REPORT

Mainstream media and the distribution of news in the age of social discovery

How social media are changing the production, distribution and discovery of news and further disrupting the business models of mainstream media companies.

Nic Newman

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Anti-government protesters sit next to a "Facebook" graffiti sign during demonstrations inside Tahrir Square in Cairo February 7, 2011. REUTERS/Dylan Martinez

THE AUTHOR

Nic Newman is a journalist and digital strategist who has played a key role in shaping the BBC's internet services over more than a decade. He was a founding member of the BBC News Website, leading international coverage as World Editor (1997-2001). As Head of Product Development for BBC News he helped introduce innovations such as blogs, podcasting and on-demand video before leading digital teams, developing websites, mobile and interactive TV applications for all BBC Journalism sites. Nic is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and a consultant on digital media specialising in news, social media and mobile. He is married with three children and lives in London.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY CONCLUSIONS

- Social media are beginning to rival search as a way of discovering news content in the UK. The average news site receives 7.5 per cent of referral traffic from Facebook alone (up from 2 per cent in 2008), whilst the overall importance of search as a gateway has begun to fall for the first time (down 3 percentage points since 2009).

- Facebook is far and away the most important social network for referring traffic, but Twitter has become a crucial tool for journalists. It has spread rapidly through newsrooms, and now plays a central role in the way stories are sourced, broken and distributed – contributing to a further speeding up of the news cycle.

- Mainstream media content is the lifeblood of topical social media conversations in the UK – providing the vast majority of news links that are shared.[1] News organisations may not always be first to publish the news, but their agendas and discussions continue to shape conversations around major news stories.

- News correspondents and columnists are gaining new authority and influence through their expert use of social media. Some are becoming 'network nodes' attracting significant audiences of their own – independently of their parent brands.

- Social media have helped UK newspapers and broadcasters gain traction around the world and especially in the United States, but news organisations with paywalls are in danger of missing out on the benefits.

- News organisations are becoming increasingly worried about the potentially disruptive effect of social media on their business models. They are struggling to square the circle between using these new powerful open networks to drive traffic and engagement whilst maximising commercial revenues on their own websites.

Although the research and conclusions focus primarily on the United Kingdom, they are linked to discussions about the impact of the rise of social media elsewhere. It is increasingly difficult to speak about news media in any national context. The rise of global social networks is accelerating the trend towards an always-on interconnected world, where social discovery and social distribution are playing an ever bigger role. In this respect, the findings in this paper offer a contribution to the ongoing

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[1] Tweetminster study, Twitter, Sept. 2010, showed 73 per cent of shared links to mainstream news, 27 per cent to other sources.

discussions about the implications of these changes for the quality of news and the future of journalism.

METHODOLOGIES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The core data in this paper is deliberately drawn from a number of different sources, in order to evaluate better long-term trends around the impact of social media discovery.

I am grateful to four news organisations for allowing access to log files and referral statistics: BBC News, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Economist*. This has allowed an over-time comparison (February 2009 – February 2011) of the importance of social media and search – as well as the opportunity to look at the number of internet users who come to selected stories and content types from different routes.

The market research company Experian Hitwise has again been generous in providing aggregated data and charts on the UK news market data over the same time period. Experian Hitwise measures web traffic flows between news websites and social networks through a representative sample of nodes in UK Internet Service Providers (ISPs). This methodology provides a second method of evaluating trends with a wider data set, as well as allowing us to explore the relative performance of news organisations in the UK in driving traffic from social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

The paper also draws on data from the latest Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS), which allows comparison of general trends during the period 2009–2011 and includes new questions and data around the role of search and social media in information discovery. I am grateful to Professor William Dutton and Research Fellow Grant Blank for their insights, and also for their collaboration over a related Oxford Internet Institute paper entitled *Social Media in the Changing Ecology of News Production and Consumption* (2011). Launched in 2003, OxIS is an authoritative source of information about internet access, use and attitudes, and its surveys involve representative random samples of 2,000 people across the UK.

Fourthly, this study has involved collaboration with Tweetminster, a UK-based data-mining specialist which tracks sentiment and trends around news events – also with a UK focus. This data provides qualitative evidence of the type of news being discussed and the role of mainstream media in the micro-blogging service Twitter, a subject Tweetminster has explored since 2008.[2] This has been supplemented with new quantitative and qualitative analysis around specific stories such as the death of Osama Bin Laden and the role of specific Twitter breaking news channels to understand better the way stories and influence spread through the network. I am particularly grateful to Alberto Nardelli at Tweetminster for his enthusiasm, and for his understanding of social media data flows.

To understand changing journalistic practice and the practical impact of building individual social media brands, I spoke to four journalist practitioners working in different capacities with mainstream media companies; I offer these as

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[2] Tweetminster is a news platform that uses data to curate news and opinion (http://tweetminster.co.uk/posts).

case studies to illustrate the wider themes around the power of individuals to become 'network nodes' of influence.

Finally this paper is informed by interviews with strategists and managers from online news organisations in the United Kingdom, primarily at the BBC, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Economist*, as well as the Telegraph Media Group. These were supplemented by discussions at a two-day BBC social media summit in May 2011 which brought together technologists, social media thinkers and executives from these organisations alongside News International (Sky News and the *Times*), the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Independent*, Al-Jazeera, NPR (US public radio) ABC (Australian Broadcasting Company), ITV and more. Many of the insights and themes of those discussions have helped inform sections of this paper, and I am especially grateful to the BBC College of Journalism, and in particular to Dr Claire Wardle, for organising the event and documenting the outcomes so thoroughly.[3]

Nic Newman
July 2011

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[3] BBC Social Media summit (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/bbcsms/).

1. Key questions around the disruption of social media and news

Social media as a term has only been around for a few years, but the seeds of today's dramatic changes to news production and distribution were sown right at the start of the internet revolution. Announcing the birth of the World Wide Web in 1991 on an early newsgroup, inventor Tim Berners-Lee set out the key aims:

> *The WWW project was started to allow high energy physicists to share data, news, and documentation ... collaborators welcome!*[4]

The technical protocols behind the internet were built to support one-to-one and many-to-many communication, not the broadcast models that had swept the world throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. It has taken almost twenty years for the full potential of those new technical realities to hit home.

Fuelled by the growth of powerful networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, individuals are now able to create, collaborate and share their own media – often to the bemusement of governments, lawyers and traditional news organisations. They have struggled, for example, to keep up with the flood of personal media emanating from the Arab street during the uprisings of 2011. They have been embarrassed by tweets making nonsense of UK privacy laws, and by the social media petitions calling for more robust action on phone hacking. Every day the changes set out by Dan Gillmor in his seminal book *We the Media* (2004) are becoming more apparent:

> *Big Media has lost its monopoly of the news. Now that it is possible to publish in real time to a worldwide audience, a new breed of grassroots journalists are taking the news into their own hands.*

Citizen journalism and social media haven't replaced professional journalism, but it has certainly become harder to define what a journalist is. The line between professional and personal has blurred amid an overwhelming tide of interlinked news sources and outputs.

Terms like old media, new media, social media and blogging have become less and less useful in defining value or quality. New types of journalistic organisations are emerging every day (Storyful, Demotix[5]), whilst professional journalists have embraced new skills like blogging, social media and the curation of communities. But big media haven't just lost their monopoly of the creation of news; they are also in a fight to maintain their control of distribution, as social media offer alternative ways to find and discover news. As *Wired* magazine's Chris Anderson

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[4] Wikipedia history of the Worldwide Web (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_World_Wide_Web).

[5] http://www.storyful.com/ uses the power of social networks to create co-operative and useful journalism. http://www.demotix.com/ and http://www.citizenside.com/ are for sharing and selling pictures of news events.

notes, the news increasingly 'comes to me' as more people choose social filters for their news rather than professional ones:

> *We're tuning out television news, we're tuning out newspapers. And we still hear about the important stuff. … I figure by the time something gets to me it's been vetted by those I trust. So the stupid stuff that doesn't matter is not going to get to me.*[6]

A considerable amount has been written recently about the quality and reliability of the information available in social networks like Twitter, the dumbing down of the agenda (Keen 2007) of information – whilst others point to examples of the new perspectives that can be opened up (Shirky 2008).

A related concern around the rise of social media relates to a fear about the loss of serendipity. There are fears that the filtering of news sources through friends and colleagues could lead to less diversity and a reinforcement of prejudices (Sunstein 2001; Zillman and Bryant 1985), whilst other studies have suggested that digital and social media lead to an increased diversity of sources (Dutton 2007; Garrett 2009). Underlying many of these concerns is the extent to which increased time spent with social media might further undermine the business models that have sustained high-quality journalism in the past. This mirrors the earlier debate over the growing power of search giants like Google and other aggregators, which were perceived to have taken much of the value from organisations producing original journalism. Today Facebook and Twitter stand accused of living parasitically off the quality content produced by mainstream media and reaping the commercial benefit – as we will discover in section 5 of this report.

This research aims to offer some new perspectives on these issues at a time when mainstream media companies are taking an increasing interest in the role of social media. In particular it sets out the case for why media organisations need to pay more attention to the dynamics of influence and trust in third-party networks – as well as wider audience patterns of social discovery.

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[6] Chris Anderson interview with Spiegel, July 2009 (http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,638172,00.html).

2. Evidence and data: social media and news in the UK

2.1. The rise of social networks

The biannual Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS) have tracked a range of digital participation measures since 2003, including the rapid growth of social networks. The percentage of those regularly updating profiles on networks like Facebook and Twitter rose rapidly between 2003 and 2009 and has continued to grow since. Today 60 per cent of all internet users in the UK maintain a social networking profile – one of the highest rates of penetration in the world.[7]
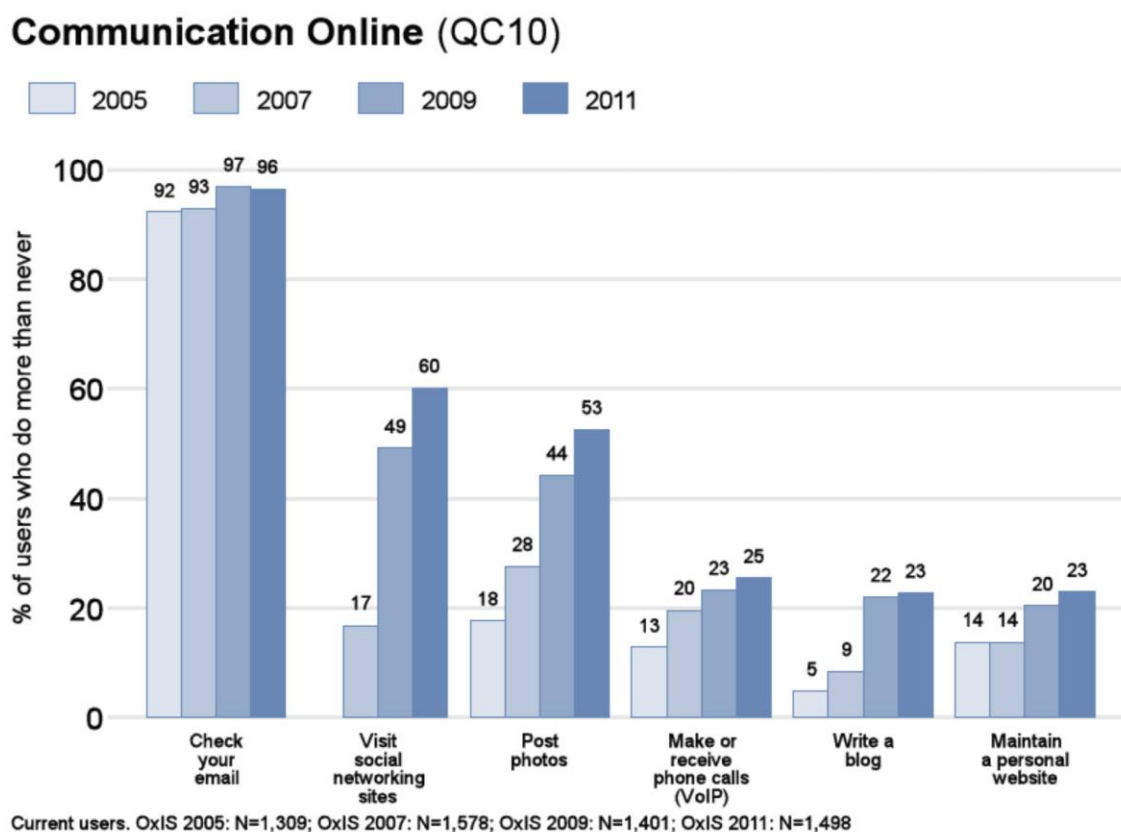

Communication Online (QC10)

Current users. OxIS 2005: N=1,309; OxIS 2007: N=1,578; OxIS 2009: N=1,401; OxIS 2011: N=1,498

Figure 1. Types of digital participation, 2005–2011

But it is not just the number of people using social networks; it is the time they spend doing so that makes the networks so significant in media terms. According to Experian Hitwise, social networking is now the most popular online activity in the UK. One in six page views are now spent with Facebook alone – with an average of around 30 minutes per user per day.

