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Social Networking: A Tool or aggregator of the news?

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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## **Introduction**

People consume news to obtain information, learn and be educated, better understand their surroundings; all to lead a more fulfilled and informed life. What constitutes “important” news depends upon the consumer. As a result, news organizations produce news content on a variety of issues from entertainment to international affairs. In terms of the most productive and prosperous function of spreading information in a democracy, the Buchanan’s Triangle Model asserts that the media’s role is to inform and protect the citizens or public by testing the claims made by candidates and elites with an emphasize on policies and qualifications (Bennett, & Entman, 2000). Coverage of public affairs is important to hold decision makers accountable and educate the public about what is happening in their surroundings. Throughout history, the duty to cover the news has evolved greatly. Changes in how information and news stories are researched, communicated and produced is attributed to technological changes.

Groundbreaking historical events such as the invention of the printing press, the necessity of advertisements, letters to the editor and the rise of the Internet have all affected the way the public receives and consumes the news (Overholser, & Jamieson, 2005). The most recent and with a significant amount of impact has been the emergence of the Internet. The use of the Internet brings an overwhelming wealth of information to the fingertips of the user. Over time, the Internet expanded to include many different features and applications. One of the most recent and popular tools is social networking sites.

As the popularity and function of the Internet has increased, so have the avenues for the public to find and consume the news. In addition, the Internet has given social media another platform to communicate information. Social media functions as the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into content publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between anchors, people and peers. Social media uses the “wisdom of the crowds” to connect information in a collaborative manner. Social media can take many forms, including Internet forums, message boards, weblogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video (Evans, 2008, p. 33).

The Internet is a platform that allows and encourages most people to join a conversation or create their own. Website domains create an inexpensive cost of entry and a platform for any person, business or cause to have a centralized location to disseminate information. Social networking sites are a branch of social media that serve as “virtual communities that are structured to delineate and build on relationships that members have with each other by virtue of being part of that community” (Barsky & Purdon, 2006).

Social networking sites are features of the Internet that allow individuals to communicate back and forth with each other from the comfort and ease of many portable devices that allow it. The sites collect data about members and then store it as their own user profile. The profiles are then presented in a simple format and can easily be shared among the members on the social networking site. The sites are a free way to connect with others through different platforms such as computers, personal digital assistants, cellular devices, mp3 players, global positioning systems and others. The number of

websites dedicated to social networking grew exponentially since 2003 as popularity and accessibility has grown (Barsky & Purdon, 2006).

The implications of the growing rate of communication pose positive and negative effects. On one hand, the Internet and social networking tools provide a massive and growing outlet of information to disperse throughout while on the other hand, the flood of information creates a blur between reality and fabricated information. Despite negative aspects, the Internet and social networking tool sites have become widely accepted requirement for news outlets.

All divisions of the media utilize social networking sites in some capacity. Major newspapers, local television stations, radio stations, magazines and other forms of news have the sites available on their websites. Some of the most popular social networking sites include Facebook and Twitter. The purpose of Facebook, according to the website's company overview, is to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet." Users create a profile and "friend" other users to communicate. The site also features the applications that include a marketplace to buy and sell goods, photo albums, groups and events. Facebook began in 2004 and has accumulated over 400 million active members worldwide as of May 2010 ("Facebook," 2010).

Twitter has drawn a large amount of attention quickly due to high-profile individuals who have created profiles and logged in. Twitter began in 2006 and is a "real-time short messaging service that works over multiple networks and devices" ("Twitter," 2009). Users are only allowed 140 characters to answer the question, "What

are you doing?” Responses to the question can be straight text, a link to a photo, link to a video or links to other websites. A 2009 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that one in five Internet users are also “tweeting” on Twitter (Choney, 2009).

Social networking sites also allow users to communicate with viewers and readers through real-time online chats, and on e-mail and comment sections. Comment sections usually appear at the end of posted articles and uploaded video of newscasts. Most news organizations enforce a policy to approve comments to make sure no profanity or defamatory statements are made. The comments can be monitored by an automated service that is programmed with keywords to flag or by individual approval. The patterns of comment sections are unpredictable. Some praise or oppose the content while others comment and respond to other posts rather than the content.

