

# Invited essays

## Get digital or die: News storytelling, social media and journalism education

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*Two years ago, Jonathan Baker left the BBC, where he was Director of the College of Journalism to take up a Chair at the University of Essex and to design an undergraduate journalism course from scratch. It has just completed its first year. In this essay he reflects on the exponential growth in social media as a news source for storytelling, the challenges presented by digital and why, he believes, that there has never been a better time to be teaching young journalists.*

**The social media revolution has now been a part of the journalist's life – all our lives – for five years and more. The media can no longer afford to gape at the speed of its advance, or ignore the potentially fatal consequences of a failure to respond.**

Ian Hargreaves in his book *Journalism: A Very Short Introduction* claims that as early as 2010 “it was clear to everyone.... that newspapers, some magazines and even parts of the television news industry, would have to adapt or die” (Hargreaves, 2014:119). Yet plenty of journalists, and perhaps some of the people who train their successors, are still only starting to learn to love digital.

Social networks exert an ever-tighter grip on our everyday lives, and the ways that we communicate and keep ourselves informed. But in general terms, the media have been slow to understand and to adapt. Perhaps it's because the new journalism is a young man's game, and remains opaque to an older generation whose career-long certainties - with their jobs - are disappearing fast. But there is no hiding place; and the implications are no less obvious for the training and education of the next generation of journalists, if that generation is to survive and flourish in the digital age.

The most striking features of the social media phenomenon have been the extraordinary speed and scale of their adoption across the world. The statistics portal Statista projects a figure of 33 million UK Facebook users by 2018, more than half the entire population. In July 2015, Twitter claimed it had reached 15 million active users in the UK, around one person in four. Instagram claims 14 million active monthly users in the UK.

Although these are staggering – and growing – levels of penetration, it is hard to get a sense of how many of those millions are using social media as their sources of news, even if you can establish how ‘news’ is defined in a world of sharing and retweeting.

The Digital News Report for 2016, published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, says just over half (51%) of its sample of 50,000 people in 26 countries now use social media as a source of news, and for 12% it's their main source. The biggest change in the last year, it says, has been the growth of news accessed via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

A key enabler of these dizzying increases is another seemingly-irresistible onward march, that of the smartphone. Social media users operate on the move, their mobiles giving them 24-hour access to their chosen networks. The Reuters Institute reports a sharp rise in smartphone usage for news in 2015-16, at

the expense of computers and tablets.

Andrew Hawken, formerly Director of Product for Sky News and now co-founder/CEO of Mesmerise, thinks this trend will quicken. He told me: “If you look at the computing power in these devices, you look at the screen’s resolution and the capacity, it just continues and continues and continues. Smartphone is just huge and will continue to get more important.”

Smartphones are key enablers in a process by which the audience has changed from passive consumer of the products of professional journalists to a community that has the tools to become active news producers. The title of Clay Sharkey’s 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody* neatly captured this phenomenon. Anyone can now be a reporter, commentator, publisher.

And there are gaps for new sorts of providers. BuzzFeed showed the potential for anyone who could master the creation and distribution of content in a social and mobile world. There were some ‘early adopters’ in the traditional media who were quick to grasp this, and others who were slower to see that social networking would have a profound effect on their business model and/or the way they conducted their journalism.

The New York Times, in an internal Innovation Report in 2014, in effect a snapshot of its own digital response, put itself firmly in the slow lane. While giving themselves a pat on the back for the enduring quality of Times journalism, the report’s authors cautioned: “At the same time we are falling behind in a second critical area: the art and science of getting our journalism to readers...this is where our competitors are pushing ahead of us.”

Joanna Geary speaks with considerable authority about those who quickly chose to adapt; now at Twitter, she was successively Social and Communities Editor and Digital Development Editor at the Guardian, and then Communities Editor at the Times – new roles designed to lead the response to the new challenges.

“I think 2009-10 was an incredible time for social media adoption,” she told me. “A lot of journalists got their Twitter accounts and their Facebook accounts and enjoyed the fact they got lots of followers from them and started to learn about how to build followers and build a presence. I think they then thought they had got Twitter and Facebook sorted, and maybe many of them didn’t go down the line of thinking of them as genuine newsgathering tools. That’s started to change now, but it’s still quite a small community of people in the UK who do it really well.”

Journalism is having to adapt to the realisation that the audience has moved elsewhere and will no longer consume what it’s given at the times media organisations feel disposed to provide it. If journalism has to adapt to take account of these new realities, then those responsible for training future generations of journalists have to adapt as well. They have to look to their laurels too, and be confident that they are teaching the skills required for this new world.