Facebook may finally have peaked as it reaches maturity in developed countries, but Twitter continues to grow at an extremely rapid pace – driven partly

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[7] '10 things you need to know about Facebook' and 'Social Media More Popular Than Entertainment' (http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2010/10/10_things_you_need_to_know_abo.html ; http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2011/03/social_media_more_popular_than.html).

by its reputation for breaking and real-time news. The share of visits to the network rose by 60 per cent in March 2011 off the back of interest in the political turmoil in Egypt and the Japanese earthquake. There was a further significant peak in May 2011 as Twitter users revealed the names of public figures who had taken out injunctions to protect their privacy (see the case study in section 3.2). Although Facebook remains much bigger in absolute numbers, Twitter's audience is also beginning to reflect the general online population far more accurately than it did a year ago, according to Hitwise UK research director Robin Goad:

> *Twitter is no longer purely in the domain of early adopters; rather it is becoming a universal tool which is being used increasingly by all types of internet users, regardless of their online preferences.*[8]

The UK Mosaic classification[9] splits Twitter users into different categories based on attitude and lifestyle. Figure 2 shows an emphasis a year ago on liberal opinions (green line) becoming less pronounced over time (red line) compared with the UK average (blue line). Nevertheless there remains a clear bias towards professional and city dwellers.
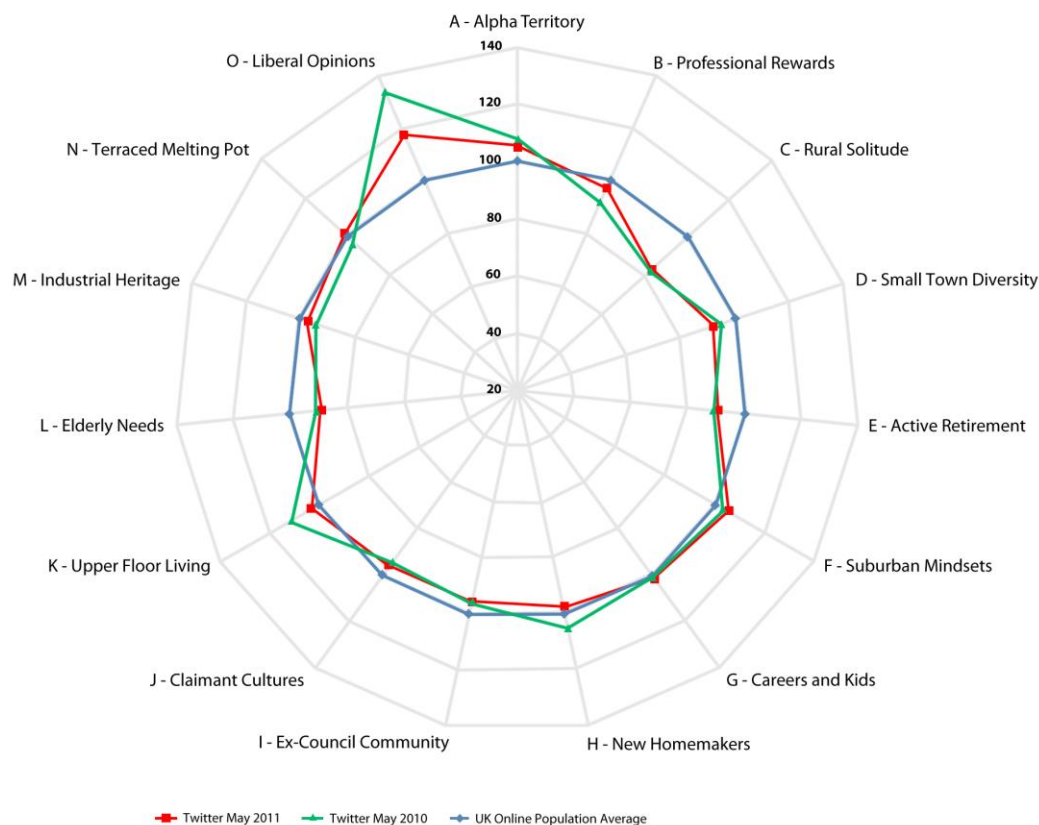

Figure 2. Twitter user base by type, 2010–2011

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[8] Robin Goad weblog (http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2011/05/twitter_accounts_for_1_in_ever.html).

[9] http://www.experian.co.uk/business-strategies/mosaic-uk-2009.html.

The increasingly mainstream nature of Twitter since 2010 has been reflected by the way in which news journalists have adopted the medium for sourcing stories such as the Arab Spring and the Japanese earthquake – and the way they have been encouraged to do so by their bosses. The editor of the BBC News website, Steve Herrmann, says early scepticism about Twitter has evaporated as it has demonstrated its usefulness time and time again:

> *A big difference now is that it is taken as read for anybody working in newsgathering that Twitter is a key source that you need to be across. So not everyone is tweeting but pretty much everyone is keeping track – that has changed in two years.*

Journalists are making increasing use of Twitter as it gains critical mass as a tool for key sources and media elites to share information. In this sense it is also important for wider distribution, because newspapers and broadcasters use Twitter as a source, instantly picking up and amplifying comments from the network. The development of Twitter as a dynamic 'network of influencers' around niches and real-time events is illustrated further by the case studies in section 3.1 and section 3.2, and has previously been noted in a number of research studies (e.g. Newman 2010).

On the other hand, in terms of direct impact on audiences Twitter remains something of a sideshow compared with Facebook, which, as the next section explains, is the most important network for driving traffic and referrals to mainstream media organisations.

2.2. Driving traffic: the key role of Facebook and YouTube in distribution and customer acquisition

If Twitter is where the news is, the majority of the audience is spending its time with Facebook. In terms of absolute size, Facebook dwarfs Twitter by fifteen times in terms of user numbers. Supporting this, analysis of log files of four UK news companies (the BBC, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Economist*) shows Facebook as consistently the largest social media referrer – now second only to Google as a generator of traffic (Table 1).[10]

Table 1. Most important social networks for UK news organisations, rated by relative contribution to social media referrals

1.	Facebook	56%
2.	Twitter	26%
3.	Reddit	12%
4.	Digg	3%
5.	Stumbleupon	1%
6.	Other	1%

[10] Averaged figures for referrals, Feb. 2011, from four news organisations: BBC, *Financial Times*, *Economist*, *Guardian*.

In terms of volumes, log files also reveal a very rapid increase in referrals – albeit from a low base. As one example, the number of click-throughs to the BBC site from Facebook increased by over 400 per cent in two years (see Figure 3). Facebook itself says that the average news organisation has increased referrals by 300 per cent in the year to June 2011, driven largely by the introduction of a simple sharing button (Facebook Like).[11] 'They are discovering news via their friends – it finds them', says Facebook's journalist programme manager, Vadim Lavrusik.
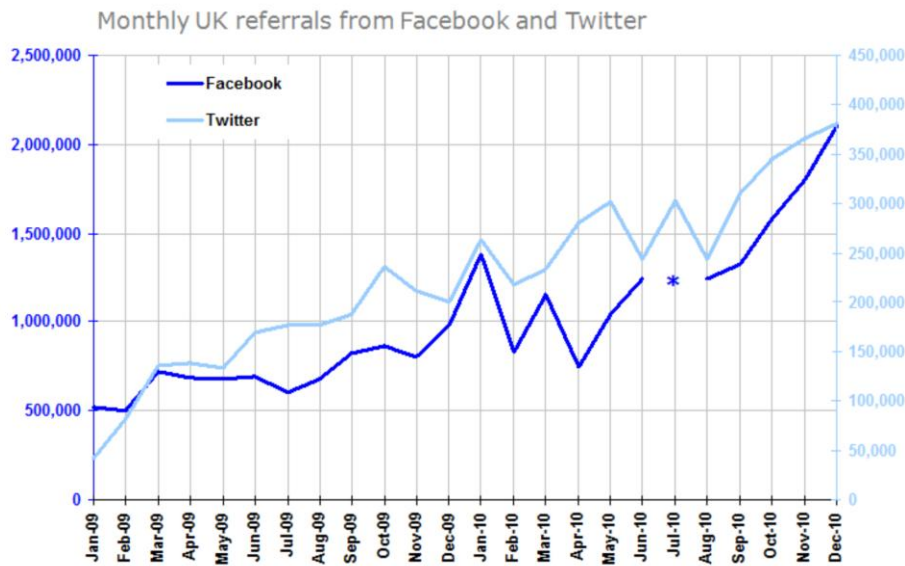

Figure 3. BBC referral data, January 2009 – December 2010

The percentage of total page views driven by social media sites ranged from around 1 per cent for the *Financial Times* to 5 per cent for the *Guardian* and 9 per cent for the *Economist*. This compares with an average of around 22 per cent from search for all four sites.

Aggregated data for the news industry by Experian Hitwise suggests that 16 per cent of referrals are driven by social media, but this includes a number of specialist sites and a wide range of social networks. Looking at the traffic flows from Facebook alone is perhaps a more useful proxy for the trends for major news sites – because of the way it dominates social media flows to those sites. This particular metric shows news sites, on average, relying on Facebook for 7.5 per cent of total referrals compared with just 2 per cent in 2008.

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[11] Journalism.co.uk podcast, 1 July 2011 (http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2011/07/01/jpod-in-depth-how-journalists-can-best-use-facebook-pages/).

News and Media upstream traffic from Facebook and Twitter

8.0%

7.51%

6.0%

4.0%

2.0%

0.40%

0%

Mar   Jul   Nov   Mar   Jul   Nov   Mar   Jul   Nov   Mar
'08   '08   '08   '09   '09   '09   '10   '10   '10   '11

■ www.facebook.com   ■ www.twitter.com
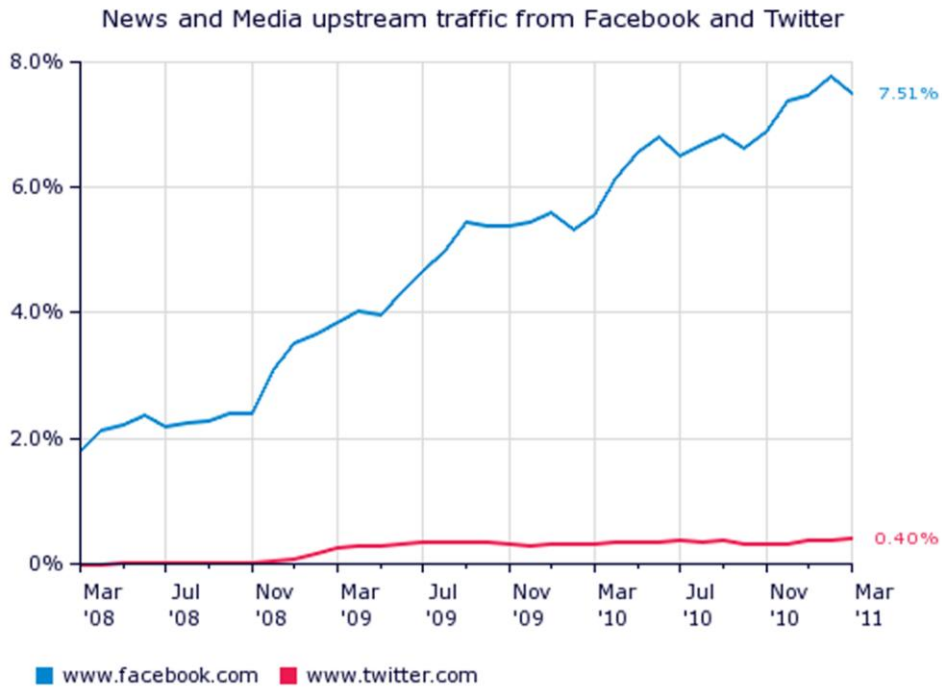
Monthly upstream % of 'News and Media', based on UK usage.
Created: 21/04/2011. © Copyright 1996-2011 Hitwise Pty. Ltd.   Source: Experian Hitwise UK

Figure 4. Referral traffic from Facebook and Twitter to UK News sector, 2008–2011

Breaking that down into individual news sites, the data shows that the *Sun* and the
Daily Mail have benefited most from social media referrals in percentage terms (see
Figure 5), perhaps because the type of entertainment content they publish sits well
with Facebook users.
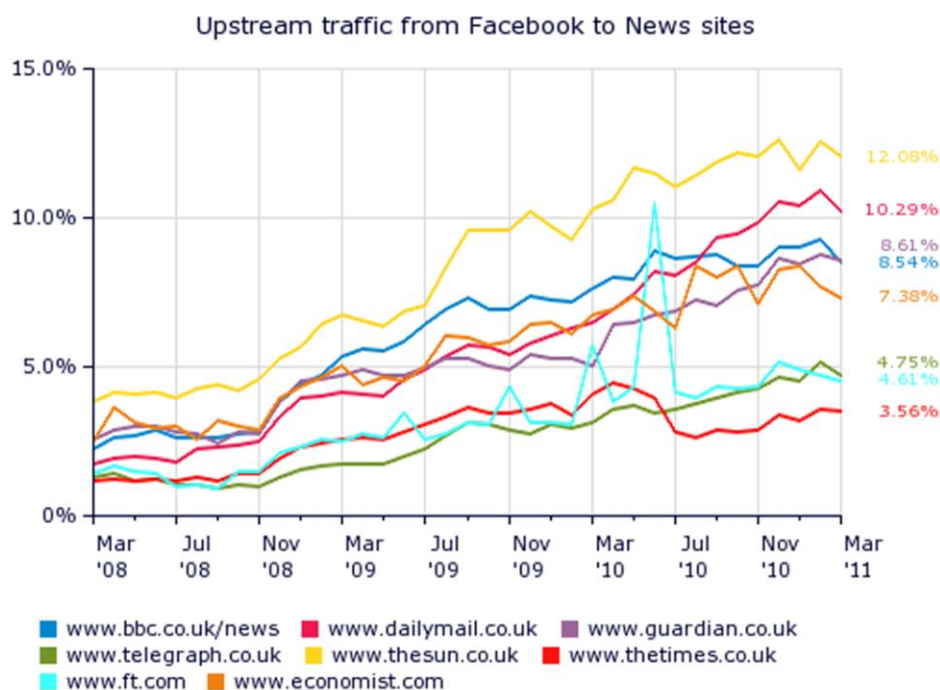
Figure 5. Referral traffic from Facebook to UK news sites, 2008–2011

One surprising beneficiary of these trends has been the *Economist* magazine. Digital editor Tom Standage says social media traffic now delivers half as many page views as Google, and this has made senior executives sit up:

> *In parts of last year we were growing by 20% a month on the amount of traffic from these sites so we've started to adjust and have started to think about doing journalism in a different way.*

For the *Economist* that has meant introducing a more frequent publishing schedule, as well as educating staff about the value of getting involved in a conversation. From a business perspective, the *Economist* has also introduced a more flexible paywall, partly to ensure that social traffic does not get driven away.