With so many avenues for self-expression and platforms for communication, how and why do news organizations choose to use social networking sites? The revenue model for broadcast news has changed over the years. The change has influenced the quality and content of news. Survival has taken precedence over informative news reports and as a result, “substantive news content and audience size are inversely related” (Media Politics, 62). Advertisements via commercials have drastically cut into the amount of time the broadcasts report information. The amount of time allotted for news in a thirty-minute news report was cut by 10 percent between 1990 and 2002 from twenty-one to nineteen minutes (Media Politics, 63).

Most media outlets function by the use of advertising dollars. All news outlets, except for National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service, are privately owned. Their survival depends maintaining a loyal audience that advertisers can communicate with (Iyengar and McGrady, 50). Advertisers are the most interested in the entities that attract the most people. As technology has evolved traditional sources of news, such as broadcast news have taken drastic hits. The network television audience share fell from 85 percent in 1969 to 40 percent in 2003 (53). As a result, the product they are selling or promoting will have a better chance to receive attention online because a more affluent demographic is being reached. The influx of participation on social networking sites is therefore important to the media in order to create revenue that will, in return, result in additional content (Bennett, 229).

The media had to make shifts because their business model is supported by and functions from the participation of the advertisers who want to reach consumers. In terms of broadcast television, the success of broadcast programs is measured by Nielsen and determines the amount of people who watched a certain program. The programs that receive the highest amount of ratings and number of viewers are more likely to maintain active in the networks that support them because they drive revenue.

As a result of the rising and sustained success of social networking sites, television broadcast news organizations cannot ignore the potential they possess and over the past few years have had to quickly adapt. Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* said, “News organizations and reporters have been quick to adopt Twitter for an obvious reason: Its speed and brevity make it ideal for pushing out scoops and breaking news to Twitter-savvy readers.”

The use of Twitter is more prevalent during major and breaking news events. It is an effective tool because other outlets, such as newspaper reporters and television reporters, cannot get to the scene and report information as quickly as a citizen using his cell phone to send a text message. In 2008, during the attacks in Mumbai, CNN estimated that 80 messages, or "tweets," were being sent to Twitter via SMS or text message every five seconds (Lenatti, 2009). The eyewitness accounts beat the content and speed of any newspaper or television outlet. During President Obama's inauguration, Twitter reported five times its usual traffic per second and four times the number of short-message tweets in a typical minute (Lenatti, 2009).

Media outlets cannot avoid using social networking sites because so many of their viewers and readers are engaged in their use. But, how has one of the most traditional sources of news, broadcast, embraced the new technology? The evolution of broadcast news has been slow. Cameras are still large, film is slowly transitioning to digital formats and scripts are typed into a teleprompter for more accurate delivery. This study will investigate the changes and adaptation broadcast news must make in order to "keep up with the times" and compete.

The content of this study will primarily focus on traditional network newscasts such as the Sunday morning programming and evening news. Both have been around and developed into popular, respectable and trusted sources prior to the emergence of social networking. This leads to the discussion at hand. This study will seek to answer how broadcast news is adapting to changes in technology while attempting to maintain profitability and provide objective and credible journalism. A conclusion will be drawn from prepared interviews and analysis of case studies conducted based on online content.



Broadcast news is the most trusted source of news (Iyengar and McGrady, 57) and therefore it is important to determine the validity and use of alternative sources found through social networking sites.

### **Literature Review**

It has been established that broadcast news has accepted and is continuing to adapt to vast changes in technology as evidenced in their ubiquitous use.

#### *Information and Democracy*

It is important to first decide what constitutes news in order to understand the procedure to report it. Doris Graber said that the news is not just any information, but that it tends to contain information that is timely, often sensational and familiar (Bennett, 19). The information is pertinent and important for the public to know. Scholar James Curran cited the “media should be the voice of the people, representing to authority the citizenry’s views and expressing the agreed aims of society.” To maintain and foster a democratic society the media should “inform, scrutinize, debate and represent.”

A citizen can receive news from many different forms. Broadcast news, newspapers, radio and the Internet are platforms for content. With many options, what do most citizens turn to and find to be the most credible? Credibility is an important function of news making because “when people perceive news reports to be unbiased and trustworthy, they are more likely to take them seriously” (Iyengar and McGrady, 57). A study conducted in 2005 by The Pew Research Center found that a majority of Americans trust television news over print sources. The most credible sources were the three major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) and the cable channel, CNN (57).

