

Sourcing and Trust: Twitter Journalism in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Social media, in particular Twitter, have been widely adopted in newsrooms for various purposes, including sourcing news leads and content, disseminating stories, soliciting user comments and driving traffic to corporate websites. This paper investigates the ways in which journalists use social media for sourcing and verification, and their attitudes towards social media in terms of trust. The analysis is built on a survey of journalists in Ireland conducted in 2013, which revealed that journalists in Ireland are heavy adopters of Twitter in their workflows, and in particular use social media for sourcing news leads and content. However, they are highly skeptical about the level of trust in social media. While this paper focuses on journalists in Ireland, the analysis of the relationship between trust, sourcing and verification reveals broader patterns about journalistic values, and how these values and practices operate in the new media landscape.

Keywords

social journalism, social media, news, sourcing, data journalism, verification, Twitter, journalism, trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms, and in particular Twitter, have become an integral part of journalists' professional lives, having been widely adopted in newsrooms over the past five years. Journalists and news organisations now monitor social media for breaking news and content, they use it to find sources and eyewitnesses, and to crowdsource varied perspectives on newsworthy events. They also use social media for promoting their content, attracting audiences, and driving traffic to their websites. The wealth of information social media provides is unprecedented in terms of velocity, if arguably not in terms of quality.

In traditional journalism, the news-gathering process mainly relies on sourcing information from "official places" [12] such as press releases, newswires, and first-person interviews. However, social

media platforms and user-generated content have changed this, as social media has increasingly taken a prominent role in the sharing of real-time information and breaking news. In its short lifespan (est. 2006), Twitter has become a central source of news for many important events, such as the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, the 2009 post-election protests in Iran, the devastating 2012 earthquake in Haiti, the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, and the ongoing Arab Spring uprising. Posts from 'citizen journalists' and eye-witnesses can help fill the 'news vacuum' that immediately follows an event, when media organisations do not have a reporter in the field (e.g. in Haiti - see [2]). During the Arab Spring, Twitter facilitated greater inclusion of 'nonelite' voices during rapid and often confusing developments [11]. Broersma and Graham [1] refer to social networks as 'huge pools' of 'collective intelligence' that allow reporters to obtain information about ongoing events, to diversify voices, and to get in touch with informative sources. Overall, social media is an invaluable source of information which gives access to a considerably larger pool of information than was previously available.

The emergence of Twitter as a source for breaking news, content, and leads, and the speed and openness through which this information is generated, is impacting the profession of journalism. Hermida [10] argues that the openness and instantaneity of Twitter has affected two key aspects of journalism as gatekeeping: sourcing and verification. These aspects of the journalism workflow are reflected in our study, as sourcing and verification have turned out to be two of the most controversial aspects of social media use in newsrooms.

This paper draws on the results of a survey into Irish journalists' use of social media, which revealed that journalists in Ireland are some of the heaviest users of social media internationally [7]. This paper studies the use of social media in Irish newsrooms, focusing on the practices of sourcing and verification, and examines how the notion of trust factors into the use of social media in these aspects of a journalist's work.

2. METHOD

This study is drawn from the results of a national survey of journalists working in Ireland, across all types of organisations, beats, and media. The survey was open to all journalists -- full-time, part-time, casual, and freelance -- but results are limited to those who identify as professional journalists, which the survey defines as those who state that journalism forms a 'significant part' of their income. The survey was conducted following ethical approval by the National University of Ireland Galway's Research Ethics Committee, and was carried out using the online tool Survey Monkey. It was promoted broadly through professional listservs, and community-specific social media channels.

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Journalists were also direct-targeted through a comprehensive list of media professionals from the National University of Ireland's Press Office, which holds over 1,445 email addresses of individual journalists, as well as national and local media companies. Several articles about the survey were also featured in local and national media.