It should be noted that the BBC is the leading news site in terms of the total volume of referrals sent from Facebook, with the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Guardian* a little further behind. Figure 6 shows actual amount of traffic sent to individual news sites – sometimes known as 'downstream traffic' – expressed as a percentage of Facebook's total downstream referrals.
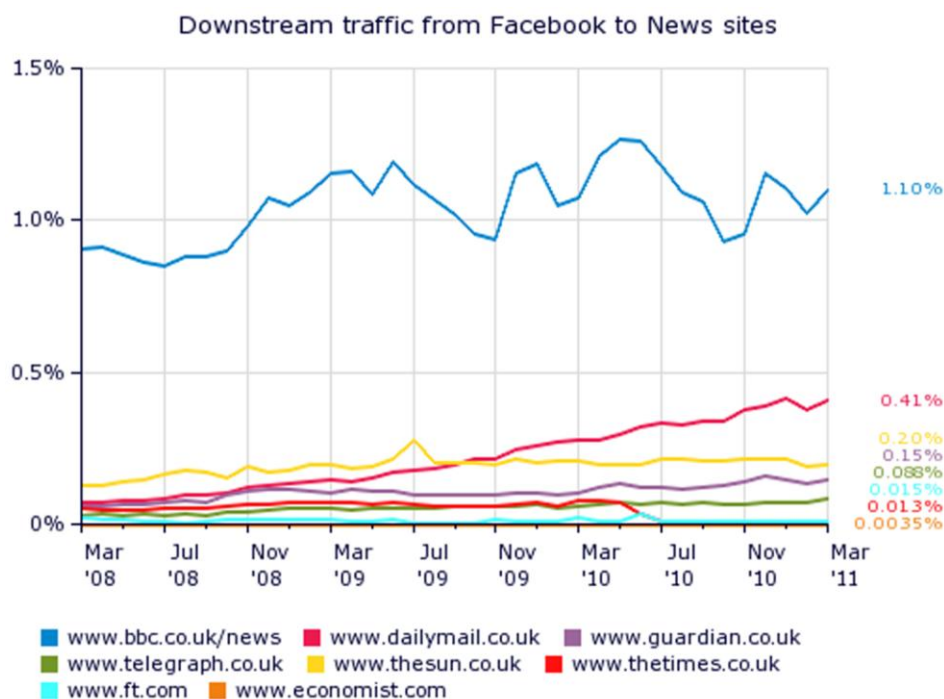
Downstream traffic from Facebook to News sites

Figure 6. Volume of referrals from Facebook to UK news sites, 2008–2011

2.3. Search vs social: the new battleground

For much of the last decade, publishers have relied on Google for a significant slice of their traffic, but the emergence of social media is beginning to change the balance. Log files from the four news organisations show a slight increase in the volume of traffic from search over the period 2009–2011, reflecting the improvement of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) techniques in most newsrooms. However, the emergence of social media has reduced the overall percentage of referral traffic made up by search. In other words, for news sites search remains crucially important, but it is no longer the only game in town.

Survey evidence also suggests that in terms of information – not just news – online users are searching less compared with a few years ago. The OxIS survey has asked internet users how they have found information since 2005, and for the first time the 2011 survey results show a slight decline, from 64 per cent to 61 per cent for search. A plausible explanation is the increasing time spent sharing information within social networks, alongside the growth in push services such as contextual links within emails.

Ways to Look for Information Online (QC25)

Legend: ■ Mainly use a search engine ■ Both about the same ■ Mainly go to specific pages

2005
- 20% Mainly use a search engine
- 61% Both about the same
- 20% Mainly go to specific pages

2007
- 56%
- 33%
- 10%

2009
- 64%
- 26%
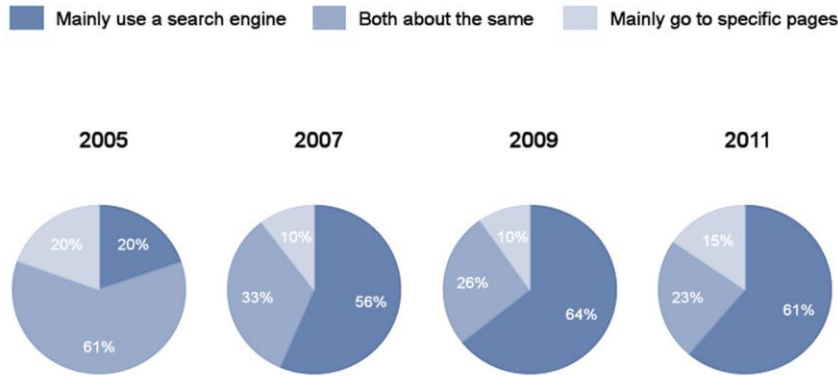- 10%

2011
- 61%
- 23%
- 15%

Figure 7. How users find information online

The OxIS survey also monitors the extent to which users go to a specific page for information or follow a link that they may have been sent. This data shows that social network users are more likely than non-users to go to pages via links they have received (see Figure 8).

Going to Specific Pages by Social Network Users and Non-Users (QC23)

Legend: ■ Non social networking users ■ Social networking users

% of users who rather use

Category	Non social networking users	Social networking users
Rather go to specific pages	83	58
A page you received	5	8
Both about the same	12	34

Current Users. OxIS 2011: N=1,498 (Users of SNS: 988)
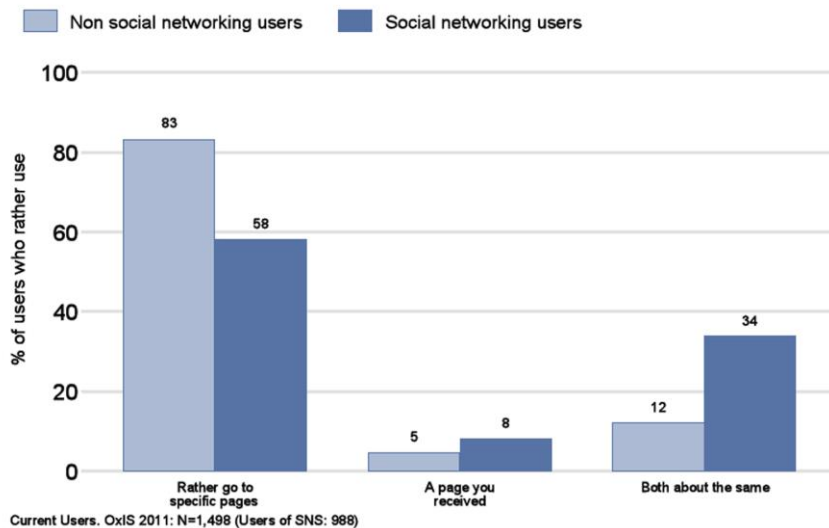
Figure 8. Going to a specific page or following a link?

Picking up on these new sharing trends, many news organisations have devoted an increasing amount of time to establishing how to make the most of them for journalistic distribution. 'It has turned into something that is beginning to rival search', says Janine Gibson, outgoing editor of the *Guardian* website, who cites the example of the death of Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protests in 2009. The Guardian had

obtained video footage of the newspaper seller being struck by a police officer, and its release on the *Guardian* website soon went viral.

> *I remember tweeting the video and looking an hour later at the retweets and realising that we had this enormous pyramid of distribution and then three hours later looking at the geographical spread (Brazil, America) and thinking that is an extraordinary thing.*[12]

In many ways Twitter is just speeding-up a process that has always occurred behind closed doors. Now it is possible to see a networked map of how a news story spreads – and how that draws people back to find out more.

Most other news organisations are also setting up Twitter feeds and Facebook pages and encouraging readers to share links. For the *Telegraph* website editor, Marcus Warren, this helps build new types of audiences and helps network their output. 'I don't want our content to just be sitting statically on the *Telegraph* website. I want it to live and breathe and be part of the web.'

And yet for all the benefits of engaging in social networks there have also been concerns that they could represent a threat to traditional news organisations – in particular that the growth in time spent with networks like Facebook might reduce actual visits to news sites themselves – or at best lead to increasing news snacking on headlines, rather than full immersion in a news story. The analysis of Experian Hitwise (Figure 9) tends to suggest that this is not the case. Between 2008 and 2011, whilst visits to social media sites grew by 58 per cent, those to traditional news sites also increased slightly.

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[12] Interview with Janine Gibson by Nic Newman, April 2011.

UK Internet visits to Social Media and News and Media

■ Computers and Internet - Social Networking and Forums ■ News and Media
Monthly market share in 'All Categories', measured by visits, based on UK usage.
Created: 21/04/2011. © Copyright 1996-2011 Hitwise Pty. Ltd.   Source: Experian Hitwise UK
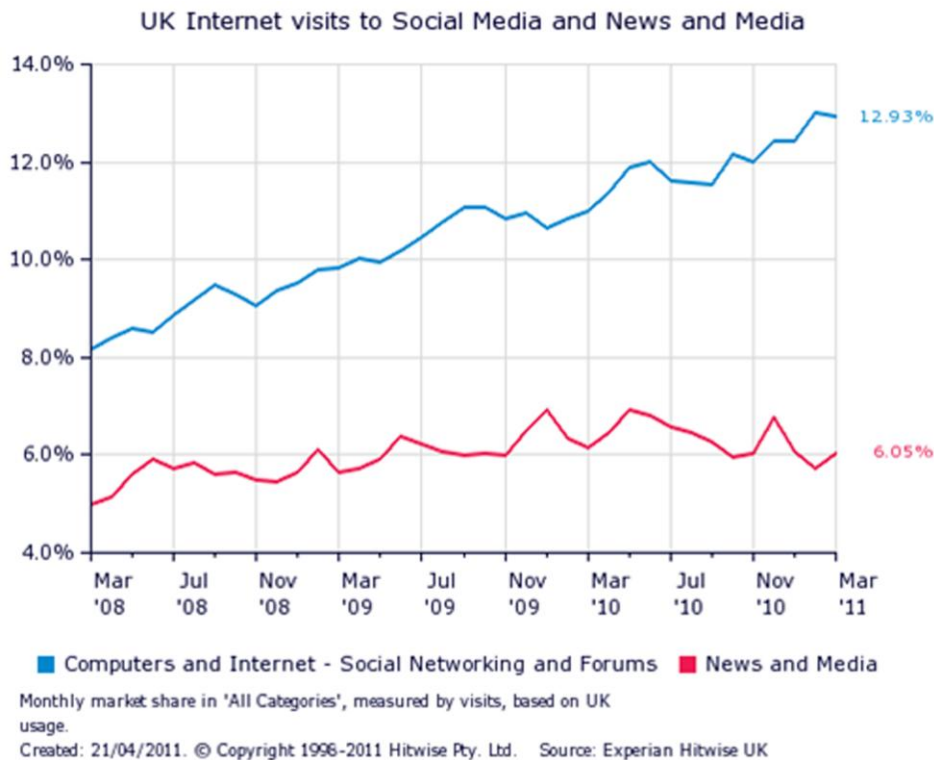
Figure 9. Share of visits to social networks compared with news, 2008–2011

'Far from cannibalising News and Media traffic, social media has helped drive traffic to news sites', says James Murray, senior research analyst at Experian Hitwise. Further evidence comes from logfile and other data which shows that in many cases the time spent on traditional news sites has also gone up over the period.[13] Overall, it appears that snippets of information in social networks are stimulating further interest in news events and encouraging further exploration. The commercial implications of this are more complex and raise more concerns for some news organisations, however, and are tackled in section 5.

2.4. What content is shared in social networks?

If social media referrals are increasing in importance, a key question is whether this is affecting the type of journalism that is produced. What kind of content works in a sharing environment? Are news organisations changing their editorial strategies to fit audience demand? To what extent are they delivering different content to different networks, and what are the implications of any such 'selective exposure' for information provision?

To understand these issues, we analysed the most shared stories in Twitter from five major UK news organisations over a four-month period (January–April

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[13] Time spent data (2009–11) from Alexa.com for the *Guardian, Telegraph, Financial Times* and BBC shows increase in time spent when averaging the four sites, with stronger increases over the period for the *FT* and the *Telegraph*.

2011) and categorised each story against a number of criteria such as mood and subject type.[14]

Table 2. Examples of top shared stories across five UK news organisations, January–April 2011

BBC — Michael Gove in fiery debate with caller

4 — The FactCheck Blog - Bank bingo: why banks will pay less tax this year

theguardian — Charlie Sheen v Muammar Gaddafi: whose line is it anyway?

T — Matt - witty political cartoons and satirical sketches

The headline findings are that the following types of stories tend to do best in Twitter :

- Disasters and deaths
- Latest news on breaking stories
- Quirky and funny stories
- Provocative comment and analysis
- Original and distinctive content

In the examples illustrated in Table 2 it is noticeable how top stories involved content exclusive to that news organisation – a controversial interview with Michael Gove on a BBC phone-in, an insightful fact check on taxes by Channel 4 blogger Cathy Newman, a *Guardian* quiz and some amusing cartoons from *Telegraph* cartoonist Matt.

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[14] Tweetminster pulled out the top links sent within Twitter by the BBC, Channel 4, the *Guardian*, Sky and the *Telegraph* from January to April 2011 within a network of 10,000 UK-based users with an interest in politics and current affairs. The sample involved over 5 million queries and excluded new RTs and mentions by journalists of their own source. The top 500 links (100 from each provider) were then analysed and categorised as described in the text.

In terms of mood, the analysis showed that the type of stories that are shared most tend to involve these emotions:

- Shock (links to disasters and death)
- Funny/weird
- Surprise

It is worth pointing out that although there is overlap between the most read stories on a news website and the most shared, there are significant differences too. Although no statistically valid comparisons were made as part of this study, it is possible to observe these differences every day on the BBC News site as the most read and most shared features are shown side by side. The most shared list tends to include more distinctive and unusual content – often content that is not showcased on the front page of the website – in addition to the crashes and disasters which it has in common with most-read.