#### *The Press and Technology*

The 1976 presidential campaign was a defining one for broadcast news. It was the first time the networks used portable videotape, which enabled deadlines to be pushed close to news time, and increased the pressure on reporters to be quick to get the story on air (Curran, 34). One of the issues with this type of news coverage is that “the technical side of television is often ready to tell a story before the correspondent is” (35). It is easy to prepare equipment, but it takes time and effort to piece together a fact-filled and high-quality story. Individuals who have been in the business long before the burst of technology were very skeptical of the advancement. Former ABC News correspondent Ted Koppel was quoted as saying, “it is an impediment, not an aid to good journalism. To simply train a camera on a complicated event is not journalism, any more than taking someone out on a boat and showing them a stretch of coastline is cartography” (35).

Just as soon as the major networks could adapt more quickly and create more compact broadcasts, a cable news beast arrived. In 1980 the Cable News Network, or CNN, formed as the first twenty-four-hour news channel. CNN found success quickly because it had something the networks could not match (35). CNN’s global reach provided Americans with content and stories they did not hear a lot about because the national networks did not have the resources.

### *The Rise of the Internet*

The Internet has developed into “a unique phenomenon that has delivered not just technological innovations but become a conduit for change, accelerating the rate, diversity and circulation of ideas” (Bowman & Willis, 2005). The Internet covers all interests and topics and leaves the door open for more. The impact the Internet has made on the business models of media has been transformational. First, it has allowed nearly

limitless distribution of content and information for little-to-no cost. Second, it has allowed everyone the opportunity to be part of the media business, including the sources, businesses, governments and communities' newspapers cover (Bowman & Willis, 2005).

### *The Use of Social Networking Sites*

Nielsen created headlines when it revealed that the expansion of social networking tools created the largest gains from any online media space. A 2009 study found that, "social networking sites eclipsed personal e-mail in global reach at 68.4% vs. 64.8%, in February 2009" in terms of growth. "Even more significant—in only the first few months of 2009—the reach of these sites is growing at a brisk pace, faster than any other online sector" (Nielsen 2). Not only are massive amounts of people joining the conversation online, but they are also staying online and spending a substantial amount of time. Another Nielsen study found:

In the U.S. alone, total minutes spent on social networking sites has increased 83 percent year-over-year. In fact, total minutes spent on Facebook increased nearly 700 percent year-over-year, growing from 1.7 billion minutes in April 2008 to 13.9 billion in April 2009, making it the No. 1 social networking site for the month (Nielsen).

In the summer of 2009, Paul Fahri from the *Washington Post* published an article in the *American Journalism Review* regarding the "fad" of Twitter. Twitter became an overnight success that was thought to be a short-lived tool due to the many previous sites that failed. Fahri reported that in a five-day period in mid-April the search engine Lexis Nexis produced more than 3,000 news stories mentioning Twitter, while a search on the website Google had over 400 million related links. During the hype, news coverage

shifted to include the horserace that was taking place between icons such as NBC News' "Meet the Press" moderator David Gregory and at the time, ABC News' "This Week" moderator George Stephanopoulos and who had the most "followers" on sites such as TVNEWSER, a blog that covers network and cable news (Shister, 2009). The coverage encouraged more people to join and soon CNN and the actor Ashton Kutcher were competing to see who could reach a determined amount of followers first ("Ashton kutcher beats," 2009).

The lighthearted stories did not help Twitter's credibility. However, Twitter has made drastic strides. Farhi reported that the "Oregonian in Portland may have been the mainstream media pioneer... it began posting its own links and aggregating citizen tweets about flooding and road closures during heavy storms in central Oregon in late 2007, when Twitter barely had 500,000 users nationwide." Using Twitter as a reliable media outlet was slower to gain attention but has proven to be invaluable.

In November 2009, four police officers near Tacoma, Washington, were tragically shot and killed. The shooter was at large. A massive hunt to find the criminal began. Following the capture of the suspect and laying of the victims to rest, another headline emerged. Tech Flash, Seattle's technology news source, reflected on the use of Twitter during the event and said, "Could this be a watershed moment for the use of Twitter and other social media tools in Seattle journalism? It appears so" (Cook, 2009). During the capture of the suspect, residents in the neighborhood logged onto Twitter and posted updates about the arrival and other actions of the police. Twitter posts were made available to the public an hour before the local television affiliate's major news organization was able to arrive on the scene with cameras. One resident saw an

immediate rise of fifty follower requests from people all around the country. The residents acted at “citizen journalists.”