Are they responding any more effectively than the media industry? The Broadcast Journalism Training Council accredits many UK journalism courses, and each course has a brief manifesto on the BJTC website. A trawl of more than 20 of these documents reveals only two mentions of the word ‘digital’, and two references to social media. This might suggest that social media and digital skills have yet to be fully integrated into some courses, or given the prominence that their increasing importance warrants. Or both.

One reason might be that it’s still not clear whether social media skills will always require specialist practitioners, or whether in time they will be in the storytelling toolkit of every digital journalist. For now, the general trend seems to suggest a gradual move from the one to the other – although there will probably always be a place for the social expert, just as there is for other sorts of specialism within the wider field of journalism.

Sky News keep both of these options in play, as Andrew Hawken explains: “We have a couple of approaches. While we want everyone in the newsroom to be completely conversant with social media, we want them run at the moment by specialists. They know exactly how to publish to Facebook, they know exactly the best times. The difference between someone just coming in on a rota who hasn’t done it for six months, and having a team of real specialist producers who live and breathe social media publishing every day is huge. We see that every day in the numbers.”

Joanna Geary also sees the emphasis shifting somewhat, especially when it comes to newsgathering as opposed to distribution. “I would imagine most journalists would be able to have at least some abilities to search for and find interesting stories via social media.

“But I think that more forensic mapping and shadow analysis, that side of things – I don’t expect that’s something that will become essential skills for everybody. I think that will be something that will be owned by some sort of ‘social desk’. You are always going to need some sort of specialist in a newsroom who can

understand how to verify multimedia content that is procured online.”

Learning these skills does not necessarily come easily to journalists of a certain generation. That means plenty of opportunity for young, web-savvy journalism graduates, and undergraduate courses should be able to help them seize those opportunities. And newsrooms want them.

Joanna Geary says: “There are so many skills now that are becoming essential to the business that just aren’t really taught in journalism schools. Data journalism and editorial developers are big things. There’s a lot of demand for really good editorial developers, and there aren’t many of them around, and not many courses that are creating them.”

The New York Times is in no doubt about the kind of people it will be looking for in the future: “We need more reporters and editors with an intuitive sense of how to write for the web, an interest in experimenting with mobile and social storytelling, a proficiency with data, a desire to engage readers on and off our site and a nuanced understanding of the shifting competitive landscape.”

Nic Newman is specific about some of the new skills that will need to be developed by the next generation. “Numerical literacy will be more important, and data journalism will be a part of it,” he told me. “But so too will be learning to tell stories visually - and that will include charts, videos, pictures and new formats that combine all these elements together in new ways. You are trying to teach them flexibility in format, and expose them to tools and techniques for gathering and packaging, at the same time as doing the core concepts.”

So the journalists of the future will need a range of skills associated with the digital world - some of them new, some of them traditional skills given a new impetus or direction. All undergraduate courses will have to determine how to provide these in a digital environment which is difficult and even alien to some of those doing the teaching, yet familiar and natural to those being taught.

Those skills will include:

- a knowledge of the geography of social media, what each platform offers and how it can best be exploited in the interests of getting journalism to audiences;
- a willingness to experiment and find new ways of connecting, engaging and informing;
- an ability to produce the sort of content that works effectively on the web - techniques for visual storytelling;
- an ability to handle statistics with confidence, and to understand how to mine, analyse and present some of the wealth of big data available online.

There is one critical point upon which everyone is in agreement: social media and their associated skills may be important, but they in no way replace or sideline any of the immutable virtues and values of good newsroom practice. This is the argument for professional journalism and the importance of its place in the news environment of the future, a pillar of trustworthiness in a messy and ever more complicated and fast-moving world. It’s an oddity of social media, that in spite of our mania for it, our natural scepticism survives. Levels of trust for news on social media remain low.

Jeff Jarvis, head of Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York’s Graduate School of Journalism is, as his title suggests, an optimist. He encapsulates the challenge for educators:

*“We face the challenges every journalism school faces today: how to teach change; how to teach enough tools so students leave proficient in them without letting that rob vital time from the teaching of the basic skills and verities of journalism; how to stay ahead of change in the field while still preparing students for the jobs that exist today. It’s not easy. But there is no better time to teach journalism and no better time to become a journalist. Youth, I tell my students, used to be something to get over. Now youth is an asset. Our students today are not only more technically skilled than we could be, they see the world in new ways. I urge them to guard that fresh perspective and to use it to question and challenge all of our assumptions so they can imagine and build a new future for journalism.”*

## References:

Hargreaves, I., *Journalism: A Very Short Introduction*, (second edition), 2014, Oxford University Press  
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Digital News Report*, 2016