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Tweeting with the enemy? The impacts of new social media on sports journalism and the education of sports journalism students

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Abstract. With more than 200m users worldwide, Twitter is becoming an increasingly significant tool for journalists and their audiences. Yet, to date, there has been relatively little academic study of its impacts on the journalism profession. This article provides one of the first attempts to investigate how Twitter is influencing journalism, focusing on the specialist area of sports reporting. Through interviews with members of a press pack, the article explores how Twitter is perceived by sports journalists, how it is affecting their professional relation-

ships, and how it is being employed in everyday working practices. Findings suggest the new technology is creating some problems and divisions among journalists, due partly to a lack of clear guidelines and best practice. While Twitter undoubtedly offers new journalistic opportunities in terms of sourcing, publishing and accessing audiences, it poses a number of potential problems including workload, loss of exclusive source access and content, and abuse from readers. As a result, training in the use of Twitter should form an essential part of any sports journalism course if future reporters are to get the best out of this social media. The article concludes by identifying the key areas which should be covered by such training.

Key words: *Twitter; sports journalism; Internet; social media; education*

Introduction

From the introduction of the printing press, to the telegraph, to the arrival of the Internet, changes in technology have always shaped the nature and delivery of journalism (Conboy, 2004). As Temple (2008, p.2) has observed: ‘Change is an essential factor in journalism.’ Taking this idea as its foundation, this article seeks to explore how a recent technology is changing the nature of journalism.

If good journalism involves saying a lot in a few words, then Twitter’s 140 characters could provide one of its greatest tests. So far, relatively little research has been done on the influence of the online platform on the journalism profession. As Ahmad (2010, p.147) states: ‘Within academia... virtually nothing has yet been published on Twitter in journalism studies, the social sciences or, for that matter, in the field of media studies.’ This article takes one of the first steps in addressing this shortage by examining how Twitter is affecting the world of sports journalism.

Sports journalism has become one of the most important sections of the UK media, increasing greatly in the amount and prominence of coverage it receives (Boyle, 2006a) and the respect it gets within the wider profession (Boyle, 2006b). As in other forms of journalism, the character and practices of sports reporting is open to revision in line with social and technological movements. As Boyle says: ‘Print sports journalism adapts and changes... to the arrival and consolidation of each new wave of media development and its wider social impact’ (2006a, p.54).

Some initial work has been done to assess how Twitter is shaping the attitudes and working practices of sports writers in the US (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Here, we seek to perform a similar task in relation to the UK sports press. It will do so by addressing the following questions:

- How are sports journalists adapting to and using Twitter in their work?
- What do these journalists perceive to be the major benefits and drawbacks of Twitter for their profession so far?
- What lessons does this have for the training of future sports journalists?

The article combines an analysis of examples of Twitter in action with new empirical research into the perceptions and practices of sports journalists.

The new empirical material used in the article is drawn from structured interviews with sports journalists covering the Premier League fortunes of Sunderland and Newcastle United in the north east of England. The beat is covered by three regional newspaper organisations (Trinity Mirror's *Newcastle Chronicle and Journal*, Northeast Press – including the *Sunderland Echo* and *Shields Gazette* - and Newsquest's *North-ern Echo*). A number of national newspapers also have sports journalists covering the area on a full-time basis. These reporters typically cover a Sunderland home game one weekend and a Newcastle home game the next. As such they have close links with players and press officials from both clubs. Material has been gathered from seven sports journalists, comprising three reporters from regional titles and four writers working for the national press. Journalists were purposively sampled to gather information from a variety of perspectives. In other words, not all the reporters interviewed are social media fanatics. Some use Twitter regularly, some use it occasionally, while some choose not to use the platform at all (for more details on this see the findings section below).

It must be acknowledged that the scope of research here is limited to a sample of print journalists, covering predominantly football, in one part of the country. Any findings must therefore be seen in this light and future research needs to expand on work here; for example, looking at the practices of broadcast and online journalists, the influence of sports and digital editors, and the views of fans and readers.

However, the focused nature of this study has some advantages over other possible approaches. A case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of a particular context which can then be applied to other, similar contexts. The north east beat analysed in this article has many parallels to other parts of the country where national and regional journalists regularly report on a small number of football clubs. Its conclusions therefore have wider relevance. Furthermore, a case study approach allows us to explore not only the individual perceptions and practices of journalists but also the relationships between colleagues and the changing dynamics of a relatively close knit press pack. As journalists do not work in a vacuum, an understanding of their working relationships is crucial to a fuller understanding of their professional output.

