TWITTER AS A FLEXIBLE TOOL

How the job role of the journalist influences tweeting habits

This study focuses on the tweeting habits of journalists with different job roles at a UK city newspaper. The Twitter profiles of 16 journalists working at The Star in Sheffield were captured in 2014 and a content analysis was conducted to examine the types of information each individual was reporting. The data revealed Twitter was being utilised as a versatile tool for gathering, reporting and disseminating news and there was correlation between types of tweets and the job role of the profile account holder. Those in managerial positions tended to include more hyperlinks to their own news website and use Twitter as a promotional tool whereas sports journalists tended to use the social media platform as a live reporting tool. News reporters at the newspaper did not regularly link back to their legacy platform preferring to use Twitter to build relationships and interactions with users. The authors conclude that this data together with similar comparative studies are useful for identifying patterns in changing journalistic roles within a local, national and international context. The emerging trends challenge the notion of the redefinition of the journalist as a universal role and instead point towards multiple redefinitions of the varying roles of journalists.

Introduction

City newspapers in the UK continue to experience a steady decline in circulation as a result of market fragmentation and a shift towards online and digital content via multiple platforms. Smartphone use for news has reached a third of the population in the UK and tablet use currently stands at 23 per cent and rising (Newman 2014). Meanwhile print newspapers such as the Manchester Evening News and Birmingham Mail have seen circulation drop year-on-year by 23 and 27 per cent respectively between 2014 and 2015 (Hold the Front Page 2015a) whilst their website audiences have seen exponential growth. Newspaper sales for the Manchester Evening News currently stand at around 56,000 yet their website audience has expanded by 200 per cent in the past year and now boasts 415,000 daily unique users (Hold the Front Page 2015b).

This change in news consumption has led city and regional newspapers to invest heavily in online technologies to further their readership and reach through their websites, Apps and social media profiles which are being accessed on desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones. With its wide reaching capacity, simplicity and speed Twitter has been adopted by news organisations as the number one social media tool due to its easy engagement with users and huge commercial potential. The platform is free to use but can raise brand profile significantly and

more importantly, link thousands of users to revenue generating news websites. The Twitter explosion (Farhi 2009) of recent years has created an environment whereby the site is now considered a news platform as much as a social network (Hermida 2013) with 52 per cent of the user base getting their news from Twitter (Holcomb, Gottfried and Mitchell 2013).

UK journalists readily acknowledge that Twitter is an essential part of their everyday reporting toolkit (Oriella PR Network 2012; Cision 2013; Hermida 2013) and is impacting on the way in which they operate within traditional journalistic practices and norms (Dickinson 2011; Canter 2013, 2014). Yet research to date has largely focused on global breaking news events (Newman 2009; Bruno 2011; Vis 2013) or the practices of journalists working for national news organisations (Ahmed 2010; Noguera Vivo 2013) or American publishers (Artwick 2013; Reed 2013). Studies in the field of non-national UK newspapers are limited and have only just begun to identity emerging trends in journalists' Twitter use.

This paper seeks to build upon the research of one of its co-authors (Canter 2012; 2013; 2014) to develop a greater understanding of the tweeting habits of regional UK journalists, particularly how different reporting roles can lead to different Twitter practices.

Changing practices

Twitter is changing the way in which journalists gather, produce and disseminate news (Dickinson 2011), which is increasingly broken by the public (Blasingame 2011) but amplified and contextualised to a mass audience via the media (Murphy 2015). The BBC's Director of Global News said as early as 2006 that "news organisations do not own the news any more" (Allen 2006, 169) and instead journalists gather information on social media platforms from breaking news situations and use it as a marketing tool to disseminate news and link back to their legacy platforms (Broersma and Graham 2011; Raimondo Anselmino and Bertone 2013). The dilemma for journalists is how to sift through, and verify, the "rapid and easily accessible flow of information" (Bruno 2010, 6), in effect acting as a "human algorithm" (Aviles and Carvajal 2008).