A total of 421 people responded to the survey between 2 June 2013 and 20 September 2013, with 259 respondents filling it out to completion. A similar survey conducted in the UK [4] collected less than double the number of responses (589) from a population ten times that of Ireland. The National Union of Journalists lists 1,280 journalists in the Republic of Ireland, and 88 journalists in Northern Ireland, for a total of 1,368, which likely includes a number of individuals who do not qualify as 'professional' based on the survey's stated criteria. Using this figure, the response rate (421) is 31%, and the completion rate (259) is 19%. Based on survey completions, we can conclude that the results of this survey are accurate at the 95% confidence level with a 5.5% margin of error.

3. RESPONDENT PROFILE

Journalists in this study come from a fairly wide age range, with a generally high level of professional experience; 68% of respondents fall between the ages of 25 and 44, 90% of the respondents have five or more years' experience as a journalist, with 16% indicating 1-4 years experience, and 22% saying they have been in the business for 20 years or longer. The gender balance is roughly even, with a slightly higher number of males (55%) in the final results. In terms of journalistic medium, journalists working for print newspapers make up the largest group (39%), followed by radio (17%) print magazine (12%), the online platform of a broadcast or print medium (11%), television (10%), online medium (9%) and personal journalism blog (2%). All areas of content production are represented, with journalists working in Irish news constituting the largest group (37%), followed by a relatively even mix of other beats, including sport, business, lifestyle, politics, science and technology, arts and culture, and world news. Journalists are relatively evenly spread out across organisation size, with 31% falling in the 10-49 employees category, and 23% working for very large organisations with over 500 employees. The vast majority of journalists in this study (59%) report their social media knowledge as 'better than average' or 'expert'. Overall the demographics are diverse, capturing a range of journalists working in different areas, media and organisations. However, the

sample does reflect a group that is savvy in the use of social media, and experienced in the profession of journalism.

4. RESULTS

The results of this survey reveal that Irish journalists are amongst the heaviest users of social media platforms for work purposes. Almost 99% of journalists in Ireland use social media in a professional capacity, with 92% of respondents using Twitter at least once a week. This frequency of use is amongst the highest studied, matching the UK rate, surpassing France (91%), Canada (89%), Australia (85%), the United States (79%), and Sweden (77%).

The fact that Irish journalists are heavy adopters of social media makes them a good source for a study into exactly how journalists use social media in a journalistic workflow.

Twitter is by far the most popular social media platform by journalists in this study. Two thirds of journalists name Twitter as their most-used social media platform, whereas only 18% name Facebook and 8% name Google+ as their platform of choice for professional purposes. Due to the evident popularity and importance of Twitter in this study, and the reported significance of Twitter as the most important social media platform for journalism [12, 3, 15], this paper focuses on journalists' use of Twitter.

4.1 Uses of social media: sourcing vs. verification

The adoption of social media in Irish newsrooms is clearly high, however the results show that the function of social media in a journalist's traditional workflow varies. The survey named a number of uses for social media (sourcing leads, sourcing content, verifying information, networking, publishing/promoting own work, monitoring trends), and asked respondents to use the following scale: 'social media is the main thing I use for this', 'I use social media daily for this', 'I use social media around once a week for this', 'I only rarely use social media for this', or 'I don't use social media for this'. The results reveal that social media is most popular for sourcing news leads, with 64% saying 'I use social media daily for this' or 'social media is the main thing I use for this', and second most popular for sourcing content (55%). The least popular option was for verifying information, with only 40% using it frequently, and a significant 45% stating they never use social media for this purpose.