The following section will provide a general introduction to Twitter, discussing the nature of the platform and its potential uses by journalists. The article then moves on to analyse some specific examples of sports stories derived from Twitter, examining the implications of these for journalists and their relationships with sports stars. This is intended to provide context for the subsequent section in which new empirical findings are presented. These findings explore journalists' perceptions of Twitter and how it is affecting their practices and relationships with one another. Finally, a conclusion will draw together the main findings of the article and discuss their implications for how the sports journalists of the future should be trained.

Twitter and journalism

Twitter is now an everyday tool for many journalists. It can be used as a publishing platform or as a marketing medium to highlight a personal brand or to divert followers to print or digital output. The service has empowered journalists with a new means to research stories, contact sources and uncover information. Moreover, Twitter offers an opportunity for journalists to maintain a relationship with their audience that extends beyond the sporadic interactions of print publications in letters pages or comments on articles published online. As Fahri argues: 'Twitter can be a serious aid in reporting. It can be a living, breathing tip sheet for facts, new sources and story ideas. It can provide instantaneous access to hard-to-reach newsmakers, given that there's no PR person standing between a reporter and a tweet to a government official or corporate executive. It can also be a blunt instrument for crowdsourcing' (2009, p.2).

At its most basic level Twitter is an online information sharing service, a micro-blogging platform that enables users to create 140-character updates, 'tweets'. Tweets are published to the user's stream of updates which can be followed, and subsequently 'unfollowed' by others. Users who access Twitter via mobile or desktop websites, or through popular readers such as Tweetdeck, view a real-time cascading timeline of messages from everyone they are following. Essentially it is a tool for managing trusted sources of information and entertainment from celebrities to sports stars, friends and family to colleagues.

Like other social media success stories, such as Facebook - Twitter's evolution has been driven by its users. For instance, a means of message amplification developed when people began to 'retweet' messages, effectively introducing the message and originator to a new stream of followers. This was originally achieved by prefixing a duplicate of the original message with RT and the name of the original tweeter. This method is critical to the tool's appeal for journalists as it provides a means for virally spreading information to a new audience. The retweet function is now built in to Twitter's interface.

The service was created in 2006 and grew steadily. Its potential as a journalistic tool was highlighted when it was used as a platform by eyewitnesses to report the Hudson River plane crash in January 2009 (Beau-

mont, 2009). The event showcased how Twitter could be used by anyone in a manner which subverts the role of journalist as information gatekeeper. And that process continues with reports from football matches, peace protests and even the operation to kill or capture Osama bin Laden.

Twitter has an estimated 200m users worldwide, which is some way short of the estimated 600m accounts registered on dominant social network Facebook (Chiang, 2011). And while the extent of the impact of Twitter as a referrer to major news sites is debatable, the service's growing user base makes it impossible to overlook for journalism students and practitioners. As a publishing platform, thanks to the advent of smart phones, 'tweeting' has become as simple as sending an SMS text message. Bypassing content management systems and production processes, creating Twitter updates is a simple means of communicating breaking news. Twitter is especially useful in out-of-hours situations and can be used via a 3G internet connection 'on the go'. The service is characterised by its ease of use - it simply requires users to type text into a dialogue box which is instantly added to their timeline. In fact, simplicity is a cornerstone of the service's appeal to users and journalists alike. The proliferation of content through Twitter is also becoming increasingly straightforward, with most websites featuring 'tweet' buttons that allow users to flag up web content in a few easy clicks.

lists contribute to a buzz of activity on Twitter alerting followers to sporting teamsheets, single lines of breaking news, or transfer speculation without the need for a longer article. Twitter's busiest day in the UK was recorded in May 2011 when the clamour to discover details of footballer Ryan Giggs' injunction saw traffic spike. On May 21 Twitter accounted for 0.55% of all UK internet traffic, making it one of the 20 most popular sites in the country (Arthur, 2011). By comparison, the BBC News site accounted for 1% of traffic.