Citizen journalism is a form of journalism where “people without professional journalism training 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 Mark Glaser of PBS (Glaser, 2006). Examples of citizen journalism include:

- Write about political events such as a rally or hearing and post it to an online forum,
- Fact-check articles found from traditional sources and post online errors or bias,
- Take a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening and post it online,
- Videotape an incident and upload it.

Citizen journalism has not always been a popular term, especially with professional journalists. Professional journalists “believe that only a trained journalist can understand the rigors and ethics involved in reporting the news” (Glaser, 2006).

### *Newsmaking*

A newsworthy event occurs and then what? Who makes the executive decision to grant something newsworthy or not? Gatekeeping is a term that describes the vetting process and is used to “refer to whose voices and what messages get into the news” (Bennett, 15). The individual journalist is more likely to determine which quotes are used, while editors and executives in the news organization manage big stories and their coverage. There are many factors that affect the decision process. Political communications scholar Lance Bennett has written, “These organizational-level decisions, in turn, are influenced by economic pressures, audience reactions, and a host of other considerations that all go into the construction of daily news (p. 15). The pressures have had a direct effect on the types of stories reported on. Hard news, or serious

political reporting, has been replaced by more appealing stories and sensationalism. Sensationalism are “cheap lifestyle features and ‘news you can use’” (Bennett, 17).

News is comprised of sources. Sources provide legitimacy to a story because they usually come from respected and knowledgeable people or organizations. As a result, it is one of the most critical elements of the newsgathering process. To obtain sources, journalistic techniques has evolved so much that journalists, “do not assemble at the scene of an event, but gravitate instead to sources that can provide authoritative accounts of the event” (Iyengar and McGrady, 78). For example, if there is a story involving a national environmental issue, a journalist is more inclined to go to the Environmental Protection Agency for the most accurate information. As stated, one of journalist’s primary roles is to serve as watchdogs. To moderate their sources, reporters understand that the officials they speak to also have an interest in shaping the content of the story released. Trustworthy journalists, “maintain their objectivity by relying on counter sources from the opposing side of the partisan divide to ensure that the bias is canceled out” (78).

Not only do news organizations have precedence searching and using sources, but they also have a significant amount of power and influence on the public in crafting the news. There are many factors that can contribute to the decision-making process. One way to understand an approach is indexing. Indexing is an approach that makes disagreements among high profile entities the centerpiece (Entman, 4).

Over the past year, the popularity of social networking has taken off. A strong proponent that created much attention and increased use was Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008. The Obama campaign utilized all aspects of the medium

to engage different and progressive audiences (Carr, 2008). Although the features were made more prominent, the rush to use the services did not come with guidelines on the proper way to use it.

The rise of social networking sites provided some controversy for journalists when they revealed information or opinions without consent by the news organization they represent. As a result, in late October of 2009 National Public Radio was one of the first large news entities to create social media guidelines and hold journalists who use the communication tools to another standard. The organization said that “the line between private and public activity has been blurred by these tools (social networking tools)” and therefore enforced rules were in order. The Code of Ethics was expanded and states:

Information from your Facebook page, your blog entries, and your tweets - even if you intend them to be personal messages to your friends or family - can be easily circulated beyond your intended audience. This content, therefore, represents you and NPR to the outside world as much as a radio story or story for NPR.org does.

The magnitudes for the need of guidelines relates to the fast transition news organizations have faced to adapt to the options, obstacles and dilemma’s social networking sites have created. The guidelines are important because they prove that the journalistic tools that can be found by communicating with the public. Comparing social networking sites to traditional broadcasts has happened quickly, but both still provide citizens with content and facts.

#### *The News and Marketing the Source*

Charlene Li, the vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research, a marketing company said, "The more you know and understand the individuals who make up the groundswell around your brand and your company, the more you can use the new

social networking phenomenon to your advantage" (Varma). As of November 2009, the moderator of NBC News' "Meet the Press" David Gregory had over 1.4 million followers on Twitter, while one of his strongest competitors, George Stephanopoulos of ABC's "This Week," had over 1.5 million followers. The number of people creates an interesting parallel when the number of viewers of the respective programs are revealed. On Sunday, November 22, 2009, "Meet the Press" had the highest total viewership among the four Sunday morning programs with a total of 2.95 million, while "This Week" was a close second with 2.87 million (Media Bistro, 2009). It is interesting to note that Fox News' "Fox News Sunday" only had 1.05 million viewers, which is less than the combined number of followers of Gregory and Stephanopoulos. The question is, then: why is Twitter so engaging and what do users with large amounts of followers have to say or reveal that is so popular?