Table 3. BBC News top stories vs most read vs most shared, 5 August 2011

Top stories	Most read	Most shared
Europe adds to global shares rout	UK group 'in fatal bear attack'	Rowan Atkinson 'injured in crash'
UK group 'in fatal bear attack'	Rowan Atkinson 'injured in crash'	Water-flow signs found on Mars
E.On raises cost of energy bills	Europe adds to global shares rout	Swede admits atomic test 'crazy'
Heart test 'saves babies' lives'	Girlfriend 'killed in sex game'	Audio slideshow – architecture of housing
Chile marks year since mine blast	Dutch rethink Christianity for a doubtful world	Asian stocks slump on US sell-off

2.5. Facebook vs Twitter

In order to understand the difference in sharing behaviour between different social networks, we then repeated the headline analysis exercise using log files of BBC News, taking the top 200 stories shared stories in Facebook and the top 200 shared in Twitter over the month of May 2011.

Table 4. Top BBC stories shared in May 2011

Facebook Stories	Pages	Top Twitter Stories	Pages
Bin Laden dead	202,850	Bin Laden alive	37,650
Man tries to board train with pony In Wrexham	94,850	Bin Laden Dead story	17,300
		Bin Laden raid revealed on Twitter	8,850
Insurer held orgy for salesman	62,200	Graphic: how Bin Laden raid happened	7,500
Rapture: apocolypse sparks atheist reaction	51,350	Man tries to board train with pony	6,650
Bin Laden live page	49,950	Insurer holds orgy for salesmen	6,650
Video: schoolboy wears skirt to school	48,800	Volcano starts new eruption	6,650
Rapture: believers perplexed after end		Bomb warning in London	5,650
Of the world fails	48,700	Video: Obama car gets stuck	5,650
Rapture: camping offers new date	47,350	Spain earthquake kills 10	5,500
Video: passer by pushes suicide man	43,650		

Source: Nedstats.

This exercise revealed significant differences between stories shared in the two networks, which supports the data about the different make-up of the two networks outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2. Facebook users tend to be interested in major news stories or events that are funny or unusual. Twitter users tend to be more serious-minded and interested in different angles on a running news story. During the period studied, they followed the twists and turns of the Bin Laden story and repeatedly referred to the updating live page, which focused on real-time news.

It was also striking that Facebook delivered a far higher percentage of page views to individual stories: the numbers from Twitter were far smaller. Of the page views to the BBC's 'Bin Laden Dead' story, 3.5 per cent came from Facebook, compared with just 0.3 per cent from Twitter. For lighter stories such as 'man tries to board train with pony', almost 10 per cent of the page views came from Facebook.

These results came as no surprise to the outgoing editor of the *Guardian* news website Janine Gibson, who has noted that 'stuff that makes you laugh and stuff that makes you angry' is most effective. She contrasts the topic- and keyword-based approach which works for search with the way in which social networks reward 'mood and the way a story makes you feel'. Gibson pointed to the success of the *Guardian*'s quiz on the sayings of the Libyan leader Mu'ammer Gaddafi and the controversial actor Charlie Sheen. This delivered over 200,000 shares via Facebook and 7,000 from Twitter and helped the stories to generate several million page views over at least four days. Gibson says that for many people the quiz summed up the mood of the week, and included a couple of celebrities and a healthy dose of competition.

The *Economist* has also noted how certain types of distinctive content perform particularly well in blogs and social networks. The Economist Daily Chart is a case in point because it tells an unusual story every day in a visually compelling way.[15] Other social media successes for the *Economist* have included an information graphic showing how much heads of state earn relative to the average wage, and another displaying the units of alcohol consumed per head per year in different countries.

Unusual and original content can also spawn significant spikes of traffic driven by sharing that can last for a long period of time. A story provocatively titled 'The Disposable Academic'[16] accounted for over 1 per cent of the total *Economist* website traffic at the end of 2010 as it was passed around a host of blogs, social media outlets and university mailing lists over a period of several months.

The *Economist* has also developed a process for seeding different content into Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and Tumblr accounts, based on what has worked well in the past. It has also experimented with technology which loads stories into a carousel and fires them out automatically in Twitter feeds in response to the type of terms that are trending in the wider network: this is seen as a way of seeding more relevant content cost-effectively.

But has a more responsive news organisation changed its values over what it writes and where it seeds its content? Is there a danger that the agenda is being narrowed by a race for popularity?

In his research paper *What's Happening To Our News*, Andrew Currah has noted how some news publishers are in danger of becoming 'digital windsocks' shaped by the direction of the prevailing clickstream, and losing their identity in the process. He notes how publishers like the *Daily Mail Online* have developed a markedly different feel, with more celebrity news, and even that the *Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Guardian* have introduced sections such as Lifestyle, Celebrity and Weird. The evidence in section 2 of this report suggest that this type of news also gets its reward in social networks like Facebook, arguably exacerbating the demand-led trends that have been linked with search-engine optimisation.

The *Economist*'s Tom Standage says it is true that the clickstream has become far more visible to journalists, but he says that this hasn't corrupted their underlying judgement:

> *Maybe consciously or subconsciously the agenda narrows as you write more stories about cars and China and India. But the agenda broadens too because of the internet. We have now a blog on language called Johnson ... it is now a blog that has 30 posts a week and we'd never have done that in print.*

The range and type of content being produced have undoubtedly changed as a result of the internet, but the individual consumer's experience may well depend on the

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[15] http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart.

[16] http://www.economist.com/node/17723223.

type of gateway to content that they choose – including their social networks. News organisations now recognise that they can't rely on audiences visiting their websites and are stepping up their efforts to distribute and sell the stories they write.

At BBC News this means a closer relationship with marketing – including a jointly funded post sitting in the heart of the newsroom – and a strategy of manually selecting and optimising headlines for specific social networks. This follows research that shows that editorially enhanced social media stories are far more effective than automated headline feeds.[17]

The BBC is embarking on setting up a more ambitious hub which will enable the key accounts such as the core breaking-news feed (1.3 million followers) to be updated twenty-four hours a day. 'It is not about Tweeting and Facebooking the same things necessarily', says outgoing BBC social media editor Alex Gubbay. 'Twitter is rapid fire, constant, constant, constant. Facebook is massive breaking news or really distinctive journalism.' Already this more selective approach is paying off on major events. During the royal wedding, for example, a team focused (amongst other things) on seeding the first pictures of the key moments in Twitpic, producing over 300,000 views just from that one channel.

Other news organisations, such as the *New York Times*, are moving in the same direction, developing new social media workflows and trying to link these with existing newsroom and marketing processes. At a time of acute pressures on financing, it remains hard to make the case for extra investment, and a key priority is to being able to prove value through improved social media metrics around reach, engagement or impact on the bottom line. That remains a work in progress.

2.6. Who sets the agenda in social networks?

Mainstream media have traditionally revelled in their role as shapers of opinions and conversations, taking on ever greater influence as audiences and businesses have grown. But to what extent has this agenda-defining role been undermined by social media's ability to break stories, organise protests and petitions, and hold the powerful to account?

In our own study of news links in Twitter (section 2.4), 35 per cent of the most shared links came from 'non-traditional sources', but that still leaves the majority coming from the mainstream media. An earlier Tweetminster study[18] looked at over 5 million tweets in the first 100 days of the new coalition government in the UK, and estimated that 73 per cent of the shared news links came from traditional sources, with many of the remaining links coming from blogs and academic institutions.

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[17] The BBC doubled the number of followers on its business Twitter feed through switching from feed to manual curation. Facebook has published research showing the value of editorial curation (http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2011/07/14/adding-analysis-increases-referrals-from-a-journalists-facebook-page/).

[18] 'Coalition Government 100 Days On', Twitter published by Tweetminster, an independent monitor of political data on Twitter (http://tweetminster.co.uk/100days).

Tweetminster also found that the overall agenda of subjects turned out to be remarkably similar to that pursued by the mainstream media at the time.

Table 5. Top subject trends in Twitter, June–September 2010

1. David Cameron
2. War (Afghanistan and Iraq)
3. Oil spill
4. Schools
5. Jobs
6. Cuts
7. Banks
8. Women
9. Big Society
10. Markets

Tweetminster also used a mix of frequency and reach (size of following, retweets and mentions) to calculate which Twitter accounts had most influence in the network. A glance at the resulting list shows a familiar mix of traditional publishers and prominent political commentators. Some of these have been able to build up a sizeable audience of their own for their feeds, blogs and personal websites, although commentators like Iain Dale use this in combination with appearances on traditional radio and TV. Social media on their own do not appear to be a replacement for traditional influence.

Table 6. Top influencers in Twitter, June–September 2010

1. BBC News
2. *Guardian*
3. Reuters
4. Alistair Campbell (Labour-supporting commentator)
5. *Economist*
6. India Knight (*Times* journalist)
7. Krishnan Guru-Murthy (Channel 4)
8. Sky News
9. Iain Dale (Conservative-supporting blogger and now blog aggregator)
10. BBC *Question Time* (weekly debate format)

The top 20 also included Conservative bloggers Tim Montgomerie and Guido Fawkes, and left-leaning comedian Armando Iannucci.

The suggestion that mainstream media play a crucial role in defining the agenda of social media – rather than the other way round – is further supported by research from Stanford University and HP Labs,[19] which explored what defines 'Twitter trending' (the most popular real-time topic lists).

Bernardo A. Huberman and three fellow researchers note that a small number of trending hashtags 'capture the attention of a large audience for a short time, thus contributing in some measure to the public agenda'. Sometimes they are generated organically, but more often, says Huberman, they come from traditional outlets. The study shows that most big news trends can be traced back to the Twitter accounts of big breaking-news brands like CNN, ESPN, Reuters, the BBC and Sky News. This is illustrated in Table 7, which shows Twitter accounts that were most influential in driving the selected trends through mentions and retweets.

Table 7: Top 22 retweeted users in 50 US trending topics, September–October 2010

Author	Retweets	Topics	Retweet ratio
vovo_panico	11,688	65	179.81
cnnbrk	8,444	84	100.52
keshasuja	5,110	51	100.19
LadyGonga	4,580	54	84.81
breakingNews	8,406	100	84.06
MLB	3,866	62	62.35
nytimes	2,960	59	50.17
HerbertFromFG	2,693	58	46.43
espn	2,371	66	35.92
globovision	2,668	75	35.57
huffingtonpost	2,135	63	33.88
skynewsbreak	1,664	52	32.00
el_pais	1,623	52	31.21
stcom	1,255	51	24.60
la_patilla	1,273	65	19.58
reuters	957	57	16.78
WashingtonPost	929	60	15.48
bbcworld	832	59	14.10
CBSnews	547	56	9.76
TelegraphNews	464	79	5.87
tweetmeme	342	97	5.87
mydailynews	173	51	3.39

The study concludes that 'Social media behaves as a selective amplifier for the content generated by traditional media, with chains of retweets by many users leading to the observed trends.' It goes on to suggest that, far from being an

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[19] Bernardo A. Huberman, Sitaram Asur, and Gabor Szabo, at Social Computing Lab, HP Labs, and Chunyan Wang, Department of Applied Physics, Stanford University. 'Trends in Social Media: Persistence and Decay' (http://www.scribd.com/doc/48665388/Trends-in-Social-Media-Persistence-and-Decay).

alternative source of news, social media act 'more as a filter and an amplifier for interesting news from traditional media'.

There is no comparable study in the UK, but Tweetminster data which looks primarily at Twitter users interested in news and current affairs in the UK shows that two 'emerging news organisations' have been able to gain significant traction through social media. Al Jazeera's news feed and the link to its live web stream was the most mentioned and shared on Twitter during the Egyptian turmoil. Although this was partly due to the promotional campaign and sponsored tweets outlined in section 5, the strength of its breaking-news feed has also enabled it to gain traction around Middle East events on its own merit (see Table 7).

A second emerging organisation (@breakingnews) is one of the largest and most influential Twitter accounts in the world; it has recently been acquired by MSNBC. Its size and the frequency of its updates has enabled the organisation to develop influence over Twitter trends in the UK too.

Table 8. Posts from breaking news accounts in the aftermath of Bin Laden death, May 2011

Name	Followers	Bin Laden RTS	No. of posts	AV RTR
CNNbrk	4.6m	20,260	45	450
Breaking News	2.7m	19,304	78	248
BBC Breaking	1.6m	4,100	9	**455**
Sky News Break	236k	3,009	20	150
Ajelive	103k	2,800	56	50

On other occasions the key breaking-news influencers continue to be traditional organisations. During the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, the BBC breaking account drove almost 1,500 retweets with just a handful of posts.[20]

Table 9. Posts from breaking news accounts: royal wedding, April 2011

Name	Followers	RTs	No. of posts	AV RTR
CNNbrk	4.6m	3,142	6	523
BBC Breaking	1.6m	1,471	5	**298**
BBC News	208k	930	40	23
BBC World	850k	594	9	66
Breaking News.com	2.7m	280	6	46
Sky News Break	236k	230	5	46

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[20] Original research for Reuters Institute supported by Tweetminster data, January to April 2011.

3. The role of Twitter in breaking news

Ever since the first twitpic of the Hudson river plane crash and the so-called 'Twitter revolutions' in Iran and Moldova, the microblogging platform has been closely linked to news and to journalism. Supporters argue that Twitter's speed is putting mainstream media out of business when it comes to breaking news. Detractors point to the unreliability of information and the way rumour can also be spread in seconds around the world. In this section we explore the mechanics and inter-relationships in two recent case studies.

3.1. Case study: the death of Osama Bin Laden, May 2011

In the world of social media and citizen journalism it seems there is no such thing as a media blackout. The US Defense Department's carefully laid plans to surprise Osama Bin Laden were exposed sooner than it would have liked by a part-time café owner from Abbottabad who live-blogged the attack – even if he didn't know what it was at the time.

Sohaib Athar describes himself on Twitter as an IT consultant taking a break from the rat-race by hiding in the mountains with his laptop. He first reported the arrival of a helicopter above his home at about 1 a.m. local time.