Twitter can also be used as a cross-promotional device directing followers to print publications, events or most commonly to URLs containing articles. But it's also a mechanism for journalists to market themselves, a means to establish them as an authority. The greater the following, the more people are effectively endorsing the journalist as a trusted source.

The notion of brand on Twitter is complex. Name is traditionally a cornerstone of brand. Changing a name means reacquainting consumers with your product and can prove costly in terms of money and time. On Twitter a user can change their name, borrowing the brand value of their current publication, team or employer to boost their appeal, without losing followers. So while celebrity and an attachment to a corporate brand can increase a 'tweeter's' following, in this democratized space individuals who tweet useful, insightful, exclusive or entertaining material can effectively create a personal brand. If a reader chose to follow a journalist when they switched newspaper they would have to actively change their consumption habits. Not so on Twitter, where aspiring journalists can snowball their following with every career advancement or their growing proficiency on the platform; or where people who are not journalists can break down the traditional barrier between the reporter and the audience.

Another potential journalistic use of Twitter is as a mechanism for finding stories. It provides a means of monitoring traditional sources with a presence on Twitter, but also to track sources that go 'under the radar' enabling journalists to pick up on chatter from members of the public that might previously have gone unreported. Twitter's space is at once highly public, but also treated with a certain intimacy by users who frequently wish their followers good night, or outline the details of their last meal. In this space journalists can overhear conversations without heading to the local pub and pick up on gossip or insight that may warrant further investigation, or else come to nothing. With geo-tagging and the use of hashtags which flag a message to users looking out for mentions of specific key terms it's possible for users, including journalists, to pick up information that may never have been reported to traditional sources with, say, a phone call to newsdesk.

Finally, Twitter is also used by reporters as a crowd-sourcing tool. It gives them an opportunity to appeal for information or sources either by capitalizing on their own or their publication's followings or by plugging into a network of millions of users. Twitter, and its use by journalists, is defined by users who find new ways to exploit the platform. .

Twitter and football

On August 31, 2010, Ryan Babel – Liverpool football club's Dutch international player –heralded an unforeseen, as yet immeasurable shift in momentum within the UK's sports media. As always, unless it falls on the nation's final Bank Holiday Monday of the summer, August 31 was transfer deadline day for English Premier League clubs. Satellite broadcaster Sky Sports had long since assumed unofficial ownership of a red letter day in football's calendar. A day when the perceived immediacy of their rolling sports news platform Sky Sports News (SSN), combined with Rupert Murdoch's chasm-deep resources, provided minute-

by-minute proof of the imbalance of power within British sports journalism. If it happened – *as* it happened – during the manic minutes and hours before the close of English football's bi-annual bout of horse-trading, the assumption was that SSN would deliver it to a captive, if not uniformly appreciative, nationwide audience. Although he might not have brought SSN's world crashing down, Babel at least questioned the assumption that Murdoch's billions could buy a monopoly on sports news. At around 2.10pm, SSN began reporting that Babel was aboard a helicopter bound for London and talks with Tottenham Hotspur. Having then, at around 2.50pm, claimed that he was also set to negotiate with West Ham United, they continued reporting both angles. Then, in separate, successive Twitter posts at just after 4.40pm, Babel declared: *'I'm going no where (sic)'* and *'#LFC all The Way ...#ynwa !!!'*

It has not been established whether Babel was ever airborne that day, although when Sky Sports News reported on transfer deadline day the following January that Fernando Torres and Andy Carroll were flying to and from Liverpool, Babel mischievously reflected – again, via Twitter – that *'My Helicopter pilot called me for permission to fly someone real quick today, he didn't wanted (sic) to name the person #Strange'*. What is certain, however, is that SSN continued to report that Babel was in talks with Tottenham and West Ham even while his pledge to stay at Liverpool became common knowledge online. It was towards 5.30pm before SSN finally confirmed Babel's tweets, albeit while maintaining that he was on his way back to Liverpool by road because it had been *'quite a bumpy flight down'*.

The ride received by Sky in the ensuing hours and days was more than bumpy. Having traded heavily on SSN's ability to break transfer 'exclusives' first, they had been outpaced by news delivered straight from source. Worse still was their embarrassing delay in catching up with the facts. None revelled in the event more than print sports journalists who often appear hamstrung in remaining revenue-reliant on the printing press during a digital age. While Babel's discrediting of SSN was swift, it was a vindication of the enduring value of the traditional journalistic tenets of 'patch' knowledge and contacts-gathering, with Dominic King - then of the *Liverpool Echo* - having tweeted at around 2.30pm that Babel was staying at Anfield.