Journalists' goal is usually to cover the issues and stories that are important to their readers and consumers. Social networking has provided an easy platform for constructive dialogue. There are many benefits to engaging with the audience because it can enhance the diversity of reporting and improve one of the most important aspects, by generating more revenue. In an article published by the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, professor Christophe Van den Bulte addressed the business model of producers and customers and the value of utilizing online avenues.

"Interacting directly with customers, through blogs and other online venues, can have two payoffs for a company...one, it is a market research tool; you can tap into your customers and find out what their concerns and objectives are. Two, you can profile your company as one that is working *with* customers, not just one that is only trying to influence their purchasing decisions."



While the context of the article focuses more on companies that are profit-oriented businesses, both observations serve the goals and intentions of broadcast news. First, the use of social networking is a Mecca of focus groups. Anyone can log on to view the makeup of one's friends, the content of dialogue that is sent and received, view pictures of interests and grasp a sense of who a person is. Sites like Facebook, that include a discussion option, are a great source to present a topic for debate and watch how people react. Another strong advantage of utilizing the sites for broadcast outlets is that it fosters a relationship with the "customer" or viewer. Engaging with the audience to discuss the result of a show, to ask for opinions and questions for guests and provide a listening ear for citizens give viewers a sense of ownership. Therefore, by working with "customers" a relationship can build that will in return result in a higher amount of returning viewers and a prosperous program.

Social media's affect on companies has been both positive and negative. The sites have allowed them to reach new and different audiences or solidify the base, but at the same time, they have adapted so quickly they are too slow and ill-equipped to react. Companies such as Dell computers have found that consumers prefer information from other consumers than information supplied by companies, which has allowed their IdeaStorm site to be successful (Hughes, & Boudreaux, 2010). However, social networking has proven problematic for other major corporations. These companies cannot control the conversation on the Internet and hence some are being victimized instead of benefiting from social media. Negative comments can damage the brand name. In 2008, Johnson & Johnson issued a public apology for an online ad that the public viewed as having an unpleasant tone (Hughes, & Boudreaux, 2010).

## **Methodology**

In order to seek information on a subject that is quickly changing and advancing without adequate time to conduct studies, the content of the research of the study came primarily from interviews. The interviews were conducted in November 2009 in Washington D.C. with nine individuals that work in television and print media. The organizations represented are NBC News' "Meet the Press," NBC News' "Nightly News," PBS' "Frontline," The National Journal's *The Hotline* and *The Washington Post*. The easiest way to find out how journalists are utilizing social networking sites is to ask them, the source, directly. To further investigate the role that social networking sites have on traditional television news broadcasts, the main source of this study was interviews with the television news executives, producers, reporters, moderators and other journalists directly involved through interviews.

Informed by previous literature, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed. Questions were tailored to the professional background of each interviewee, and addressed several major themes, including: Comment Sections, News Gathering, Marketing, Old Style of Journalism Compared to the New Style of Journalism and Other.

**Comment Sections:** When newscasts or articles are posted onto the Internet there is another feature on the site that allows viewers or readers to write a comment. The viewer or reader decides the content of the response. The producer of the newscast or article then has access, as the rest of the public does, to choose to review it and reply. The collection of questions formed to further investigate if and how comments are utilized, the approving process and requirements and their impact on the future of journalism. Examples include: Do you read the comment sections of material you produced? Why,

why not? Has there been a time that a comment, e-mail or message from a viewer prompted you to investigate a story? How often has this happened?

**News Gathering:** To better gauge the interviewee, measure their consumption of news and newsgathering for their own reporting, news-gathering questions were selected to find out what sources they seek first and the role that the large shifts in technology have played in that decision-making process. Examples include: When you are working on story what are the sources you go to first? When you are working on a story how do you prioritize the sources you are seeking? How do you decide what story is the most important to cover? Do you look online to determine it? If so, where do you go?

**Marketing:** The term “marketing” was not used in the interviews, rather the category addresses a potential underlying purpose of the use of social networking sites by television broadcast programs. This category had the intent to find out if a presence online is necessary and if so, what effect they have. Examples include: Why is an online presence necessary? Why do you have a website, blog, twitter account, etc? How does online activity impact you, how does it impact the viewer?