This clearly changes the role of the journalist which in the pre-internet era was heavily entrenched in the notion of the gatekeeping fourth estate, an industry which could be relied upon to accurately report the news on behalf of the public. Post-Web 2.0 scholars refer to the journalists as curators (Charman 2007), gatewatchers (Bruns 2005), conversationalists (Gillmor 2006) and verifiers (Bruno 2011) rather than traditional gatekeepers. Yet journalists still have a significant role to play in adding value and context to the streams of information online rather than simply acting as filters. They must have active knowledge of the area, an ability to understand the material being assessed and be able to clearly communicate why particular items are important (Charman 2007). Furthermore they can use social media platforms - particularly Twitter due to its speed, reach and ease of use (Canter 2014) - to gather a wider range of voices and ideas and gain a new dimension in breaking news stories previously unavailable (Eltringham 2012).

These civic functions of engaging with, and providing, a platform for a plurality and diversity of voices are set within a commercial framework where news organisations are competing for increasingly fragmented audiences online. Twitter, along with other forms of social media, has therefore emerged as a method of building brand loyalty (Dickinson 2011) around legacy platforms such as newspapers. Canter (2013; 2014) argues that branding and promotion on regional

newspaper Twitter profiles has split into two distinct approaches with "a traditional function for news organisations and a social function for journalists" (2013, 492). This is further supported by her 2014 research which illustrated how news organisation policy directs journalists to link to their legacy website. Yet this approach is only taken by news organisation accounts and editors, whilst individual journalists promote the brand at a much more nuanced level by "indirectly building a personal brand which is engaging for users to follow" (Canter 2014, 16), rather than by actively driving traffic to their news website.

These personal brands vary in scope from those who build a reputation for regular live tweeting, others who become celebrated for tweeting happy messages or engaging in sporting banter to a limited few who tweet family snapshots (Canter 2014). There is some evidence that journalists are breaking down traditional boundaries of objectivity and professionalisation by posting personal and sometimes subjective tweets commenting on the news or revealing their hobbies and interests (Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012; Hermida 2013) using personality to create a following (Palser 2009; Marwick and boyd 2011). However there is still a swathe of journalists who set clear boundaries between their professional and personal persona when using Twitter as a reporting tool (Reed 2013; Gulyas 2013). In short, practice varies immensely amongst individuals but the dominating factor is that Twitter has become normalised into the working practices and routines of journalists albeit as a flexible tool, which can be adapted to suit a journalist's specific job role and individual preferences in relation to interaction (Canter 2013). This is acknowledged in Twitter's own guidelines to journalists (2013) which state:

> Some reporters turn to Twitter as a virtual notebook using it to collect and provide real-time updates on breaking news events. Others use it as a way to point readers to their work or to share their perspective on a particular topic.

This raises further questions about the role of the journalist and the notion that the occupation is moving towards a universal role where each individual is expected to act as a multimedia reporter who takes on convergent activities (Quinn 2005). This is particularly prevalent in the regional press due to financial constraints from the aforementioned drop in circulation and shift in advertising revenue to alternative online platforms. Traditional print reporters are now redefined as 'multimedia' or 'digital' journalists and are expected to produce written copy for the newspaper, website and social media platforms plus headlines, captions, hyperlinks, photo, video and audio content. Similarly in traditional broadcast job roles journalists are expected to create content for multiple platforms including text, video and audio for websites and social media accounts together with their legacy platform.

Employers are looking for all-rounder applicants who can "hit the ground running" and work as a universal journalists with both written and digital skills (Canter 2015) no matter which sector of the industry they enter.

Method

The research sample was selected from the UK city newspaper, *The Star*, referred to locally as The Sheffield Star. The flagship newspaper and its associated website www.thestar.co.uk is owned by publisher Johnston Press which is the second largest regional newspaper company in the UK. *The Star* currently has a circulation of 21,437 (Hold the Front Page 2015c) in a city of 560,000 (Sheffield City

Council 2015) and sales are currently down 12.7 per cent year-on-year. However its website has seen rapid growth and now receives 51,524 daily unique users (Hold the Front Page 2015b), an increase of 37 per cent year-on-year. *The Star* has a dedicated Twitter account @SheffieldStar which at the time of the research in 2014 had 28,995 followers. Sixteen journalists had Twitter accounts that identified them as employees of *The Star*.