However, the bigger picture to emerge from that episode was as worrying to sports journalists across all traditional platforms as it was potentially liberating to those they report on – and no doubt chilling for those employed to filter, censor and frequently suppress the opinions of our sporting icons. For Babel showed how everybody (press officers, agents, administrators and journalists) and everything (including a sense of perspective - and common sense) standing between a sports star and his public can be bypassed in much less than 140 characters on Twitter, where source and subject are one and the same.

Inevitably, where Babel led, others – for better or for worse - have followed. For some the platform is one of compulsion, not least in the aftermath of 'battle'. Having angered Liverpool by revealing he had been dropped for a previous game, Babel was censured by the Football Association after re-tweeting a mocked-up picture of referee Howard Webb in a Manchester United shirt immediately following his handling of a match between the two clubs. Fledgling England international Jack Wilshere narrowly escaped similar action after a Twitter tirade at referee Phil Dowd after Arsenal had surrendered a four-goal lead against Newcastle United in January. Of lesser profile but greater impact was a rant by Aldershot Town striker Marvin Morgan, who was suspended and made available for transfer after posting: *'I hope you all die'* in response to being jeered by the Football League Two side's own supporters.

Wider offence was caused by West Ham United striker Carlton Cole's tweets on the night Ghana – backed by 20,000-plus supporters – faced England in a friendly in April 2011. *'Immigration has surrounded the Wembley premises! I knew it was a trap!'* Cole posted. *'Hahaha. The only way to get out safely is to wear an England jersey and paint your face w/ the St. George's flag!'* The Football Association, albeit after nine days of telling prevarication, later charged Cole with improper conduct, before fining him £20,000.

However, the most disturbing example – and perhaps the most consequential - of footballers talking out of turn on Twitter came in April 2011, when two youth-team players at Scottish lower league clubs were sacked for posting abuse towards Celtic manager Neil Lennon after it emerged he and two of the club's most high-profile supporters had been sent nail bombs through the mail. Berwick Rangers Under-17 captain Kieran Bowell admitted tweeting that he wished the bomb had killed Lennon, while Clyde Under-19 player Max Mckee described the sending of the nail bombs as *'hilarious'*.

Though seemingly less significant, Wayne Rooney's arrival on Twitter in April 2011 – he accrued around 170,000 followers within 24 hours of signing up – was warmly welcomed by the tabloid press. For a while, the Manchester United and England player tweeted with both surprising restraint and lucidity. That changed, however, after a fellow tweeter – purportedly a fan of United's bitter rivals Liverpool - dubbed Rooney *'a fat whore'* and threatened to attack him with a golf club. Having responded by urging his abuser to *'come and do it'* at the United training ground, and then been given the promise *'ill (sic) be down tomor-*

row lad in me (sic) twin turbo nissan micra’, Rooney tweeted: ‘I’ll put you asleep within 10 seconds hope u turn up if u don’t gonna tell everyone ur (sic) scared u little nit. I’ll be waiting’.

Responding to the subsequent media storm, Rooney described the exchange as ‘banter’ and urged that people ‘chill out’. Interestingly, he appears to grow ever more wedded to the concept of Twitter, to the point where he used the site to reveal the results of a hitherto secret hair transplant.

Further proof of Rooney’s unanticipated resilience in the face of uniquely unfettered criticism on Twitter was the brevity of his club-mate Darron Gibson’s connection with the medium. Having joined the site at around midday on April 25, and picked up many followers on the back of a tweeted plug from English football’s most followed tweeter, Rio Ferdinand, Northern Ireland international Gibson closed his account - @dgibbo28 - within two hours, seemingly in response to a hail of criticism from supporters – many of his own club. One typical tweet read: ‘@dgibbo28 hasn’t tweeted yet. Seems somewhat fitting after the countless anonymous performances we’ve seen from the “footballer”’.