**Old vs. New:** It is an undisputed fact that changes in technology have had an effect on television broadcast programs. Whether a journalist decides to utilize the many capabilities of the Internet or the speed of a cellular device, reporting the news does not consist of one-on-one interviews as often as it used to. The ease to cut corners to find sources can blur the line of ethical journalism. A portion of the interview questions addressed the changes and how current journalists are dealing and accepting them. An example is: How do you merge journalistic principles with today’s fast paced technology?

The interviews were recorded by a voice recorder and logged. Then the interviews will were replayed and analyzed to find common themes and conclusions.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, phone interviews and interaction through e-mail, this study also consisted of case study analysis based on online content. Online examples to look further into include archives of online chats, show segments that include questions via Twitter and e-mail. In early 2009 David Gregory participated in live chats online to speak with viewers. The weekly live chats were online and open to the public to submit questions on any topic. The hour-long discussion enables viewers to connect with the host for the first time. The chats were archived and in this study looked at the types of questions, in terms of “hard” and “soft” news.

## **Results**

Social networking can play a role as an aggregator for the news or as tool to advertise the source of the content. Through interviews and content analysis, major advantages and disadvantages of social networking emerged creating a larger distinction between the medium as the news, as a tool or a combination of both.

### *User-Generated Content*

The moderator of NBC News’ “Meet the Press,” David Gregory, supports the use of social networking and sites such as Twitter because it allows viewers to “become a part of the conversation.” Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post*, wrote an article for the Academic Journalism Review called “The Twitter Explosion.” He said the use of social networking sites creates “a better user experience” for viewers. Gregory found that creating an interactive relationship that he is able to find out what the viewers want and expect out of each program. “Communicating online allows me to engage with the

viewers and hear them. I think people are no longer passive in their consumption, they are interactive and want to be heard,” Gregory said. He was one of the first network hosts to utilize Twitter and has found productive use of it. “I get on twitter and go hey, this is something that someone is thinking about, that would be an interesting question or I should make sure to get to that issue and then some of it is political argument and that is the reality that you have a pretty heated debate going on online,” Gregory said.

In addition, social networking sites work toward the program’s advantages because he is able to reach a younger demographic that can be found online. “I was the first one of the Sunday Morning hosts to get on Twitter because I recognize you got to reach younger people where they are. They are not as interested in appointment viewing as older viewers are, they are much more transient both in their viewing power, but also how they live their life and they want information to seek them out,” Gregory said.

Gregory said he looks for patterns and trends in the comments and questions people are posting and discussing as a point of reference when he is preparing for the show. “Viewer comments often prompt looking into something else to discuss,” said Gregory. Amy Walter, editor-in-chief of the *Hotline*, a publication by the National Journal, also uses social networking sites to watch for themes and see what her peers view as noteworthy. The ability to communicate with the gatekeepers of the news is something that has not been as accessible to the public before. As technology has increased, so has the ability to communicate on more accessible formats.

*The Daily Herald*, a newspaper out of Everett, Wash., started a website in 1997 to provide online content for its print readers. The new media editor of the site, Elaine Helm, has been excited to watch the variety of people who contribute to stories now, not

just the number of people. She is pleased that people other than journalists are becoming a part of the discussion. In terms of utilizing Twitter, she said it “is good for when it comes to news.” The quick, short responses provided “better coverage and people who started watching and paying attention got a much better sense of what was going on in the area in a very rapid, real-time fashion” (Lenatti, 2009).

Michael Kosnar is a producer for NBC’s “Nightly News” and is responsible for all stories involving criminal issues. Before working with “Nightly News” he was an investigative reporter for a local station covering many issues by mainly remaining in the field to obtain first account research and information. He has utilized Twitter and Facebook to find information online immediately. In 2009, two American journalists were detained in North Korea that worked for Al Gore’s “Current TV.” Television crews went to the airport when one of the journalists safely returned home. Kosnar went to the journalist’s celebrity sister’s (Lisa Ling) Twitter site to see the last post she made to get information from a different angle. In addition, Kosnar has used social networking sites to find clues that have “led to information on people in cases.” He said the “Internet is a great tool to start researching to find leads to stories.”

With the abundance of information and conversations taking place there arises the need for online etiquette. Farhi said “the culture of the Internet” has many distinctive features. “Only a small percentage of comments are useful and people don’t tend to compliment so more are irrelevant, boring, racist or sexist.” Users have the ability to post comments, e-mail, and send direct messages on the various sites all trying to gain the attention of the host or news team on the other side. In terms of helping to improve a program or point out something to question, Gregory said, “I’m all for constructive

feedback, no matter where it comes from if it's not constructive then I'm not paying attention. If it's constructive, I want to see it."