@ReallyVirtual
Sohaib Athar

Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event).

14 hours ago via TweetDeck

Figure 10. Tweet from Sohaib Athar, 2 May (1 a.m. Pakistan time)

He went on to express his annoyance about the intrusion, then to describe an apparent explosion, before finally realising what was going on. The following morning he tweeted:

Uh oh, now I'm the guy who liveblogged the Osama raid without knowing it.

By that time he'd gathered almost 100,000 followers for his Twitterstream and become not just a network hub of information about events in Abbottabad but a story in his own right. He spent much of the next few days talking to the world's press and posting pictures of them setting up their satellite positions near his home.

Back in the United States the story also emerged first through Twitter, leaked by a former chief of staff to former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Keith

Urbahn only had a few thousand followers on Twitter but his post quickly went viral, partly on the strength of his credible Twitter biography.

Figure 11. Tweet from Keith Urbahn, 1 May (22.45 EST)

New York company Social Flow mapped how the story spread by analysing 15 million tweets. Within one minute, it reported, Urbahn's post had been resent eighty times – and from there it went viral with the help of influential journalist Brian Stelter of the *New York Times*, who has more than 50,000 well-connected followers.

Social Flow visualised how the story spread through the internet in those first few hours (Figure 12), while the president painstakingly honed the words for his national address, and the mainstream media maintained a discreet but frustrated silence.
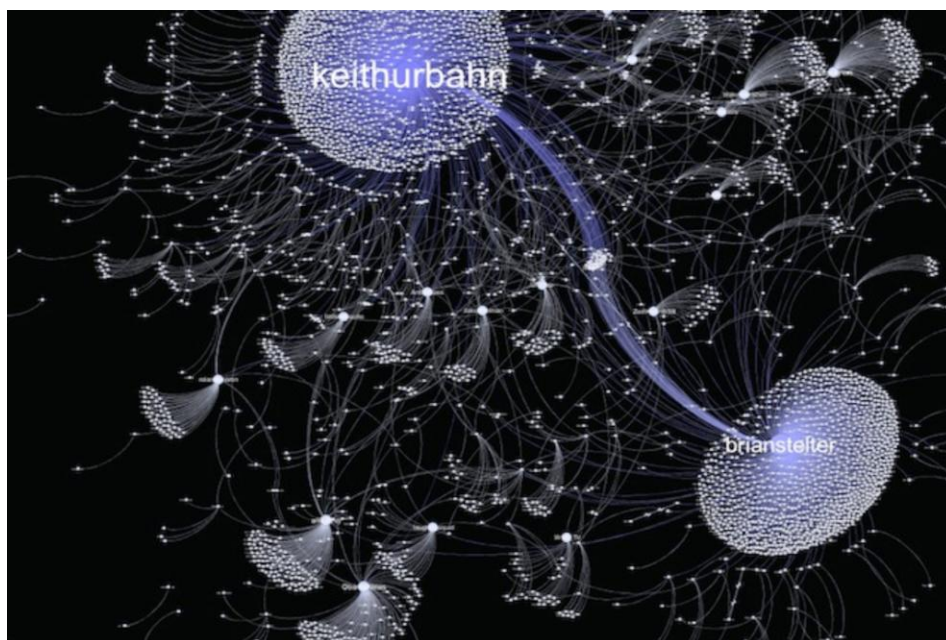

Figure 12. Social flow visualisation of how the Bin Laden story spread, 1 May

By the time President Obama got up to speak the element of surprise had gone. Many people watching already knew the headlines, which they'd shared and discussed amongst themselves. The president was left to fill in the detail. New-media evangelist and journalism professor Jeff Jarvis summed up the change:

The old definition of a shared national experience was watching TV at the same time. This shared experience is happening with TV in the background. The Internet is our connection machine and Twitter is the new Times Square.[21]

And yet it is easy to underplay the continued importance of traditional media outlets. President Obama's address was watched by 56 million people on nine different networks, the biggest audience since his election.[22] Rather than replace core news outlets, social media acted a bit like a cheerleader, getting the ball rolling and stimulating interest in the main event – which is still delivered in a fairly traditional way. These Americans summed up the role of different media outlets for them as the story developed:

Saw a post on FB, verified it on NYT, and then yelled for my fiancé to turn on the news.

I saw comments on Facebook, and then read about it on my NPR News App on my phone, and then turned on the TV.[23]

Even Keith Urbahn, who posted that first tweet, was moved to defend the role of mainstream media when he later revealed via Twitter that his source was actually a well-connected TV producer from the mainstream media – not a political insider:

As much as I believe in the rise of 'citizen journalism,' blogs, twitter etc supplanting traditional media, my tweet isn't great evidence of it … stories about 'the death of MSM' because of my 'first tweet' are greatly exaggerated.

Because of the timing, most people in the United Kingdom slept through the dramatic events and work up to the news on traditional TV and radio. There the roles were reversed, with the news broken by mainstream outlets, leaving digital and social media to fill in the gaps through the day.

In this particular case it was a tweet by the BBC's breaking news feed at 6 a.m. that captured most viral attention, driving over 1,000 reposts (retweets) within the first few hours and driving significant traffic to the more extensive online coverage. The social monitoring tool Trendsmap showed that BBC stories were consistently the most shared on Twitter throughout the day, and BBC log files showed almost 400,000 referrals from Facebook and Twitter to the top stories about the event.

[21] http://blogs.reuters.com/lauren-young/2011/05/02/bin-laden-is-dead-twitter-buzzes/.

[22] 'Obama Drew TV Crowd', *Wall Street Journal Online*, 4 May 2011
(http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703834804576301821550865988.html).

[23] Bin Laden's death sets Twitter record
(http://edition.cnn.com/2011/TECH/social.media/05/02/bin.laden.twitter.record/index.html).

One interesting postscript to this tale about the intersection between mainstream and social media came a few days later with the publication by reputable online news sites, newspapers and TV outlets of gruesome pictures purporting to show the dead body of Osama bin Laden.

These pictures were quickly revealed as fakes, but provoked considerable discussion about plummeting journalistic standards and the internet's role in this. The combination of powerful software for photo and video manipulation and social media's ability to virally distribute the resulting images has led to embarrassment in the past – but rarely have such fakes been picked up so prominently by mainstream publications.

Some news organisations like the BBC operate rigorous checks on incoming pictures and videos using picture matching software[24] and bringing in advice from experts within language services as necessary.[25] Another approach comes from National Public Radio's Andy Carvin, who has tirelessly posted reports that he considers to be credible from the Middle East – with health warnings where necessary. He frequently then asks followers to help verify or check facts or eyewitness reports. Writing about the case of the Bin Laden pictures, journalism professor Paul Bradshaw pointed out that it was users of social media sites Reddit and Twitter 'who first highlighted the dodgy provenance of the image, and the image it was probably based on'.[26]

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[24] Tineye is a reverse image search engine which can tell you if an image – or one like it – has been published on the web before.

[25] Alex Murray blogs about the BBC's processes for verification of UGC material (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/bbcsms-bbc-procedures-for-veri.shtml).

[26] http://paulbradshaw.posterous.com/dead-and-fake-osama-bin-laden-photos-why-didn't-news-websites-check-before-publishing?

The Bin Laden case reveals how both genuine news and misinformation can break and spread at speed through social networks. The pressure for politicians and the traditional media to keep up is often intense, and in most cases it appears to be a losing battle. In a Reuters Institute study, journalist Nik Gowing has referred to a 'new tyranny of shifting information power in crises'. He says a matrix of real-time information flows is challenging the ability to respond with effective impact and in a timely way.[27] But many news organisations are now beginning to respond to the challenge, recognising that they need to work with social networks on major news stories. They have developed new procedures for monitoring, verifying, filtering and sifting as fast as they can, on behalf of a mainstream audience that is short of time and looking for wider context.

3.2. Case study: Ryan Giggs, injunctions and the role of Twitter

Social media are not just affecting the way global news is reported; they have also been undermining the age-old attempts of the rich and famous to protect their reputations. In a landmark case, the Manchester United footballer Ryan Giggs ended up taking legal action against Twitter over the breach of an injunction by means of which he had attempted to protect his privacy over an alleged affair. His name was repeatedly revealed by around 75,000 users on Twitter over a three-day period, but the newspapers were unable to print the story until a Member of Parliament, John Hemming, used parliamentary privilege to name him.

At the heart of this complex case is the issue of whether social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are media publishers, subject to the same laws as everyone else, or are merely an open platform for conversations in the manner of a pub or a restaurant. As social media blur the boundaries between public and private they are redefining these issues of celebrity and privacy in the digital age.

Using social media tracking tools, it is possible to track how Ryan Giggs's name spread through Twitter over a number of days and how the nature of the conversation changed at different points (Figure 13). This once again confirms the complex and complementary relationship between Twitter and the mainstream media. It is striking to note how the spikes in Twitter activity correlate exactly with the timing of the main morning and evening TV bulletins. Audiences were clearly going online after each broadcast to search for the name and post comments on the story.

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[27] Nik Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009).
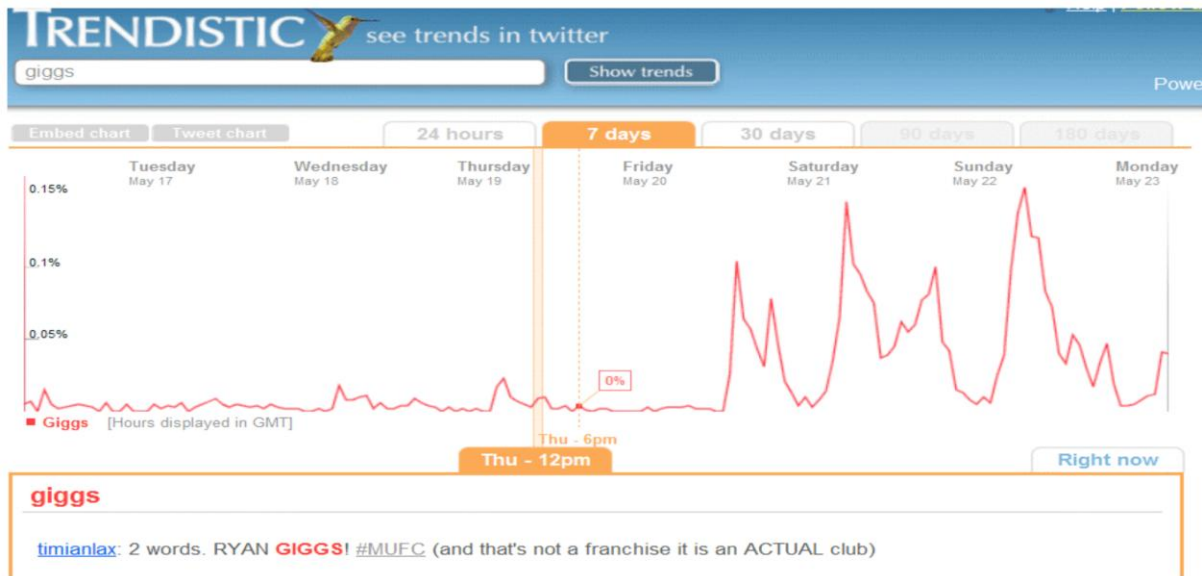
Figure 13. Mentions of Ryan Giggs on Twitter, 20–23 May 2011

The image in the screengrab here also shows how easy it was to discover the name – using one of the popular trending tools (Trendsmap), which geographically clusters the most frequently used terms within Twitter. An analysis of the tweets being sent also reveals how the mood changed from gentle interest to anger and defiance once Ryan Giggs and his lawyers had decided to take action against Twitter.

On 20 May the tweets centred on subtle ways of mentioning the name without overtly breaking the law, such as:

How did Ryan Giggs get into my Facebook menu? #owngoal

My timeline is suddenly filling up with pics of Ryan Giggs. A nimble & long lasting footballer sez I. Looking haggard and care worn

On a separate note, Ryan Giggs has had a good season hasn't he!

By the 22nd most had turned to the prospect of Twitter users being sued:

Ryan Giggs' lawyers demand Twitter handover every a/c name mentioning affair w/Imogen Thomas. If you believe in defending Twitter, RT this.

I don't think Ryan Giggs & his lawyers understand what the Internet is! #ryangiggs

Ryan Giggs. It was Ryan Giggs. I have 9p in the bank – sue me dude

This case came just a few weeks after an anonymous Twitter user posted the names of a number of other celebrities who, it was suggested, had taken out injunctions to protect their reputations. Not only did these postings directly challenge the courts but at least one of them turned out to be incorrect – leaving Jemima Khan angry and upset. She used her own Twitter account to answer back, saying that the post, which had alleged an affair with a TV presenter, was irresponsible and had caused considerable distress to her children.
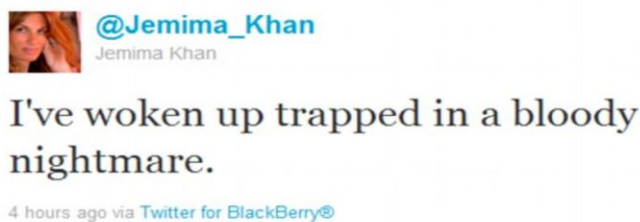

@Jemima_Khan
Jemima Khan

I've woken up trapped in a bloody nightmare.

4 hours ago via Twitter for BlackBerry®

Figure 14. Jemima Khan's response to allegations on Twitter

Once again these postings were extensively covered by the mainstream media, which reported both the existence of the original anonymous postings and the subsequent denials.

Experian Hitwise said that overall the extra coverage around the injunction stories pushed Twitter traffic in the UK to record levels alongside search terms relating to celebrities and the words 'injunction' and 'super-injunction'. In the wake of these developments, the UK's Lord Chief Justice, Lord Judge, declared that modern technology was out of control, and that he hoped that 'people who peddle lies about others through using technology may one day be brought under control'. While sympathy is often in short supply for celebrities who try to gag the press, the forces undermining these injunctions – technological developments combined with natural curiosity and competitive media – are affecting more and more everyday legal situations.

