then director of BBC's international news service, later reflected that text and email messages containing images and information of the terrorist attack poured into the BBC from the public, and became an integral part of how the day's events were covered.

According to Sambrook, within six hours, the BBC received more than 1,000 photographs, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 text messages and

20,000 emails. “People were participating in our coverage in a way we had never seen before. By the next day, our main evening TV newscast began with a package edited entirely from video sent in by viewers,” said Sambrook.⁷

In July 2011, CNN’s IReport system for citizen journalism celebrated its fifth anniversary. The director, Lila King, talked about how citizen reporters’ contributions were now “at the core of the way we [CNN] tell most big breaking news stories.” More than 800,000 people from every country in the world have contributed reports, King said. CNN’s participatory news community has grown into a globally recognized platform. <http://ireport.cnn.com/>

Al Jazeera launched its citizen journalism project in 2008, seeking eyewitness news reports from its vast international audience. Al Jazeera’s Sharek (an Arabic word which means participate) became a way to get breaking news and exclusive content for the channel from people who were on the scene. <http://sharek.aljazeera.net/>

Citizen journalism has changed the media landscape by giving voice to the voiceless and creating a stream of news that, for traditional journalists, provides rich new sources of information and poses a new source of competition. Many journalists today use Facebook, Twitter and other social media networks as part of their information gathering process.

“Journalists should appreciate all forms of social media for what they are: faster ways to get some forms of information. Reporters can use that information like they do a tip from any other source – to start their reporting on breaking stories,” said Michael Sorkin, a prize-winning investigative reporter who works for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Gregg Coppen’s Tweet about the man-eating shark is a perfect example.

After the initial bursts of information on the Internet, professional journalists took over the story. They added the basic interrogatives – the who, what, where, when, why and how – of the event, including the victim’s name and comments from eyewitnesses. They also linked to a larger issue: an increase in shark sightings and the need for electronic warning systems to alert swimmers to avoid future mishaps.

Following is an excerpt from a story in the Sydney Morning Herald about the incident:

“Mr. Lloyd Skinner, 37, a Zimbabwean who lived in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was standing chest-deep 100 metres from the shore and adjusting his goggles when the shark struck. It was seen approaching him twice before he disappeared in a flurry of thrashing. His diving goggles and a dark patch of blood were all that remained in the water.

“Disaster management services had issued a warning hours earlier that sharks had been spotted in the water, but the shark flag was not flying.”⁸

7 “Citizen Journalists and the BBC,” by Richard Sambrook, Nieman Reports, Winter 2005, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100542>

8 <http://www.smh.com.au/world/giant-shark-killed-man-in-shallow-water-20100114-ma81.html#ixzz1sDpb7kZo>

Looking to the Future

The proverbial genie is out of the bottle and there is no going back. At best, it is time to experiment, test modern communication theories and come up with new models to help journalism succeed in the most positive form possible. Media scholars, professional journalists and journalism educators must be part of that equation.

After he was named editor of *The Australian* in 2011, Clive Mathieson noted in an interview, “Barely a day goes by when someone, usually online, declares the death of newspapers, or magazines, or free-to-air TV.

“With respect, such doomsayers are wrong on two counts: there is little sign the old media – though facing many challenges – is losing its influence over the news agenda; and the media industry itself is not dying but evolving. It’s how we in the media handle that evolution that will determine the future of the industry.”

LITERATURE

“Citizen Journalists and the BBC,” by Richard Sambrook, *Nieman Reports*, Winter 2005, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100542>

“Killer Shark Attack in South Africa Witnessed on Twitter,” January 14, 2010, *Herald Sun*, Melbourne, Australia: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/killer-shark-attack-in-south-africa-witnessed-on-twitter/story-e6fr-f7lf-1225819256930>

<http://civic.mit.edu/blog/andrew/podcast-adapting-journalism-to-the-web-with-jay-rosen-and-ethan-zuckerman>

<http://journalism.about.com/b/2011/01/28/citizen-journalist-gigi-ibrahim-uses-tools-of-the-web-to-spread-news-of-cairo-protests.htm>

<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2222/news-media-network-television-cable-audio-radio-digital-platforms-local-mobile-devices-tablets-smartphones-native-american-community-newspapers>

<http://www.propublica.org/article/a-note-on-propublicas-second-pulitzer-prize>

<http://www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/icij/>

<http://www.smh.com.au/world/giant-shark-killed-man-in-shallow-water-20100114-ma81.html#ixzz1sDpb7kZo>

Ethics in Digital Age: Do same rules apply?

After a survey of web journalists, the Poynter institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, brought together 24 of the participants to further examine online ethics issues. They created a set of guidelines – not rules – that can help in the decision-making process for online journalism.

Here are some of the most important issues they raised:

- What is this journalist’s primary role? Is it straight reporting or commentary?*
- What is the journalist’s role in the context of the moment?*
- Is the content straight news reporting, informed analysis or opinion?*
- Does the content blur or blend the roles of reporter and commentator? If so, how should this content be labeled?*
- Does this content need to be put through the same editing process as similar content on the – parent site? Why? Why not?*
- If there anything in the content that could create the appearance of conflict of interest or that could imperil the journalist’s ability to report the story fairly in the future?*
- Have all the proper stakeholders been involved in this decision?*

The Poynter report stressed that ethical principles apply to any news operation that aspires to practice journalism: an international cable news network, a local newspaper’s or TV station’s web site, independent bloggers, among them. The key is to be clear what you stand for – and what you are doing.

The guiding principles of the profession provide a sound basis for reasoning through the issues raised by the Poynter Institute. These principles are more important than ever in an era where anyone can be a publisher or broadcast information with the potential to reach a global audience.

- Seek truth and report it. Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information for their audiences.*
- Minimize harm. Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.*
- Act independently. Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know.*
- Be accountable. Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.*

Most journalists agree that the same ethical standards should apply in all media. Those standards vary from newsroom to newsroom and from country to country, but most ethics codes tend to cover similar ground, stressing the importance of verification, fairness, independence and accountability. There are more examples on the website of the U.S. Society of Professional Journalists, a voluntary media organization:

*www.spj.org
<http://www.spj.org>*

This information was part of an online course in «Doing Ethics in the Digital Age,» sponsored by the International Center for Journalists, Washington, D.C.