While Gibson did not relish his online profile, the new platform allows some to gain far greater attention on Twitter than they ever have or will on the pitch. Once tipped for success in the Premier League, Rohan Ricketts struggled to realise his reputed potential and became a footballing nomad, with spells in Canada and, more recently, Moldova. However, the candid and unusually articulate nature of his Twitter posts, revealing the reality of life as a journeyman footballer, has seen him build a prominent online profile, writing regular blogs and then developing his own website.

There is little such eloquence about another of English football’s former bright young things, Leon Knight. Yet he too, in a hail of profanity, has gained on Twitter the fame which eluded him on the field. In one manic evening in September 2010, Knight posted repeated accusations against his former club, non-league Rushden & Diamonds, amid a rancorous argument over his player registration documents. ‘I’ve started a volcano on Twitter...’, Knight told newspapers. Although most recently playing in relative obscurity in Northern Ireland with Coleraine, Knight has more than 11,000 Twitter followers.

Knight’s fellow striker, Darren Bent – one of the first English footballers to embrace Twitter – initially appeared to have done equally little for his career in aiming similarly strident criticism at his then club Tottenham Hotspur in July 2009. Bent was fined an estimated £120,000 after accusing Tottenham’s hierarchy of delaying his proposed move to Sunderland, and imploring Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy to ‘stop

J/st	Uses Twitter?	For how long?	Time daily on Twitter	Tweets	Followers	Following
A	Yes	2 years	1 hour	500	1,300	270
B	Yes	1 year	5 mins	2,500	2,400	170
C	Yes	18 months	90 mins	10,500	5,700	235
D	Yes	2 years	30 mins	4,383	14,200	240
E	Yes	3 years	3 hours	11,400	20,600	210
F	Yes	18 months	1 hour	7,318	2,850	215
G	No	-----	-----		-----	-----

Table 1: Sports journalists and their use of Twitter

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f***** around'. At the time, some saw that as cause to heap further ridicule on a player already in receipt of mocking criticism by Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp. However, although having been forced to apologise, Bent was a Sunderland player within a week. Not only did his supposed social media own-goal appear to break a career-blighting impasse, he has rarely stopped scoring since.

Some, particularly among those reaching the end of their playing career, use social media seemingly to raise their profile, and brand, ahead of a projected career change. Robbie Savage, for example, still plays for Derby County, but finds time to regularly bait fellow sporting personalities on Twitter – most famously, then England captain Rio Ferdinand – in a manner strikingly similar to that he adopts in his burgeoning role as a radio and TV pundit. Ferdinand, the most followed Premier League footballer on Twitter, regularly debates the wider world issues of the day – 'Twitter+facebook (social media) played a significant role in the revolution in Egypt. We are involved (if not directly) in a powerful #movement!' - but tends to remain quiet on matters sensitive to his club and country. Ferdinand has Tweeted: 'I'm addicted to Twitter . . . It really bridges that gap between us and the fans'. Furthermore, as former News of the World editor Phil Hall has observed: 'Twitter turns you into a franchise. Instead of someone like Rio Ferdinand being part of the Manchester United franchise he is effectively creating his own' (in Gibson, 2011). In other words, Twitter is changing the nature of relationships between players, fans, clubs and the media. What we turn to now is how sports journalists perceive and are adapting to these changes.

Sports Journalists and Twitter

Twitter divides sports journalists. Some love it. Some are prepared to live with it. While some wish it had never been born at all. This is reflected in the amount of time and energy different journalists are prepared to devote to the platform

Spending at least three hours each day on Twitter, and sending thousands of Tweets, is a big commitment to a platform that some colleagues choose to ignore entirely. In fact, the potentially time consuming nature of Twitter is a concern for some journalists:

One problem is spending too much time on it. It can be quite overwhelming when a big story is breaking or it's the transfer window and so on, but I think the positives outweigh that.

It's very easy to spend a lot of time on there and to become embroiled in time-consuming debates and arguments.

Twitter is an always-on platform that enables a journalist to publish instantly from a phone without visiting the office. From an audience perspective this is a major strength of a service that empowers journalists and users alike to post instant updates on breaking news. But from a professional standpoint this does raise questions about expectations on journalists. Being always-on is arguably an extension of journalist's already stretched office hours.