In June 2011 Joanne Fraill became the first juror to be prosecuted for contempt of court for using Facebook, and was sentenced to eight months in jail. In other cases social media have been used to put one side of the case in a messy divorce, or to discuss commercial disputes, or to provide background on employment tribunals while these cases are being heard. Former director of the Press Complaints

Commission , Tim Toulmin, is concerned about what this means for the lawyers, for journalists and for individuals:

> *Ordinary people can face pressures that are indistinguishable from those faced by celebrities: how to manage voracious media appetites; how to influence social media; how to keep a low profile; how to protect a reputation and get a message across in a world where one nugget of information can give rise to a million instant judgments online.*[28]

The brands driving these developments – Facebook, Google and Twitter – are only a few years old, and the disruptive impact of social media is still gathering pace. It is clear that new lines in the sand will need to be drawn as the existing ones are proving impossible to enforce. As with so much of the digital space, governments have been reluctant to intervene, but each new case adds to the pressure for a review of the rules of engagement that define an appropriate balance between freedom of speech and personal privacy.

3.3. Breaking news and the future

Both these case studies illustrate how news routinely emerges first on social networks like Twitter, but they also demonstrate the way in which mainstream media work to verify, contextualise and then amplify these stories. It is a complex relationship where professional and amateur versions of events coexist and feed off each other in ways that raise new challenges both for the law and for traditional working practices in media organisations.

It is clearly impossible to regulate all the messages that are flying around in these public, private and semi-private networks. On the other hand, there is societal interest in ensuring that truth can be separated from lies – and making sure that sensitive or shocking information is placed in meaningful context.

In the past, Twitter has famously announced a non-existent heart attack affecting Apple's Steve Jobs and the premature demise of many other celebrities – but resurrection and retraction can also be swift.

In June 2011 a picture was widely circulated suggesting that McDonalds were charging African American customers an extra $1.50 'as an insurance measure due in part to a recent string of robberies'. The story trended briefly under the hashtag *#seriouslymcdonalds* before being discredited with the help of some official tweets from McDonalds and some Twitter detective work by ordinary users which revealed that the toll-free phone number in the picture belonged to rival fast food store, Kentucky Fried Chicken. In this case little harm was done, but at other times the model of self-correction breaks down.

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[28] http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2011/jun/07/injunctions-lawyers-media-savvy.

After the crash of a plane carrying the Polish president in April 2010, various names of those who may or may not have been on board were circulated within minutes, causing considerable distress to relatives. A video was later circulated which claimed to show survivors being shot by Russian security forces; despite having all the signs of being a hoax this subsequently fuelled conspiracy theories.[29]

The distortion of video and picture evidence has become an increasing issue for broadcasters. Sina Motalebi of BBC Persian TV points out that the Iranian authorities have become increasingly sophisticated at mixing footage from different locations and times and seeding fake videos in social networks, in the hope that these will be picked up by international broadcasters. But instead of walking away, Motalebi says that the BBC has a responsibility to use all of its expertise and knowledge to verify or expose these videos.[30] 'Our most important currency is our reputation', says Motalebi.[31]

BBC director of global news Peter Horrocks recognises the new pressures that come from having to manage so many sources in real time, but argues that neither standards of decency nor verification have changed on the BBC's main channels. Horrocks says that the BBC decided not to show some of the pictures emerging from social media sources in Libya and Syria, even though they were featured prominently by other news organisations:

> *We do believe that maintaining verification [standards] is important and preserves our reputation. We can't just say it's out there, anything goes.*[32]

There are many approaches to the challenge of real-time verification. The Qatar-based broadcaster Al Jazeera has actively encouraged social media activities to the extent of issuing Flip cameras[33] to some activists. Al Jazeera's view is that there is something inevitable about the rise of a personally connected generation multitasking with new technology such as smart phones. 'People are more connected and they are going to post breaking news online', says head of social media Riyaad Minty.[34]

For Al Jazeera the challenge is how to filter through the noise to find those trusted and authentic voices in advance, and then work with them to amplify and contextualise what they say. As Riyaad Minty explains, the strategy is to get in early and build a relationship with influencers and bloggers in many parts of the world:

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[29] *Daily Mail* article on video footage, May 2010 (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1278175/Footage-Polish-air-crash-emerges-claiming-Russian-speaking-men-shooting-survivors.html).

[30] Alex Murray blogs about the BBC's processes for verification of UGC material (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/bbcsms-bbc-procedures-for-veri.shtml).

[31] http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/bbcsms-what-the-audience-expec.shtml and conversation with Sina Motalebi, May 2011.

[32] BBC Social Media summit open session, May 2011 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/bbcsms-changing-journalists-mi.shtml).

[33] Cheap and ultralight cameras that take high-quality footage created by Pure digital technologies.

[34] Interview with Riyaad Minty by Nic Newman, June 2011.

When events happen we know who to go to ... and we don't have to go through all the noise therefore we have our trusted sources that we can get in touch with – a sort of white list of people that we trust.

Although this is Al Jazeera's focus going forward, it recognises that this will not work for all stories, and it is looking at supplementing this with a powerful technical platform to help its journalists filter and sift the most relevant information on any story in real time.

In similar vein, new media start-up Storyful has begun to curate and verify the most newsworthy material for YouTube and other clients, offering a service of journalistic, social media-based research to news providers.[35] In this respect the social media elements of real-time news are becoming a key differentiator in the business of journalism as well as in the way it is practised.

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[35] http://mashable.com/2011/02/03/storyful-egypt/.

4. Individual journalists and the influence of network nodes

Social media have enabled individual journalists to strengthen their own brands and engage directly with audiences in new ways. In this section we hear from four journalists who explain how they are embracing social media and how it has influenced their journalism.

4.1. Case study: Laura Kuenssberg – BBC Political Correspondent (@BBCLauraK)

Laura Kuenssberg made her name reporting on some of the most dramatic political events in recent times for the BBC News channel, but also through her adoption and championing of Twitter. Inspired to join the fledgling social network after witnessing its power as a journalistic tool during the US election in 2008, Kuenssberg persuaded her bosses at the BBC to allow a trial of real-time tweeting during the party conference season the following year. By the time she left the BBC to take up a new business correspondent role with rival broadcaster ITV News, she had amassed over 60,000 followers, 'not far off a small circulation newspaper and far more than we had ever expected'.[36]

The @BBCLauraK account is very much a professional one. It is branded BBC, and she doesn't use it to express her opinions or have discussions. She sees it as an extension of her job, typically posting dozens of short updates a day. 'You can file so much more often, the bar is much lower in terms of getting the story out there', says Kuenssberg, who has a very clear sense of what she is trying to do with the account.

> *There are three broad areas. One is new information, two is colour – the things that I get the privilege to see in my job that other people don't – and the third is pointing people to things that they might like such as BBC interviews or programmes.*

Figure 15. Laura Kuenssberg – Twitter account promoting Liam Fox on BBC News

These tweets often fly around the Westminster village at lightning speed. Within a few minutes newsmaking items can be picked up by aggregator websites like PoliticsHome, but also by other journalists and political aides, who now use Twitter as a political newswire. Kuenssberg recounts how Twitter has transformed the experience of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQ):

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[36] Interview with Laura Kuenssberg by Nic Newman, June 2011.

You see people in the press gallery looking at their handhelds and most of them are looking at Twitter and at what everyone else is saying. At PMQs you will see government advisers and opposition advisers doing it too. It's like a constant thermometer of how a story is moving or playing.

Since the 2010 election Twitter has taken root as a default communication mechanism, not least because MPs themselves have embraced the medium, joining in the real-time conversion.

iPads and other tablets are now allowed in the chamber and some, such as Therese Coffey (Con) and Stella Creasy (Lab), provide a running commentary of everything they are doing in a day. 'Three years ago if you had said you would have had MPs in the House of Commons writing things online ... people would have had a very hard time believing it', says Kuenssberg, and that new openness is now also applying to journalism:

This has been a closed world to people and now you can open the door to people and show them what is behind it – the colour and the strangeness and the weird and wonderful world that we're in.

Kuenssberg argues that the informality and conciseness of Twitter has not – and should not – change in any way the standards that lie behind BBC's journalism. 'There is a very clear rule in my head that I wouldn't say anything [on Twitter] that I wouldn't feel comfortable about saying on air', she says, whilst recognising that social media have increased the pressures on getting the story out. 'Often, you report a story before it is complete', she says, and this means that facts are often revealed one by one without a balancing view or without waiting for an official statement.

Kuenssberg believes that this is a positive development and a continuation of the trends started by rolling 24-hour TV news. 'We are opening up our practices and being honest about what we know and what we don't.' Overall, Kuenssberg believes Twitter has helped to increase the visibility and transparency of the work of the lobby journalist, but it has also changed the way journalists and politicians communicate:

I think the biggest impact has been speeding up the work of people who are already here – the speed with which a debate can get going. Twitter has had an exponential effect on that more than blogs. In terms of the way in which stories get round, Twitter has overtaken that.

With her move to ITV News, Kuenssberg will need to see how these trends can be applied to a different sphere – to the work of business journalists and captains of industry. She is grateful for the opportunity provided by the BBC to get in early, enabling her to carve out an identity for herself in a new space. Above all, she has

enjoyed the feedback and reaction of a loyal audience – who have been able to follow and engage with the political process in a deeper way.

4.2. Case study: Neal Mann, Sky News (@fieldproducer)

Neal Mann has no on-air presence or official byline, but he has a burgeoning reputation for breaking stories and influencing others. He's done it through his mastery of social media tools and an unswerving belief in what he calls the disruptive power of the 'peer-to- peer' internet.
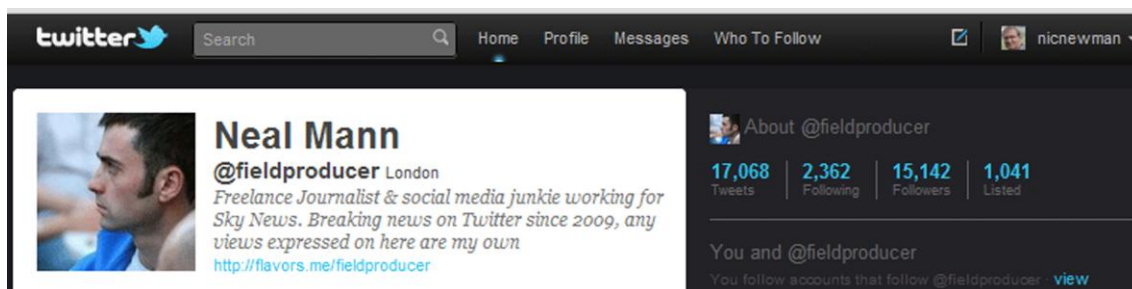

Figure 16. Neal Mann – Twitter account

Unlike the other journalists highlighted in this section, Mann works behind the scenes as a freelance desk editor and field producer, mainly with Sky News. In the past these figures and their important work in bringing the news to the screen would have been hidden from view – no longer. As a digital native, Mann was quick to spot the potential of new technology, and particularly Twitter, when he was working for the Sky News political desk in 2009:

> *I saw the power almost immediately. As soon as I realised it connected people that quickly and at that speed ... it is the fastest way you can interact with anybody.*[37]

Initially he used it to keep up with MPs and political commentators, and he found that it started to give him an edge on certain stories. He also found that as a freelance it gave him the tools to keep his hand in on the days he was not working. Part of his approach was to use tools such as Twitter lists to develop and cultivate sources – a process he calls 'spreading the net':

> *I looked at who I could follow and who would give me correct information. Initially with UK politics – but then worldwide. I filed them as people I might be able to run, people who worked for other channels, journalists in other parts of the world, organisations who put press releases and statements, because they were coming thick and fast through Twitter, faster than on the wires.*

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[37] Interview with Neal Mann by Nic Newman, July 2011.

In this way Mann was able to create a personal newswire service. Not only was he following the most influential journalists and activists in any sphere, he also tried to build a relationship with them. 'I would strike up a conversation, send them a direct message or have a conversation outside Twitter ... just as you would any source with anyone in the real world.'

Operating today in the field of foreign affairs, Mann's approach mirrors the strategy of Al Jazeera outlined in section 3.3, and can be characterised as using Twitter to build a relationship of trust around which you can later build valuable real-world journalism. He says he has repeatedly picked up tips and leads from Libya – well ahead of the traditional newswires – and he cites an earlier case from his time working on domestic news. He was contacted on Twitter by a trusted source who revealed that two 10-year-old boys had been arrested on suspicion of raping an 8-year-old girl. Sky went on to stand the story up through official sources, were first on the scene, and ran it a day ahead of the national press.

> *That for me was a huge success because it shows that people will come to you if you interact and engage. If you can become a network node, people will start bringing stuff to you ... and you can then do journalism within that sphere.*

But for Mann this is not a one-way process: it is also important to give something back to the community. He has also become a 'broadcasting channel' in his own right – breaking news, retweeting (passing on) new information, and adding context to important stories through links or by highlighting an authentic voice. All of this has enhanced his reputation to the extent that he has over 15,000 followers, many of them other journalists who rely on him to feed their own intelligence streams.

When the NATO bombings of Libya began, Mann made sure he was the first to tweet a link to a picture of a jingoistic front page from the *Sun* newspaper. The tweet went viral and the link racked up more than 30,000 click-throughs in one hour – a respectable number for a mainstream news website. His tweets are also regularly picked up by mainstream newspapers, including the last-ever edition of the *News of the World*, where his comments appeared alongside those of the celebrated journalist Piers Morgan and the author India Knight. 'A lot of the influencers are no longer the big names', he says. 'It is a different medium.'