Mark Murray maintains *FirstRead*, MSNBC's online blog of the day's political news and information. Already a tech-savvy individual, he's found additional use of social networking sites. Murray said, "I use Twitter similar to the AP wires. I use Twitter to reinforce I have not missed anything important." In terms of their ability to maintain the blog, he said, "It is important to get the information out quicker. It helps to build retention to the brand and our source as a trusted outlet."

### *The User*

Tom Bettag, a noted news producer for organizations such as PBS, ABC and CNN said social networking "needs to provide an honest aggregator. The last thing you want to look at is what your friends do on Facebook." He pointed out the blur that social media creates by allowing and encouraging users to follow "friends" which are more than likely individuals with similar opinions and views. Gregory also believed, "First person journalism and personal engagement in journalism is moving away from people on a platform saying this is what is important this is what you need to know. People are making different judgments and saying we know stuff, some has been a real backlash against the mainstream press to castigate the mainstream media for not somehow living up to its ideals. Some of it is fair some of it isn't."

A survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that people in society have become news grazers whose "relationship to news is becoming portable, personalized and participatory" (Cunningham & Miller, 2010). Citizens utilizing these sites for news and

information “need to think like journalists because they increasingly are serving as informational gatekeepers, both by creating and publishing original content online and by passing on (and thereby endorsing) news and information created elsewhere” (Cunningham & Miller, 2010). Gregory agreed, “People should be as skeptical of the internet as they are the mainstream media. There’s a danger of overreliance on the Internet.”

The solution to making users more aware of news content and what they choose to review and read comes down to news literacy. Bettag is a major proponent of the concept that “mobilizes seasoned journalists to help middle school and high school students sort fact from fiction in the digital age” (“The News literacy,” 2009). He was and remains a contributor to the News Literacy Project with the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Students lack the critical thinking skills to decide what is true and unbiased. The executive director of the project, Alan Miller said, “news literacy is not widely taught in U.S. schools, and the focus on standardized testing has tended to drive out "civics" or "current events" courses. We need a national effort to create a savvy, digital-age citizenry that is informed and engaged” (Cunningham, & Miller, 2010).

#### *Following a Base*

Online users utilize social networking avenues to communicate with friends and discover new ones. What is problematic about this tendency, is that it is rare for people to expand outside of their comfort zone and what their base. As a result, Paul Fahri of *The Washington Post* believes fragmented audiences develop. Most groups on Facebook or followers on Twitter have commonalities that attract them to become a part of the niche. He argues that social networking is “micro-targeting, not broadcasting.” “People



use Twitter as a narcissistic tool” to cater to their interests and opinions because they do not need altering opinions to solidify their own beliefs. Murray echoed his sentiments and “Twitter becomes self-fulfilling when people want instant feedback and information.”

Twitter is not quite a mainstream tool adequately used by a majority of sources effectively, yet. As a result, its value is limited and promotes skepticism. Helm, of *The Daily Herald*, said; Twitter followers tend “to be people who are computer-literate, but it tends to be people who are well-connected. So even if I have only 200 people following the Herald account, I get the sense that the appeal is a little broader because you're reaching people who are at the hub of a network of their own” (Lenatti, 2009).

#### *A New Source of Promotional Content*

When David Gregory took over the helm as the moderator of “Meet the Press” in December 2008 he was replacing the late Tim Russert whom the audience was comfortable with and depended on for many years. Gregory did not have as extensive of experience and is much younger. As a result, Gregory had to creatively figure out how to introduce himself to the base. Gregory was slow to introduce new features to the show, but off-air Gregory was engaging a new audience of “Meet the Press” viewers.

Beginning in February he participated in one-hour long web chats for anyone interested to join an online conversation and ask Gregory questions regarding himself, the show or the political news of the day. The open forum is moderated by a senior producer, Rebecca Samuels. Samuels said the chats enable viewers to “feel involved, feel connected and engaged.” She suggested that using new mediums is a great way to reach viewers and try to spark an interest for new ones. Samuels serves as the gatekeeper

of the questions and filters which ones will appear public for Gregory to answer. The benefits of talking with viewers provides constructive feedback. In terms of their effectiveness and popularity, Samuels said that is judged by the amount of feedback received from viewers and Gregory.