The coding was used to identify how each account holder was using Twitter and a categorisation system was developed using Canter's (2013) prior content analysis research as a benchmark. The aim of this research was to build upon previous findings at two different UK regional newspapers in order to identify emerging trends amongst individual journalists. As Krippendorff (2004, 13) argues content analysis is an effective method for collecting data of "texts, images and expressions that are created to be seen, read and interpreted". In this research the individual tweets were the text, images and expressions that Krippendorff refers to and from these the researchers were able to provide a context and "reasonable interpretations" (Krippendorff 2004, 24) on the tweeting habits of different journalists.

The study involved a content analysis of all of the profiles of journalists who identified themselves as employed by *The Star* across a seven day period from Monday February 3rd to Sunday February 9th 2014, midnight to midnight. To capture all of the tweets from the 16 accounts free online software SnapBird (2013) was used, which enables users to search through an individual Twitter profile from the present all the way back to the very first tweet they posted. This was a much more effective way of capturing tweets than the process used in the previous comparative research (Canter 2013) which captured tweets direct from Twitter by cutting and pasting them into a Word document which was "problematic due to the large volume of data" (Canter 2013, 476) and Twitter's inability to recall a large number of tweets from one profile's timeline. However in the time between the two research projects SnapBird had emerged as a more proficient data-gathering tool enabling large amounts of tweets to be captured quickly for coding.

Once the tweets had been collected they were coded one user at a time taking reference from Canter (2013) and using a dominant coding system so each tweet was only coded into one category. Initially the coding process had the following categories: traditional story / link, external link (to a site outside of *The Star*'s website), personal, interaction, reader participation (where the journalist specifically asked for the readers/followers participation) and live news. The coding system was tested with a second coder and this resulted in the combination of the personal and interaction categories as these interactive exchanges were personal in nature and involved conversing with either a fellow journalist, work colleague or reader/follower. The researcher then coded all of the tweets collected from 16 journalists (564 tweets in total). Two journalists Mike Russell (@mikerussell2) and Richard Blackledge (@rblackedge) did not tweet during the one week period and it was not identified whether they were on annual leave during this period or not.

Tweeting Habits

A total of 564 tweets were posted in the data sample of one week across the 16 accounts. On average a total of 35 tweets were sent out per user, equating to an average of 5 a day per user. However two accounts were inactive during the sample period meaning that a higher tweet rate of 40 tweets per user per week or 5.7 per user per day was recorded.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Amongst *The Star* journalists, there were some who tweeted far more frequently than others. For example Nik Brear (@nikbrear), whose Twitter biography describes her as a digital journalist and videographer, tweeted just once during the timeframe. By way of contrast digital editor Graham Walker (@GW1962) tweeted 129 times during the same period. As Figure 2 illustrates the staff to tweet most frequently were all in senior roles including the digital editor, night editor and editor. These were followed by the sports reporters, but on average the news reporters tweeted the least during the sample period.

Nearly half of all of the tweets across all of the profiles were personal / interaction which involved sharing personal insights or opinions or responding to followers, revealing the informal nature of communication on Twitter. The second most frequent type of tweet was traditional story / link which made up almost a quarter of all posts and replicated the established way of formally and objectively presenting the news with a link to the news organisation website for the full story. Only 14 per cent of all tweets were about live news, and these mostly originated from the sports journalists reporting live from matches. Very few journalists linked to external websites, bar the digital editor, and only four per cent of tweets actively sought reader participation, which reinforces the view that Twitter is a tool for brand promotion rather than wider collaboration.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The variety of tweets sent out by individual journalists, summarised in Figure 3, demonstrates that there is a difference in tweeting habits depending on the job role of the individual. Secondly, there are a certain number of things that all of the journalists do, at least in some capacity.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Traditional Versus Personal