Neal Mann has become one of the network nodes of the new peer-to-peer internet in a similar way to Brian Stelter of the *New York Times* (section 3.1) or Andy Carvin of National Public Radio, who have also

been able to influence opinion beyond their immediate network. For Mann becoming a 'go-to' person feels like a natural way to be a journalist in the 21st century, not as a replacement for traditional journalism but as supplement to it:

> *I don't think that social media is going to replace traditional journalism. You are always going to need journalists on the ground, there is always going to be a need for a picture and context. Social media is just another broadcast platform and one of the most important ones to operate in.*

Increasingly Mann sees people of his generation going home and logging into Facebook, rather than turning on the TV. He argues that it is crucial that news organisations engage with these trends and learn how to operate effectively within these social networks so that good journalism can remain relevant through the next stage of the digital revolution.

4.3. *Case study: Gideon Rachman – blogger, Financial Times*

Figure 17. The World. Gideon Rachman's *Financial Times* **foreign affairs blog**

Unlike some newspapers, the *Financial Times* has not embraced social media with open arms. The relationship at times remains rather cautious, and yet it has developed a number of successful spaces for debate and engagement, such as Alphaville, and a highly successful blog from foreign affairs commentator Gideon Rachman. He has been writing at least three times a week since he transferred from the *Economist*, and he became one of the newspaper's first bloggers at a time when the format was becoming popular.

> *It appealed to me because I quite liked the more conversational style of writing. I also liked being able to use a lot of the stuff that I came across in a week's work – 95% of which won't go into the column because there is only so much space.*[38]

For Rachman, the column is still the heart of his week. He will sweat over it and rewrite it many times, whereas the blog is done very quickly, as if he is writing an email to a member of his family – at that speed and in that tone of voice. He says he does worry sometimes about the pressure of immediacy, the need to react to an event by posting something quickly. He writes quickly and often posts the blog directly from a train station or airport departure lounge, with no subediting or additional checks:

> *Every now and then I've thought 'oh no that was a stupid thing to say' and I wish I'd taken more time and if it was a newspaper column I would have done.*

Rachman is reluctant to get too involved in a conversation with his readers, whom he refers to as a 'slightly weird crowd of devotees', who include regulars from Paris, Tel Aviv, Amsterdam and San Diego, and who have never met each other but congregate around his words. He is also aware that in many cases his thoughts are just the starting point for a wider conversation which has nothing to do with the *FT*.

> *It's almost like you are putting a title up there and the first ten comments might relates to what you write and then it becomes a forum for people to argue about whatever it is.*

Rachman has learnt that the blogs he enjoys writing aren't necessarily the ones that make the most impression or create the most reaction – these tend to be the quirky or whimsical ones.

Like many journalists, Rachman sees that much of the action has moved to Twitter, where he has already built up a following of 10,000 people. He admits his tweets are at this stage just automated from his blog , but is confident that social media will be developed to distribute journalism better in the future. Despite his success with social media, he is not totally convinced about their power as a brand-builder – at least for his audience. He still believes that his weekly column or an old-fashioned book are as effective a calling card as his blog. Even so, he continues to enjoy the immediacy, the connection with audiences and the style, which he finds liberating.

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[38] Interview with Gideon Rachman by Nic Newman, June 2011.

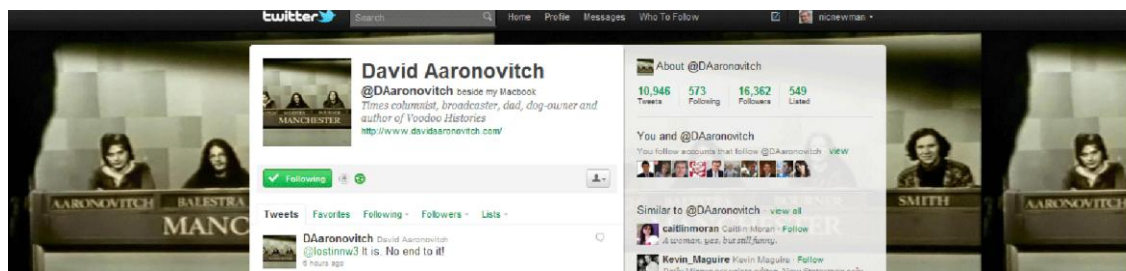## 4.4. Case study: David Aaronovich – columnist, the Times

Figure 18. David Aaronovich – Twitter home screen

David Aaronovich is a relatively new convert to Twitter, but one who is making up for lost time, having amassed over 16,000 followers in less than a year. The *Times* columnist and broadcaster had earlier flirted with starting a blog but found it too time-consuming, whereas he's found Twitter more flexible and more fun:

> *I enjoy the fact that it is highly mobile, it's diverting and gives me something to do in the ten minutes between things. It also allows you to construct precisely what you want out of it – your own timeline.*[39]

Aaronovich has constructed his timeline out of MPs, fellow columnists and a range of 'accidental friends' he has made on Twitter, such as the actor David Morrissey and writers Ian Rankin and Linda Grant. As well as using Twitter to distribute his thoughts and links to his own articles, he actively engages in conversations with people he knows and people he doesn't – enjoying the cut and thrust of the debate. 'It allows me to have fun having an argument with people I like – including people who don't agree with me.' And because he can edit his timeline he also enjoys having the control to cut people off if they begin to annoy him.

More practically, he says that Twitter has helped raised his personal profile by 'allowing more people to see his journalism'. Even with his *Times* columns sitting behind a paywall – only accessible to subscribers – he says he can get up to 200 people to click the link to an article. He can't prove that this form of marketing has led to an increase in subscriptions for the newspaper, but he senses it from the things people say.

On Twitter the links are only part of the story, and a number of other *Times* journalists, including India Knight and Caitlin Moran, are amongst the most active and mentioned personalities, keeping them front of mind amongst media elites and part of the national conversation. This is important for a columnist like Aaronovich, who also makes frequent television appearances on programmes like *Question Time* and *Newsnight*:

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[39] Interview with David Aaronovich by Nic Newman, June 2011.

I think you are looking at a variety of strategies and platforms with which you say, like the peacock, here are my wonderful tail feathers for you to look at ... where you are running your flag up the pole.

It is clear in talking to Aaronovich that he sees himself as something of a multi-platform brand. Social media and the rise of the internet have made it easier for columnists like him to create a direct relationship with the audience. But where does that leave his main employer, the newspaper?

I think we always did have brands marked off from papers but there is no question it helps people know that I am not the voice of the paper. That is not something I am trying to stress – it does allow you to have something distinct.

David Aaronovich sees Twitter as the most positive development to have come out of the internet, and one that is likely to be around for some time to come. He finds it personally rewarding, something that can support and promote his journalism, and somewhere to spend time and have fun. 'Twitter is like coming across old friends who you get on well with', he says. 'It doesn't matter that you haven't seen them for a couple of weeks, you can just slip back into the conversation.'

4.5. New tools, new dilemmas for news organisations

The last few years have seen Twitter sweep through newsrooms on the back of its convenience, utility and immediacy. In terms of publishing it is seen as less of a chore than updating a blog, but the biggest driver has been the way it has become an indispensable part of the newsgathering process. For journalists like Neal Mann it has become both a living electronic contacts book and a configurable dashboard for keeping across a vast range of stories twenty-four hours a day.

At the *Guardian*, Janine Gibson has noticed a fundamental change in attitudes towards social media because of their proven value in telling better stories. In March 2011 their extensive live blogging activities around Japan and the Middle East, which involved curating live events with the backchannel in Twitter and Facebook, accounted for over 9 per cent of total page views for the entire website.[40] Gibson says the process has now become routine:

A year ago, there were maybe 30–40 [Guardian journalists] on Twitter. There are over 200 now. It's everywhere, every desk, every department. It's been in tech [the Media and Technology section] for some time but now it is feature writers and production editors. Everybody is engaging with social media.[41]

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[40] Matt Wells, 'How Live Blogging Has Transformed Journalism', *Guardian*, March 2011 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/mar/28/live-blogging-transforms-journalism).

[41] Interview with Janine Gibson, editor, Guardian.co.uk, by Nic Newman, April 2011.

At the BBC, social media editor Alex Gubbay agrees: '18 months ago, I would have conversations with BBC correspondents about how they couldn't spare the time … now they are ringing me saying when can I start doing this?' Business editor Robert Peston and economics editor Stephanie Flanders have been two recent high-profile converts, as Twitter is now seen as a 'primary news source' according to Gubbay.

But it is also striking in these case studies how differently people use the available tools. For Laura Kuenssberg, Twitter is very much an extension of her job – another broadcast channel that allows her to tell stories in new ways. In contrast, David Aaronovich loves to engage in conversation and debate with other media commentators, and he often uses his account to tweet about culture or travel, revealing more of his personality through social media.

It is interesting that individuals are often more effective as 'network nodes' than brands in social spaces because the currency of social media is people, and because of the extra trust involved in receiving news or information from people you know. But the personality-driven nature of social networks is raising new dilemmas for news organisations. What do you do when big stars like Laura Kuenssberg leave and go to another organisation? Do they take their followers with them? Do they change their Twitter account? To what extent does this leave a hole in your distribution strategy? When does the personal brand start to rival or even outstrip the media brand? These are some of the questions that social media editor Kate Day at the *Daily Telegraph* has been wrestling with as she develops new policies and strategies in this area:

> *If you have reporters tweeting and building up their profiles, that is great for them but there are some editors who struggle to understand how that is great for the Telegraph.*

These are issues that media companies have dealt with for some time, says Day, but social media put a metric on this for the first time, making the issue far more visible.

But just as journalists have begun to get comfortable with Twitter new channels are now opening up. Facebook has begun to target journalists with specific guides on how to use its news pages to connect with audiences – LinkedIn has followed suit, and Google+ has arrived on the scene, trying to prove its credentials in this space. It is not surprising, given both the complexity and the growing importance of this area, that most newsrooms now employ social media editors to evangelise and educate and spread best practice. 'Social media is becoming increasingly central to our strategic view of what we do', says the BBC's website editor Steve Herrmann.

Al Jazeera talks about a drive to integrate social media into its journalism, and that means introducing better techniques to filter the noise of social media and add context. 'The mass of information coming out of social media is a huge challenge',

says Riyaad Minty. 'It is also a huge opportunity, and in the next few years this will be part of our core business.'

At the *Guardian*, Janine Gibson says that newsrooms are 'scratching the surface' in terms of the ways in which social media can be used – not just to listen and distribute information but also to engage and display the results. The next few years will see a deeper integration in the practice, along with greater innovation in publishing, as the social media revolution gathers pace.

5. Disruption of business models and the role of social media

While newsrooms may have realised the value of social media, the business side of news organisations is only now waking up to the potential disruption. The managing editor of the *Washington Post*, Raju Narisetti, spells out the problem:

> *What happens to web pay models if readers, especially the legion of younger readers, start to think of their friends, rather than editors ... as their trusted news sources?*[42]

In short, the great fear is that news sites will become irrelevant as Facebook and Twitter become the default gateways to news. In the process they could end up taking the audience and the value, leaving nothing to invest in original journalism. Narisetti argues that, for now, referral traffic from Facebook or Twitter looks attractive for big-brand sites, but sooner or later there are likely to be fewer and fewer reasons to visit them.

Meanwhile a number of the world's leading publishers have chosen this moment to put up expensive paywalls around their content – just as social media begin to drain audiences and engagement. Narisetti argues that this could end up being yet another historic mistake by publishers seeking to protect their profit margins.

Figure 19 shows referral traffic from Facebook to the *Times* drying up in June 2010, when the charging for content was introduced, and other publishers, such as the *New York Times*, have also opted to put up barriers around content – even if they have taken a more careful approach which allows most social media traffic through.

This approach is gathering favour as new evidence has emerged which shows that social media traffic tends to be stickier and more valuable than drive-by search referrals.

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[42] Raju Narisetti spoke at the BBC Social Media summit, May 2011 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2011/05/bbcsms-the-future-of-the-news.shtml).

Downstream traffic from Twitter to News sites

Monthly downstream % of 'www.twitter.com', based on UK usage.
Created: 27/04/2011. © Copyright 1998–2011 Hitwise Pty. Ltd.   Source: Experian Hitwise UK
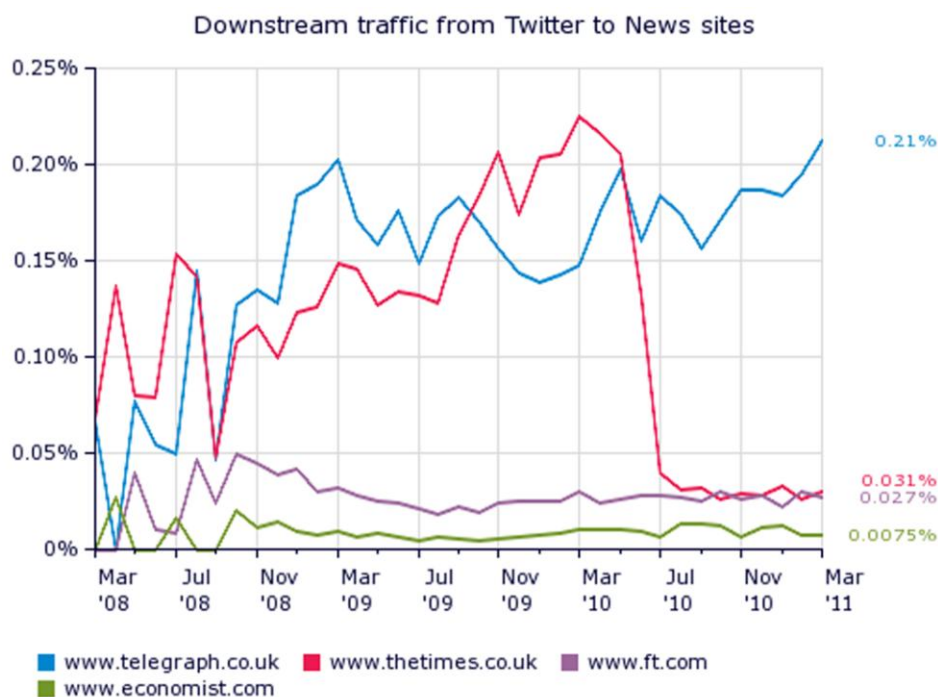
Figure 19. Traffic from Twitter to selected news sites, 2008–2011

A number of UK companies interviewed for this study noticed a higher number of page views for traffic from social networks compared with search, and in some cases a much higher tendency to sign up for subscriptions – for example when coming from a network like LinkedIn. This is backed up by evidence from the United States, where Mashable.com logfiles show that Facebook and Twitter visitors spent 29 per cent more time on the website and viewed 20 per cent more pages than visitors arriving via search engines.[43]

It is for this reason that News International has been considering relaxing its hard paywall around the *Times* – at least for Facebook users, who also bring other valuable data with them to enrich the *Times*'s sophisticated customer databases.