We can see (from Table 1) that those who devote time to Twitter have the potential to build up large networks of followers. However, there is not a clear link between time spent on the platform and the number of followers gained. Other factors are at work here. The two journalists with by far the most followers (journalists D and E in Table 1) work for national newspapers and include the name of their publication in their Twitter usernames. Branding therefore appears to be crucial in developing audiences.

But branding also creates some grey areas. While the use of an official brand can help increase audience and add credibility to a Twitter feed, it could also be seen as inhibiting some of the inherent qualities of the platform. Tweets are often informal, jokey and sometimes crude. Many journalists try to get around this potential conflict by adding a caveat to their feed along the lines of: 'Tweets on a personal basis', or 'these views are my own'. In other words, they want the benefits of branding while seeking to sidestep its potential constraints. As with many issues in social media, this is likely to remain a grey area until such time as the lawyers are called in.

Most, but not all, of the journalists interviewed had been encouraged by their sports desks to use Twitter and to post links to articles on the publication's website. However, in no cases had this been insisted upon. Furthermore, no journalists had been given instructions by their employer about what they can or cannot say on Twitter. While employers seem to have a sense that Twitter could be a useful tool for their reporters, none appear to have a clear strategy on how best to use it.

We've had nothing official. They encourage us to tweet from matches on a Saturday as part of their live match day coverage. Occasionally we'll be asked (although never told) to link something - a webchat or online debate or match report etc. They're keen for people to use Twitter, but don't demand it. I was the first one to do so in the department and have always had a mixture of the personal and professional. I've never

been told what to do/say/link/not link.

They like us to have a Twitter feed, but have never attempted to exert any influence over what's said on it.

I was encouraged by my sports editor and website editor to have a Twitter feed but already had one. There have been no guidelines from them regarding its use, other than to use it to send links for articles which have appeared in print or on-line, which is mainly what I use it for. Judging by the content of my colleagues, there are no real guidelines regarding the content of tweets.

A lack of clear guidelines on the use of Twitter has also created some division and resentment within the press pack itself. For example, there is confusion about what can and cannot be Tweeted during and after press conferences with managers. In the case of a Saturday match, the journalists usually take it in turns to question managers following the game. The broadcast journalists go first, followed by the Sundays and then the dailies. This helps ensure the latter group of reporters have something different to say in their Monday reports. But journalists have differing interpretations over how these conventions relate to Twitter. One journalist said:

The rule is that TV and radio quotes can be tweeted straight away, while written press info and quotes have an embargo.

Another said:

There aren't really any rules, although you're not supposed to Tweet anything from the dailies press conference. It is a grey area whether anything should be tweeted from television and radio.

A third said:

There don't appear to be any rules at all.

Therefore, perhaps the most apt comment of all came from the journalist who suggested the rules needed to be 'clarified and adhered to'.

Where you have a relatively new technology and differences in the uptake and application of this technology, then some difficulties and uncertainties are bound to emerge. These uncertainties though have the potential to create problems and resentment within a press pack. The comments below reflect a feeling among some journalists that views Twitter suspiciously and those who Tweet as being driven as much by personal vanity as sound journalistic motives:

Let's not overstate the importance of Twitter. After all, even someone who proudly proclaims he has 10,000 followers, is twitting to just a fraction of his newspaper audience.

One of the problems has been the belief among some that being able to use a laptop or iphone quicker than someone else makes you a good journalist or that you've broken a story reading a Twitter feed.

One of the bad aspects of Twitter is dealing with the egos of other journalists who are more interested in their own follower numbers than the papers they work for.

Are these criticisms simply born of fear of change? The answer to this possibly lies in an analysis of the way Twitter is actually being used day-to-day by sports journalists. As discussed in an earlier section, the main potential journalistic uses of the platform fall into the following categories: research, finding stories, breaking news, comment and analysis, signposting people to content on other forms of media (print or online), and communicating with the audience. All the journalists interviewed saw Twitter as a potential source of stories for journalists:

Several stories have come from Twitter. Several footballers in particular have used it for the wrong reasons to give quotes which wouldn't have otherwise come to light. It can offer a fascinating insight into a sports-tar's routines and mentality.

It allows you to pick up stories from sports people who have their own Twitter accounts.