The sample reveals that those in more senior positions, such as the digital editor, editor and readers' champion, are more likely to tweet a higher percentage of traditional tweets with links. This is likely to be due to their increased awareness of company commercial imperatives and social media policy, which focuses on promoting the brand and driving traffic to the website. Whereas individual journalists are more focused on journalistic practices such as breaking news and news gathering, and concentrate on building their own personal brand and following rather than promoting the company. Individual journalists rarely linked back to *The Star* website or their own individual stories confirming findings by Canter (2014) that UK regional journalists use relatively few links in their tweets and it is not routine practice to link to the legacy website despite company guidance stating staff should do so.

Instead the figures reveal that general news and sports reporters tend to tweet more personal and interactive posts than any other type. These could be comments on the news or responding to followers. In doing so they are developing a personal brand which is engaging for users to follow rather than simply overtly self-promoting their stories which in turn indirectly promotes their news organisation. As Canter (2014) also demonstrated journalists on regional newspapers do not use

Twitter to promote their own content and drive traffic but leave this to senior staff and the company official feeds which are often automated RSS feeds.

Furthermore, the data in this study shows the editor of *The Star* James Mitchinson (@JayMitchinson) took a mixed method approach combining traditional and personal content. The editor was the second most prolific tweeter, posting an average of 11 tweets per day. He used a mixture of traditional tweets with links to promote his journalists' stories and drive traffic back to the company website with more personal interactive tweets often giving opinion on stories. In some cases a personal comment was integrated into the traditional link, for example:

> @JayMitchinson: TV Corrie's Bill Roache cleared of all charges: [link] So an innocent man has had his name dragged through the mud! #crazy

This approach blends the traditional function of reporting the news and promoting the legacy brand with a more personable approach which moves away from journalistic norms of objectivity. This enables the editor to demonstrate that his news organisation is quick and accurate with breaking the news whilst also setting the tone of the news organisation by coupling his informative tweets with personality and comment.

Live Tweeting

The use of Twitter as a tool to report live from events was evident in this study particularly amongst the sports reporters. The majority of tweets by Dom Howson (@DomHowson) and Paul Thompson (@TommoOwls) - Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday correspondents respectively - were live updates tweeting team news, press conference quotes and game updates using relevant hashtags. Many of these local football matches were not televised so the journalists were able to keep supporters up to date by live tweeting match reports.

The findings of Canter's similar research (2014) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* found contrary results, as sports reporters did not live tweet as much as news reporters. However this was due to the *Daily Echo* website hosting its own live match blog and Twitter was used for match highlights rather than a rolling commentary. So in essence the practice of live coverage, albeit using different online tools, was the same in both studies. The night editor at *The Star* (@RichardFidler) also had a reasonable amount of live tweets (around a quarter). This may have been due to his role as the only staff member on duty at night and therefore tasked with breaking any live news on Twitter.

However live tweeting amongst reporters was far less prevalent at *The Star* than at the *Daily Echo* where 57 per cent of reporters live tweeted regularly and this practice appeared to be a base requirement even if accounts were not active in any other way (Canter 2014). This illustrates the varying practices between regional newspapers and news organisations (*Daily Echo* is owned by Newsquest) in the UK.

Combining Practices

The most prolific tweeter in the study was digital editor Graham Walker (@GW1962) who tweeted an average of 18 tweets a day and had the most varied range of tweet types. In his role as digital editor he spent time promoting the newspaper website through traditional tweets and links but also shared content

through external links, something absent from most other staff tweeting activity. These were often breaking news items concerning movies or concerts from around the world as well as topical information that was trending on Twitter and trade news. He also ran competitions for readers to win tickets to local concerts, events and film screenings demonstrating that his role was partly a promotional and marketing one rather than focusing on hard news. For example:

> GW1962: New editors appointed at Trinity Mirror titles: Move follows previous editor's promotion to MD: [link]
>
> @GW1962: BREAKING: #Sheffield indie rock superstars @ArcticMonkeys to headline @OfficialRandL – full details @SheffieldStar [link]

In his role as digital editor Graham Walker operated as a disseminator of external news rather than simply a news breaker. He also had the largest amount of audience participation tweets as he tried to engage users in competitions and promotions.