Web chats differ from past attempts to communicate with the deliverers of the news because the response is instant. Letters to the editor at a newspaper or letters and e-mails sent to television broadcaster accumulate, just as the typed responses in the chat, but they can be disregarded for any amount of time. Since web chats are filtered responses the host will be exposed more quickly to opinion and questions. However, because the chats are so short and the goal is to engage users, deep conversations and substance are not the ending results. Farhi finds great use of Twitter as a promotional tool because he said, “It’s a wonderful branding tool, it’s a wonderful tool for reaching a particular set of people, followers, and it’s also great for information as well.”

#### *Implications of Social Networking on Journalism*

Walter fears there “too much data and not enough analysis” in terms of news content. She believes Twitter provides “pretty banal stuff” and it encourages that you do not have to think much anymore. This is not a good trait for journalism to adopt because it is when the public questions officials and the sources of their news that the truth is revealed.

Kosnar’s traditional tactics of journalism remain, but he fears it is not the same for new and aspiring journalists. He said the “who cares immediacy is out of control” and there is a “pressure to be first which compromises journalistic integrity.” The

Internet allows the ability to immediately post content while television and print require a production portion of the process.

Murray remained adamant regarding journalistic integrity and maintaining a “journalistic work ethic.” He fears that things have shifted from “media first then content.” By changing priorities the value of information has shifted from a time factor rather than the strength of content.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The phenomenon of the Internet creates advances and setbacks to society each and every day. Information and communication has never been easier or faster to receive and disseminate. Yet, at the same time there has never been so much information that causes a clutter in determining what is vital and necessary and what is false. The Internet has created tools and instruments that make daily tasks and functions significantly easier and engaging. The rise of social networking sites on the Internet has given people the ability to connect and learn from others like never before. People can now communicate with elites in an attempt to bridge the gaps of understanding from different classes and types of individuals. Social networking has significantly impacted a staple of information via network television. Viewers now have access to suggest questions and openly criticize the individuals and entities they trust to convey what is important in the world around them. But, the question rises if broadcast news is effectively adapting to changes in technology while attempting to maintain profitable and provide objective and credible journalism?

In 2004 and 2006, Facebook and Twitter respectively started. That is not a long time for news organizations rich in tradition that took decades to evolve to adopt and

accept their intended uses. The popularity of the use of social networking happened so quickly with Internet users that the media entities would be crazy not to go to the source of their audience and engage with them. As a result, they had to quickly adapt and learn at the same time. This has blurred the lines between personal feelings and journalism and why organizations such as National Public Radio created social networking guidelines. The controversy negatively affects the organizations credibility and time and resources have to be spent on damage control rather than working to find new content and stories to educate the public about.

The popularity and success of social networking sites now drives news information. The public now expects organizations to use the sources and at immediate rates. The cable news channel or CNN's "Rick's List" is an afternoon program hosted by Rick Sanchez who derives his content from user feedback through various sites. The description of the show reads:

"Rick's List is not a CNN newscast...it's YOUR newscast! Every day from 3:00 to 5:00 PM ET, Rick Sanchez presents two audience-driven, interactive hours of the day's news and smart conversation. Want to get involved? Sure you do! So get online. Now!"

The program uses the following social networking and communication tools: Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, e-mail and text messaging. The program solicits information and feedback putting ownership into the viewer. On the program and website Sanchez tells viewers, "This show lives and breathes with your input, it's shaped by your opinions and concerns, and there's no program like it anywhere on CNN. Anywhere ON EARTH!"

The media's use of social networking sites and communication tools has made them more social entities (Bowman & Willis, 2005). Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC World Service and Global News division recognizes that, "Any media organization only exists on the quality and depth of its relationship with the public" (Bowman & Willis, 2005). In social environments people take on different roles. The creation, consumption sharing and transformation of information and news are performed at different levels by different groups of people. By increasing participation for the public, the media must recognize and remain in control of content. The role of a broadcaster is shifting from a mediator to a facilitator, enabler and teacher. Communication has transformed to involve more participants and traditional media sources are no longer the only owners of news.

The severity of ownership is not as extreme as it has been played out to be. Although there are programs such as "Rick's List" traditional media sources still control the content and still filter the opinions and comments viewers suggest. As communication has evolved, viewers have additional mediums to communicate and must continue to try and gain the attention of the media elites. As a result, social networking sites benefit the media more as an avenue to communicate with viewers and engage, while their sources of news content remain in a tight circle difficult to penetrate.

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