It is a delicate balance to strike. Social media referrals can drive more overall traffic – but make it too porous, and can end up undermining revenue in the long run. FT.com executive editor Bede McCarthy has been wrestling with the issue as part of a cross-company social media initiative. Whilst he can see that more content is being shared, the current metered paywall means that this 'is not translating into page impressions. People know that they have to register to see the article and that is a deterrent.'[44] The *FT* board has taken an increasing interest in social media, partly because it can see the industry-wide trends around journalism, but also because it understands the possibilities for marketing, product and customer service.

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[43] Bill Grueskin, Ava Seave and Lucas Graves, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 'The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism' (http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/chap2.pdf).

[44] Interview with Bede McCarthy by Nic Newman, June 2011.

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All parts of the company are taking part in the strategy initiative, which McCarthy believes will see the *FT* emerge with a stronger overall view of how social media support the wider business.

> *A few years down the line, what I would see is a further fragmentation of our readership across new mobile products and a stronger relationship between social media and FT products. We'll be more in the conversation.*

The *Daily Telegraph* is also engaged in a similar strategic process of integrating Facebook and Twitter into the *Telegraph* experience at the same time as it is engaging its correspondents within the social networks themselves. Social media editor Kate Day says it is a difficult balance because not all *Telegraph* readers feel comfortable with social media, and commercially there is a problem in terms of how much personal data is then being driven to those networks.

> *You can't ignore Facebook coming with their huge base of users and you can't deny that your users will also be using Facebook. That does give them a huge amount of power, but that doesn't mean that everything needs to go through a Facebook filter.*[45]

Indeed, a number of news organisations are feeling increasingly uncomfortable at the growing influence of social networks like Facebook. Although they are providing a complementary role in driving traffic, as we saw in section 2 of this report, Facebook in particular is now a major competitor when it comes to online advertising. The company has been valued of between $50 billion and $70 billion on the back of potential revenues from the personal data collected from its 700 million users.[46] And much of that data about people's interests has been aggregated from the 'like' buttons placed strategically on almost every news website in the world. LinkedIn has pulled off a similar trick with professional data and recruitment, creating further competition in another space once owned by newspaper groups. With many advertisers looking to target spend on specific demographic groups, interests or locations, publishers without that information could see their own general advertising rates commoditised even further.

Raju Narisetti at the *Washington Post* believes that it is easy to underestimate the threat from social networks – and this is not just about advertising revenue. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube don't create much, if anything, by way of original content, he says, 'But they are winning by simply making the news experience easy, useful and engaging to their audiences.' Changing that won't be easy, but news executives like Bede McCarthy agree that news organisations will need to be far more focused on the needs of audiences going forward:

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[45] Interview with Kate Day by Nic Newman, April 2011.

[46] BBC News: 'Facebook Investment "Values Firm at $50bn"', Jan. 2011 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12106652).
The Register: 'Facebook Fever Prices Social Network at $70bn', June 2011
(http://www.theregister.co.uk/2011/06/28/gsv_capital_facebook_fever/print.html).

The onus is on us to make the FT products compelling to give people a reason not to consume the FT through aggregation products on an iPad or whatever.

If improving the product is one half of the strategy going forward, the other half is an increased focus on seeding and pushing content within social networks. Social Media Optimisation (SMO) has become a new buzzword in many news organisations, not least because the impact can be impressive. Figure 20 shows how social media have helped the *Daily Mail* (red line) gain traction for its website in the United States compared with the BBC and the *Guardian*, and news organisations have started to employ increasingly sophisticated strategies (as detailed in section 2.4).
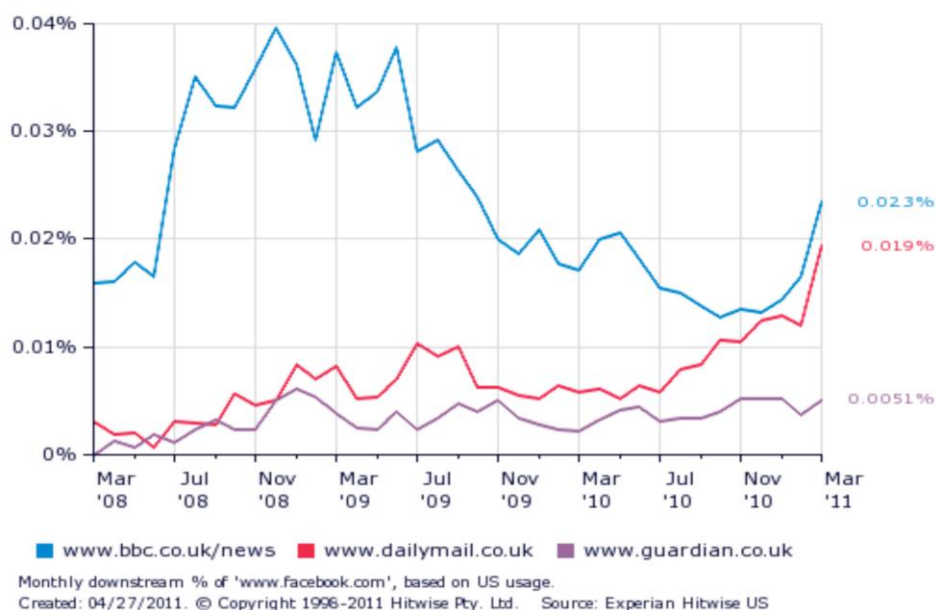

Monthly downstream % of 'www.facebook.com', based on US usage.
Created: 04/27/2011. © Copyright 1998-2011 Hitwise Pty. Ltd.   Source: Experian Hitwise US

Figure 20. Referrals from Facebook to BBC, *Daily Mail* and *Guardian*, 2008–2011

One effective example of social media marketing came from Al Jazeera during the Arab Spring, when the broadcaster ran promotional campaigns in Twitter and Facebook to publicise its live video stream – particularly in the United States. Head of social media Riyaad Minty says traffic to the video coverage increased by 2,500 per cent during the Egypt crisis, and most of that came from social media:

We've tried things before but never with such success ... at least 20–25 percent of our traffic came from the US – from a market where people couldn't see out output previously.

Al Jazeera achieved these impressive figures by buying prominent placement on the key Twitter hashtags for eighteen consecutive days with links to the live stream.

These slots were filled with relevant editorial content managed by Minty's team in Doha: 'we operated very much as a news desk', he says. 'We would see what would potentially be trending and we would post a tweet saying Mubarak is doing this or that.' This was combined with live streaming via Facebook and on YouTube, where Creative Commons licences[47] allowed the live stream to be used and embedded by others with full credit to Al Jazeera. On the day that Mubarak stepped down, YouTube linked directly through to the live Al Jazeera stream, driving hundreds of thousands more people to its coverage. All of this activity demonstrates how closely editorial teams now need to work with marketing and business development – in real time. Within social networks – where trust is so important – it is editorial content that has become the Trojan horse for marketing and customer acquisition. At the *Economist*, digital editor Tom Standage has watched the old barriers come crashing down:

> *We've crossed them without noticing in both directions. The marketing department is selecting content to put on Facebook and making editorial decisions about what should go there. In the other direction, journalists are doing marketing for their own stories by tweeting them.*

Within just a few short years, social media have gone from something people laughed about to something that board directors suspect could become integral to the business model itself. Social media fuel the acquisition funnel, create loyalty and engagement, and even distribute the journalism itself. They are no silver bullet for the woes of the publishing industry, but they are one more useful weapon in its armoury.

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[47] Creative Commons licences allow creators to communicate simply which rights they reserve and which rights they waive for the benefit of recipients or other creators.

6. Conclusions

A recent *Economist* special report on the news industry concluded that news was 'returning to its roots as a social medium' – before the advent of the mass media. The internet, it argued, is taking us back to the conversational culture of the coffeehouse,[48] where news was exchanged and discussed in a lively atmosphere and then further distributed by pamphlet, letter and word of mouth.

This report provides some evidence of that effect – showing how Twitter and Facebook have become, for many people, the meeting places of the 21st century – new hubs for the creation and dissemination of news. But, as this paper has also shown, these 'virtual coffeehouses' have some radically different attributes. Their reach is global and the speed with which individual citizens can create and move information can help to bring down governments and humble mighty corporations. In this sense they could be seen as part of the revitalisation of the public sphere (Habermas 1962), where authorities could be 'kept within bounds'.

But one difference from the theories and practice of the past is the sheer number of people now taking part – which stretches way beyond bourgeois elites. Not everybody wants to comment on or share news, but the Oxford Internet Institute survey data discussed in section 2 shows that active participation is no longer the preserve of small minority. In the United States, a Pew Research Centre survey in 2010 found that 37 per cent of internet users had contributed to the creation of news, commented on it, or distributed it via popular social networks.[49] Since that survey, the widespread adoption of simple sharing tools such as Facebook Like and the promotion of these services by mainstream news organisations has increased virality even further.

At the same time widespread smart phone adoption is increasing the ease with which consumers can upload, access and share content any time, anywhere. 'They don't just consume news; they share it, develop it, and add to it. It's a very dynamic relationship with news', says Arianna Huffington of the *Huffington Post*,[50] who has pioneered a new model of co-creation of news with audiences and who launched a version of the site in the UK in July 2011.

As we showed in section 2, one result of these trends has been the explosion in referrals from social networks to mainstream news sites. This has become the fastest-growing source of new traffic, and in some genres and for some websites these referrals are beginning to rival search as a primary gateway to news.

While few deny the significance of these changes, it is also clear that this is not just a return to the conversational culture of the 17th century. The new electronic coffeehouses are not replacing the mass media; rather, they live in a symbiotic

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[48] Coffeehouses became popular in Europe in the 17th century as a centre of social interaction (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coffeehouse).

[49] Pew Research Centre: 'The New News Landscape: Rise of the Internet' (http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1508/internet-cell-phone-users-news-social-experience).

[50] Quote from *Bulletins from the Future, Economist* special report on the news industry (http://www.economist.com/node/18904136).

relationship, feeding off and amplifying each other. As we suggested in section 2 of this report, it is mainstream media brands and traditional mainstream influencers that drive the majority of news conversations in social media. The news itself may emerge first via Twitter, but it is the mass media that pick it up and package it for a mass audience. 'In Tunisia, it was not about mobilising people through social media, it was about broadcasting what was going on to those who chose to listen', argues Riyaad Minty of Al Jazeera. 'Only once mainstream media picks up on a story and decides what importance it should have, do people really notice what is going on.'[51]

It is the interplay between mainstream media and social media that is the subject of much of this study, and this is where most of the new dilemmas are emerging. There is a clash of style and cultures over the unregulated, anything-goes nature of the peer-to-peer internet, and this is profoundly uncomfortable for news organisations as well as for regulators and governments. And yet most news organisations recognise that there is no turning back. 'The virtual world is an important part of how people live their lives. It is where people share information. We need to be in there too', says the BBC's Steve Herrmann.

Gradually, new rules and norms are emerging for how organisations and reporters should engage in these networks. In the heat of real events, journalists are working out – under enormous pressure – how to verify the most trusted information and how to separate the signal from the noise. There is also a growing number of examples – some highlighted in section 4 of this report – of how individual journalists have been able to use social media to break stories and raise their individual profile – becoming 'network nodes' of great influence in the process. Neal Mann from Sky News describes how when this is achieved the stories 'come to you'; Brian Stelter of the *New York Times* and Andy Carvin of National Public Radio are other individual examples of the same trend noted in this report.

But as social media use becomes more established in newsrooms, there is a growing realisation that social media affect the business of journalism too – indeed, they are becoming central to discussions about the future of newspapers. The launch of *Huffington Post* in the UK in July 2011 is forcing traditional publishers to re-examine whether they are doing enough to engage with bloggers and social networks – opening up a new front in the battle for eyeballs. At the same time, there are fears that social networking sites themselves will increasingly take commercial value from news organisations, making it even harder to fund independent, distinctive journalism. Many publishers will continue to be wary of the growing power of Facebook, Google and Twitter to filter and recommend news – traditionally the role of a human editor. But the balance of power may have already shifted, as social recommendation becomes established. Some publishers are looking to change the rules around metered paywalls – creating special deals for social networks – to ensure that they remain part of the conversation and can take advantage of the way their content can be virally shared.

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[51] http://riyaadm.com/2011/01/14/the-revolution-was-televised-you-were-just-watching-the-wrong-channel/.

One of the difficulties for news organisations is that the social ecosystem is constantly evolving. New networks are emerging, such as Google+, and audiences are continuing to shift their behaviour and allegiances. A host of new start-ups and social aggregators like Flipboard, news.me and Zite are offering personalised newspapers based on the recommendations of users' friends.

In truth, all of these tools are attempts to make sense of the extraordinary explosion of information that we've seen over the past decade and more. Alongside search, audiences now have new social mechanisms to filter and find things that are relevant and useful to them. Every year these mechanisms become more valued by consumers, and yet none of this replaces the role of a traditional news organisation. The need for quality content to be produced, packaged and distributed remains crucial for the new ecosystem to function and flourish.

The emergence of social networks and social discovery has added an extra layer of complexity to this ecosystem with the creation of new editorial and commercial dilemmas. There may still be more questions than answers, but news publishers know there is no alternative but to engage – hard and fast.

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