Stories are the lifeblood of a journalist's job and any new means of accessing or creating a story is potentially good news for reporters. However, the public nature of Twitter also provides a threat to sports journalists and the potential value of their contacts. While journalists have access to the Twitter feeds of sports stars, often bypassing the potential constraints of PR officials, so do many supporters. Twitter gives consumers, fans, the audience unprecedented access to sports stars and insight into their lives. While direct messages on Twitter are only possible when the recipient is following the sender, the '@' device enables anyone to direct a message to the recipient and will often provoke a response.

It could be argued that the direct access to players provided by Twitter in fact removes some of the traditional value of the sports journalism profession. This is reflected in the

One of the problems with Twitter is an over-reliance on the site by players themselves to express themselves or tell stories or anecdotes which used to be done in face-to-face interviews.

There are a lot of rival media on Twitter who follow sports journalists in the hope of picking up stories in this manner.

As Boyle (2006, p.43) has observed, the 1980s marked 'the end of the close relationship that had existed between sports journalists and the sports stars they reported on.' The influx of money into football and the rise of club PR machines meant the days of players and hacks regularly going out drinking together became a thing of the past. Access became more restricted and controlled. So, on the one hand, Twitter has reopened some of this direct access for journalists, but, on the other, it has opened this access to almost anyone.

However, while some journalistic activity involves unearthing exclusive stories from contacts, much journalism has always been about restructuring information already in the public domain. Most people do not have the time or inclination to seek out information or sift through data themselves, instead relying on journalists to do it on their behalf. It could be argued that Twitter has merely added to the total mass of information available, therefore increasing the need for journalists to act as gatekeepers, selecting, analysing and attempting to make some sense of it all. As Ahmad (2010, p.152) has commented: 'If readers can go directly to diverse kinds of sources, traditional journalism will come under even greater pressure than it has done to offer the user something unique: analysis, comment, collation and so on.' Hermida makes a similar prediction when he says: 'Journalists would be seen as sense makers, rather than just reporting the news' (2010, p.304).

If the public nature of Twitter is a potential threat to a journalist's exclusive access to sources then its instant and relentless character also threaten their ability to hold on to stories:

One of the biggest problems I have encountered is that you might think you have a story, which you are saving for the paper, and someone has put it out on Twitter beforehand. It might only be 140 characters, but it is enough for other people to get wind of a story that you think you have in the bag.

A real problem for journalists is stories leaking on Twitter before they're published on the publication's website or paper.

One of the dilemmas posed by Twitter is: how much to reveal and when? Only so much can be said in 140 characters, but it could be enough to tip off others to a breaking or exclusive story. This decision is much easier in relation to other online content as these stories can be updated almost as instantly as Tweets, with direct links provided to the site:

Tweets are the perfect way to drive hits to a story which you have online - the modern day newspaper bill.

One of the main benefits of Twitter is the marketing of your own stories to improve hits on newspaper websites.

The decision becomes more complex when signposting people to forthcoming print editions. As one reporter commented:

The constant race to Tweet things first means stories are wasted, breaking on Twitter rather than in your own newspapers. You also get people throwing away good info and quotes that should be held for the paper.

The solution for some journalists is to follow their paper's embargo rules, meaning not publishing information until an edition has gone to print. But, as discussed earlier, there are as yet no clear rules or conventions in this domain and so journalists tend to be making individual and ad hoc judgements.

So far we have discussed Twitter being employed in what could be described as traditional journalistic practices – those of finding stories and headlining content. But the platform also opens up new possibilities for journalists in terms of what they publish and how they communicate with their audience. In recent studies of American sports journalists, Sheffer and Shultz (2010) found the main use of Twitter was to provide commentary and opinion. However, they also found some important differences in usage among journalists. While some settled for using Twitter to promote content on more traditional platforms, others were more likely to use it in new ways, such as publishing new types of content or interacting with fans (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Findings here show examples of UK sports journalists using Twitter as a means of employing these new practices.

First, in terms of publishing, one of the benefits of Twitter cited by journalists is the ability to release material that would not always be appropriate for their online or print publication. As Schultz and Sheffer argue, Twitter can allow journalists to 'cover stories the mainstream media often ignore' (2010, p.229). Tweets of

this kind may include jokes, anecdotes or the type of banter more usually associated with a fans' site. For example, journalists said:

Twitter is a useful way to break stories that won't get in the paper.

Twitter is a useful outlet for small jokes/observations that wouldn't make paper.