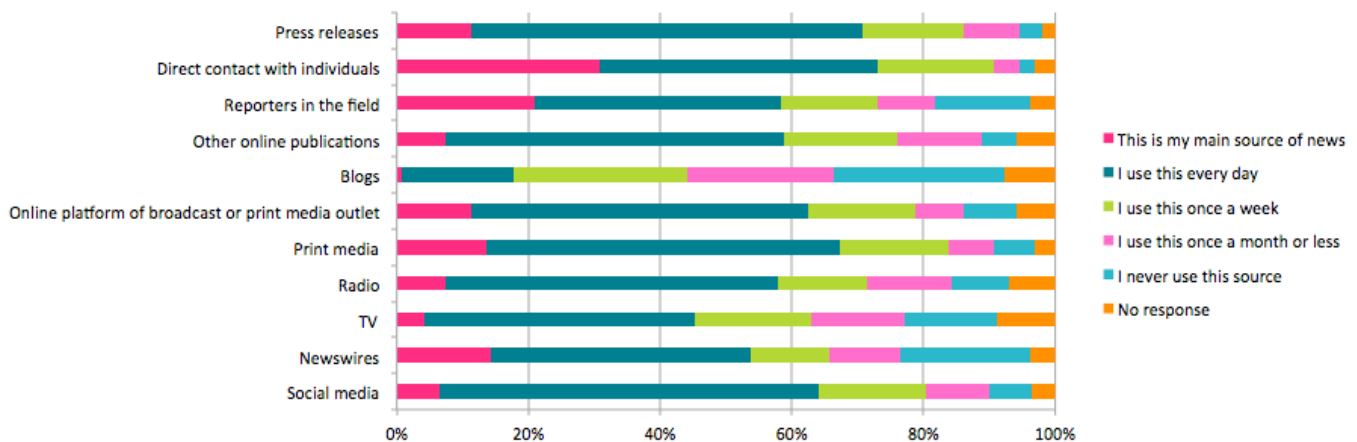


Figure 1. Where journalists source their news, N=259

The reluctance to use social media for verification has been discussed frequently at broadcaster debates and conferences [16]. A reason for this reluctance could be a consequence of the demands that are placed on a journalists' time when verifying social media content – the process is very time-consuming – a factor that has been recently occupying discussions at broadcaster debates and conferences [16]. However our findings suggest that it could also be related to the sense that many journalists believe information on social media cannot be trusted. In the free comment field at the end of the survey, one respondent remarked, “While social media is useful, I still maintain and carry out my obligation as a journalist to always verify information sourced on such sites.”

4.2 Social media vs. other avenues for sourcing

Respondents were asked to rate how frequently they used various methods for sourcing news leads, placing social media alongside more traditional sources (Fig. 1). Social media, with 64% reporting daily use for sourcing news leads, fairs better than newswires (54%), television (45%) and radio (58%), but is outranked by several other popular traditional sources: ‘direct contact with individuals’ (73%), press releases (71%), and print media (67%).

In contrast to these popular sources, social media is published nearly instantaneously, which lends it a speed advantage over traditional news formats for communicating breaking news or new developments in running stories. In the current news environments, where readers expect continual updates, the constant flow of information social media provides has become a forum for sourcing story leads. Two-thirds of respondents in the survey report that they use social media heavily for sourcing leads. However, if we look more closely at the provenance of social media leads, it becomes clear that many of these leads are from sources that journalists have access to outside social media. Seventy per cent of journalists indicate that they draw leads from the social media accounts of people they know in the real world (e.g. friends and colleagues), 65% take leads from influential individuals in their area, and 51% use information posted on the official social media accounts of media companies. By contrast, only 27% of journalists indicate that their social-media-based story leads emanate from sources they are connected to solely through social media. This finding suggests that, for sourcing

leads, social media is currently providing an additional or alternative platform for accessing sources, rather than providing new root sources of information – a finding commensurate with the idea that social media is a ‘social awareness stream’ [14] perceived mostly as a new tool for carrying out the standard journalistic task of ‘finding out what is going on in the world’ [5].

The lack of social connectivity to unknown sources is perhaps not surprising in that familiarity with a source leads to a level of trust; Hermida, Lewis and Zamith argue that “the more familiar journalists are with a source, the more likely they are to be considered credible” [11]. From a slightly different angle, our findings support Bruno’s qualified conclusion that despite the heavy incorporation of user-generated social media content by ‘citizen journalists’ into major news agencies’ websites (CNN, BBC, The Guardian), reporters in the field still have an important role to play [2].

