



Interplay of Journalism, Social Media and Ethical Concerns: Experiences from two Indian Newsrooms

Anoop Kumar

ABSTRACT

When it comes to using social media for journalistic purpose, it has lot more potential in terms of circulating the news stories in multiple networks, being abreast of latest happenings around the world, and spotting the newsworthy posts, among others. This has compelled many news organisations worldwide to use social media. Further, journalists and editors are now increasingly being directed to use their personal social media networks for meeting the journalistic ends. Despite the social media being fruitful for journalists as well as news organisations, it comes up with set of challenges and concerns – in particular ethical ones – needs to be understood and addressed. In present interview article, I have discussed on some of challenges pertaining to journalistic use of social media which is based on the excerpts of in-depth interview conducted with journalists and editors dealing with social media from two Indian English dailies, the Hindustan Times and The Hindu. Here, I have arranged the interview excerpts thematically.

Theme 1: Writing and responding on social media

Researcher: How does writing for newspaper differ from social media?

Interviewee, A: In the newspaper the possibility of going wrong is very less because there are checks and balances. In social, checks and balances are very less as compared to the print. So the possibility of going wrong is higher in social media.

Researcher: What are the precautions you prescribe for journalist with respect to writing on social media?

Interviewee, A: Control over the language is very important for reporters because in social media the problem is that if you tweet and if you go wrong you can be lambasted. So you have to be very careful.

Researcher: How does the audience shape the discourses that journalists do on social media?

Interviewee, B: You can't control your audience on social media. Your social media audience is going to be women, going to be LGBT people, they going to be disable people, they going to be Dalit people, they going to be black people. So you can't afford to be insensitive, you can't afford to be biased because you are going to instantly caught out for it. So may be earlier lots of newspapers would carry whatever insensitive comments about disability but now they can't afford to do it because instantly on social media they would be shamed.

Researcher: So in that way journalists are becoming wary of being criticized on social media.

Interviewee, B: Yeah, this has helped in creating awareness and sensitivity among journalists.

Researcher: What is the main challenge if you use your personal social media account for sharing news stories?

Interviewee, C: On my personal account it is my personal account but I am also HT representative. The division between what is personal account and what is like professional ... because people know that I am an HT journalist ... it is very thin line and the public really doesn't understand. You know we get tons of messages and mails on the stories. So we all need to be trained on how to respond especially if somebody is being offensive or if somebody had taken offence by your original story or something and just you know how to respond without getting into this whole like

Researcher: So in that way you need training on how to respond effectively?

Interviewee, C: Yes.

Theme 2: Attentiveness to offensive, abusive and incendiary posts

Researcher: What are the challenges you face while appropriating the social media posts (tweets, etc.) in the news stories or writing the news stories on social media activities per se?

Interviewee, C: We often create Twitter reaction copies on be it India's test match, any big event, film release etc. We often see that Twitter reaction stories do very well. People like to read what they say. Also we feel that curating those tweets is very big task because lots of tweets are vulgar, biased and indecent, and they are also incendiary. I think with news we are constantly cautioned against others' posts. We definitely don't report anything that is crowdsourced [from social media].

Interviewee, D: When the stuff is so coloured in the internet you know when they are very opinionated. They just want to get it shared a lot not thinking about or not being responsible about what they are writing then you have to absolutely be very careful about what you are picking up from social media websites.

Researcher: Why you need to be very careful while picking up newsworthy posts from social media? If you are failing to do so, how does this affect you?

Interviewee, D: There can't be any scope for bending the ethics or breaking the ethics because if you do it you will end up looking like fool. A lot of time you will have some wrong content and it will reflect badly on you as well as your organisation.

Theme 3: Not being overly dependent on Facebook for information

Researcher: Given the tweaked algorithm of Facebook regarding the newsfeed on timeline which prioritises posts of friends and family members over news publishers; how this is going to affect what you get to read and overall opinion-making?

Interviewee, E: Facebook's timeline is completely controlled by its algorithm. Facebook decides what you see, ok! Facebook decides ok his friends have read this copy so you must be interested in it I am going to show it to him. What are your friends? Mostly they are those people who think like you, ok! So it is vicious cycle. It will be all essentially within a same mind-set. So you are not going to get something that is different.

Interviewee, F: You see the idea of internet is to have public sphere with wide variety of opinions around you. You get your opinions from different sources and then you make your own judgement. It [Facebook] has now changed its algorithm to target more friends and family posts rather than publications. To me it is like restricting the public sphere because everybody is now looking at things through Facebook most of the time unless you are news junky and you go searching for it.

Researcher: What is the disadvantage if you become dependent on social media heavily and use it as a gateway to accessing news stories and opinion articles?

Interviewee, E: The biggest advantage of printed newspaper over the internet site is that you are putting news in front of a person. He may not like it. He might not have idea but it is there for him to see. On the social [Facebook], you don't see things that you don't like.

Interviewee, F: Now Facebook starts restricting the news feed and it will show you things only what your friends and family are reading. Then it is very likely that your views are only going to be influenced by the views that your near and dear ones hold.