Common Practice

Moving away from specific job roles the findings indicate that almost all of the journalists working for *The Star* use Twitter for a range of activities although some types are used more or less than others. News and sports reporters, as well as more senior staff, actively tweet as a part of their job role during their working week. Apart from a select few, all of the journalists were posting links to *The Star's* website, albeit sporadically, as well as interacting with followers and live tweeting.

However with the exception of the digital editor, encouraging reader participation, along with linking to external websites, were particularly weak amongst staff. This indicates that to a certain extent journalists are still operating in a traditional gatekeeper manner and are reluctant to engage their audiences in participation or share material from outside sources. Journalists may interact and respond to users in a reactive fashion but they are less likely to initiate conversations with users directly.

Conclusion

This study further illustrates the versatile nature of Twitter as an adaptable tool for journalists which can operate as a flexible friend depending on the nature of a journalist's job role. The lack of protocol or formality around Twitter use has led to journalists creating their own tweeting style which crosses boundaries between personality and professionalism, and objectivity and comment sometimes all within the same tweet.

For some, particularly those in more senior positions, it is a valuable tool for legacy brand promotion and driving website traffic, whilst for individual reporters it is a means to break news first and build personal relationships and interactions with readers. This supports prior research which emphasises the marketing value of Twitter for news organisations (Broersma and Graham 2011; Dickinson 2011; Raimondo Anselmino and Bertone 2013). This sits alongside its more personal, social function for individual journalists who engage users through more informal tweets (Canter 2014), often breaking down traditional boundaries of objectivity in

doing so (Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012; Hermida 2013), and using personality to create a loyal following (Palser 2009; Marwick and Boyd 2011).

The aforementioned parallels between this research and similar data gathered at national and international news organisation indicates that the findings are not limited to a snapshot of one UK city newspaper and have wider implications for the ways in which we understand the tweeting habits of journalists, whether they be local or global in status.

Furthermore the notion of the universal journalist is challenged in this fluid ecosystem as there are numerous adaptations of practice still emerging and journalists are constantly redefining themselves on Twitter as live news commentators, news disseminators, news responders, reader gauges, tone setters, brand ambassadors and more besides.

It is therefore pertinent for scholars and journalism educators to keep abreast of these changes within the digital landscape to enable them to educate and inform future generations of journalists wading into the increasingly murky and rapid waters of journalism online. The role of the ==traditional gatekeeper== is awash with change and it is important for academics to understand the multiple contemporary roles of journalists in order to provide an accurate and pragmatic context for journalism students.

Research in this evolving field should continue to identify where established practices are settling and where they are simply momentarily trending. Currently the emerging practices appear to be in legacy brand promotion and live reporting but the less clearly defined areas of user interactions (whether it be with readers, sources or other journalists), comment and personal disclosure warrant further exploration.

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Figures

Figure 1: Total number of tweet types

Type of tweet	Quantity	Percentage
Personal / interaction	269	48%
Traditional story / link	127	22%
Live news	81	14%
External link	67	12%
Reader participation	20	4%

Figure 2: Total number of tweets per user

Twitter handle	Job role	Number of tweets
GW1962	Digital Editor	129
JayMitchinson	Editor	80
RichardFidler	Night Editor	68
Westerdale10	Sports Reporter	60
E_Beardmore	Reporter	41
JamesShield1	Sports Reporter	40
DannyHall04	Sports Reporter	36
Starcourtrep	Reporter	24
MollyGraceLynch	Reporter	24
TommoOwls	Sports Reporter	19
DomHowson	Sports Reporter	16
NancyFielder	Readers' Champion	15
Rmarsden_Star	Political Reporter	4
NikBrear	Digital Journalist	1
MikeRussell2	Education Reporter	0
Rblackledge	Reporter	0

Figure 3: Types of tweets