4.3 Trust in Social Media

Facts, truth and reality are considered to be the “god terms” in journalism by Zelizer [17]. Thus ‘verification’ is considered to be one of the most important aspects setting apart journalism from other forms of communication [9]. The growing use of social media platforms for sourcing in the newsroom results in a tension for the profession of journalism, which defines itself via verification [9]. This tension is clearly evident in our study: even though the daily adoption of social media for sourcing leads (64%) and content (55%) is relatively high, overall, journalists report very little trust in social media as a source. Lack of trust in social media is reported as the strongest deterrent in using social media in our study. Overall, 64% of respondents agree that they are deterred from using social media because information cannot be trusted.

This lack of trust in social media, stated as a deterrent, is corroborated by another question, which compares social media to other commonly used sources for news. In this response, only 12% of respondents state they are ‘fairly confident’ that social media is a trustworthy news source, and only one respondent stated without qualification that he/she trusts social media as a news source. The only listed option considered less trustworthy than social media was blogs at 9% for ‘trusted’ or ‘fairly confident’.

The trust level of social media as a source contrasts strongly with

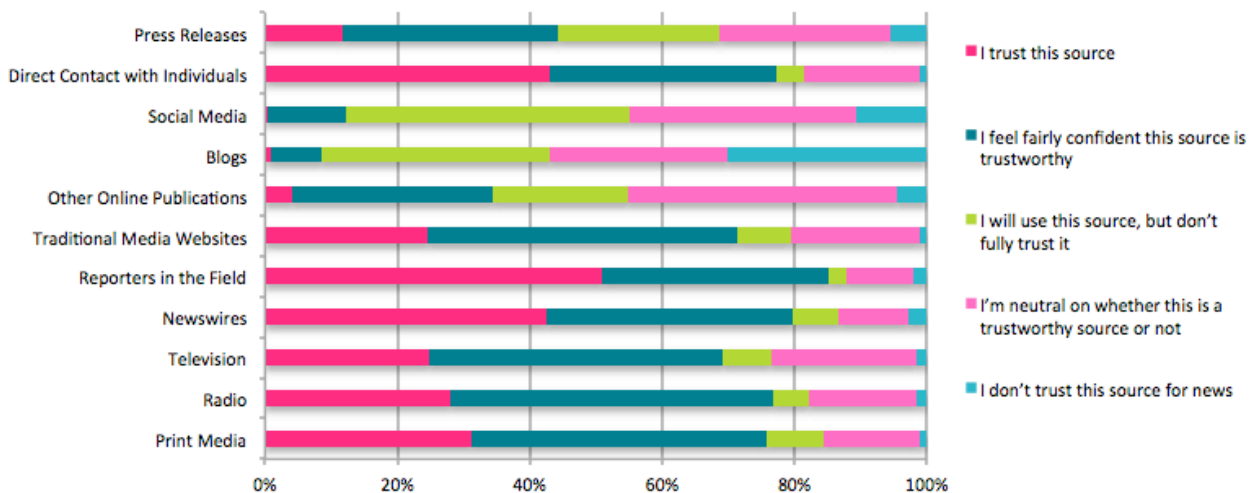


Figure 1. Trust in various sources of news, N=259

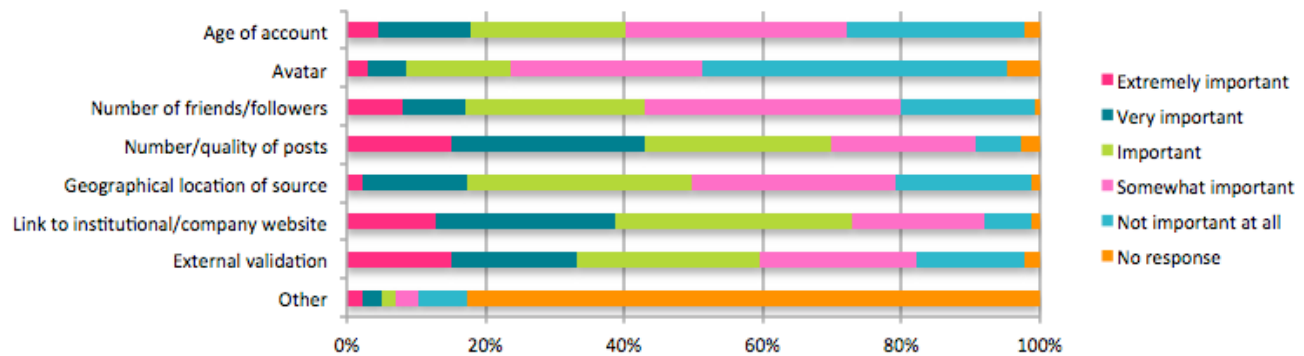


Figure 3. Factors in determining trustworthiness of source, $N=259$

other commonly used news sources, revealing that overall, the trust level in social media is not the result of generalised journalistic scepticism, but reflects medium-specific concerns. As presented in Figure 2, ranking highest for ‘I feel fairly confident this source is trustworthy’ or ‘I trust this source’ are reporters in the field at 85%, followed by newswires (80%), direct contact with individuals (77%), radio (77%), print media (76%), websites of traditional media outlets (71%) and Television (69%). Other online publications (44%) and Press Releases (34%) were generally considered less trustworthy as sources.

Thirty-seven percent of journalists who say they do not trust social media for sourcing news also identify themselves as infrequent users of social media (those who post original content to social media platforms less than once a week). These infrequent users are twice as likely to distrust social media as ‘power users’, who post original content to social media sites multiple times a day. The correspondence between heavier use of social media and greater levels of trust in its content may shed light on the ongoing debate about whether or not journalists who are very active on social media deviate from traditional professional practices and norms [13, 5, 6]. However, such an investigation is beyond the scope of this current paper.