Second, Twitter offers an immediate means of interacting with fans and getting feedback. As Schultz & Sheffer (2010, p.229) argue: 'Much like blogging, Twitter offers a unique opportunity for real-time conversations. It could be used by journalists to directly connect and communicate with audiences on topics and stories'. On the evidence of findings here, those journalists who most welcome the advent of Twitter are those who have tapped in to its potential to have direct dialogues with audiences, as the following comments demonstrate:

I like the immediacy of Twitter; the instant feedback, the conversation. It wasn't too long ago that we worked in a vacuum. The only feedback we got, if anything, would be the letters page or the odd bit of correspondence. Now it's constant. Most of all,

- Twitter is a source of debate, stimulation, argument and banter.
- Twitter provides a new form of interaction with readers which can create a more loyal readership.
- However, this new form of interaction is not without its problems as it provides a platform for those who have things to get off their chest:
- One of the downsides to Twitter is the mindless abuse you can get at times.
- Sometimes you get fans taking the info you put out, then not believing it, as if we make it up.
- It can be difficult not to take criticism to heart.
- One of the bad aspects of this is getting slagged off for Tweeting things which are supposedly <old news>.

Initial findings in the US have suggested a difference in how Twitter is being used by the broadcast and print media. 'Print journalists seem to be ignoring many of the obvious technological breakthroughs associated with Twitter (such as the ability to connect directly with sources) and instead are using it to point back to the journalism they grew up with – developed stories on the printed page based on traditional journalistic practices' (Schultz & Sheffer 2010, p.236). However, findings here show that at least some print journalists are fully embracing the interactive potential of Twitter and all the fun and fire that may entail.

Conclusion

Twitter is becoming an increasingly important part of a sports journalist's role, even for those who may wish it was otherwise. For some it is a major element of their working day, for others it is a potentially useful tool, while even those who choose not to participate directly must at least take account of the fact that most of their colleagues do.

Findings here suggest that Twitter is a potential source of friction within press packs as journalists take-up Twitter at different rates and for differing means. While some have embraced Twitter and see it as a regular and important feature of their working day, others remain suspicious of the platform, questioning the motives and actions of their more Twitter friendly colleagues. This friction is exacerbated by a lack of clear guidelines both within news organisations and among the press pack as a whole.

Crucially, Twitter is not only changing the way traditional journalism is practised (in terms of researching, sourcing and publicising stories), but is also encouraging new types of journalistic activity such as entering into banter with readers and publishing short, anecdotal material that may previously have not seen the light of day.

- To sum up, findings suggest some of the main benefits of Twitter for sports journalists have been:
- Direct access to sources, bypassing PR officials;
- A supply of stories;
- A new and instant means of interacting with readers;
- A way of signposting readers to online and print content;
- A platform for new types of content.
- Some of the main drawbacks of Twitter have been:
- The potentially overwhelming and time consuming nature of the platform;

- Loss of exclusive access to some sources;
- Material being leaked/released ahead of publication on other platforms;
- Abuse from readers;

A lack of clear guidelines leading to confusion, friction and resentment within the press pack about the accepted use of Twitter.

In other words, while Twitter has undoubted positive qualities for sports journalists, it has also created some significant problems. However, many, if not all, of these problems could be reduced with clearer guidance and education in how to use the platform. In light of these findings, it is suggested that Twitter, and the use of social media in general, should form a crucial part of the curriculum on sports journalism courses. As journalist and academic Julie Posetti (2011) argues, if social media is no longer discretionary for many journalists, it follows that the 'professional training of journalists in social media theory and practice is also essential'.

Based on findings above, it is recommended that sports journalism students would benefit from training in, and critical discussion of, the following issues:

- How to create their own Twitter brand;
- How to find stories on Twitter (who to follow and how);
- What to publish on Twitter and when;
- How to manage Twitter and filter the flow of information;
- How to create and communicate with an audience;
- How best to use Twitter in relation to other platforms.

This article has taken some initial steps to explore the impacts of Twitter on the world of sports journalism and journalism education. The research now needs to be developed in a number of areas. Future areas for research could include examinations of how broadcast journalists are using Twitter, how and why fans are using social media, which are the most successful sports journalist brands on Twitter, and why and how clubs and official organisations are reacting to the challenges and opportunities of the new platform.

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