To put trust as a deterrent in context, the second strongest deterrent for using social media (45%) is concerns about copyright, ownership or intellectual property restrictions on social media. This is followed by concerns around privacy or reputation, with personal privacy ranking higher as a deterrent (37%) than concerns over the source’s privacy (25%). Privacy issues are understandable given that the most-used platform, Twitter, is comprised of almost entirely public content. Very few respondents (3.5%) feel too constrained by their organisation’s guidelines to use social media for work purposes, and only 10% state that social media was not used widely enough by their relevant contacts to be useful. Given these figures, the lack of trust stands out even more clearly as a key deterrent.

4.4 How social media content is validated

When social media content is deemed worthy of further inquiry, journalists pursue a number of methods for validating information. The most popular method adopts the long-standing practice of direct contact with trusted individuals. Eighty-three percent of respondents state that, in order to validate content on social media, they contact official bodies, such as press offices or the police. Sixty-five percent of Irish journalists tap into existing ‘real world’ networks for validation, 52% say they contact the social media source directly. Outside of direct contact with

individuals, 63% reveal that they validate by cross-referencing information online, or by cross-referencing on social media (40%). A small percentage (15%) use technical means (i.e. tools) to verify information, which could be the result of the relatively small number of tools available for these purposes (e.g. processing metadata and geo-tagged information or using available services for checking authenticity of images). Overall, the validation of content, relying more on direct, individual contact than other means, remains a time consuming process, even if the time required to find the lead is shortened by the instantaneousness of social media publishing.

4.5 Factors in determining trustworthiness

When asked what is used to determine the trustworthiness of a social media source (Fig. 3), 73% of journalists choose a ‘link to an institutional or company website as important, very important, or extremely important, whereas 59% choose external validation - going beyond what is provided by profile information in the source.

These figures suggest that social media is being adopted as a tool for accessing information that can be trusted because of factors beyond the communicative boundaries of social media. However, by contrast, the quality and number of posts on a social media account is named as important, very important or extremely important by 70% of respondents, suggesting that the quality of the account activity itself significantly contributes to trustworthiness. The source’s Avatar (24%) and the age of the social media account (40%) were considered the least important aspects among the options.

5. DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that the full adoption of social media as one amongst many available quality sources is in a transitional phase, with journalists using it rather enthusiastically, while at the same time noting a strong scepticism about its trustworthiness. Journalists frequently adopt social media to find stories and content for their stories, but they are reluctant to rely on it for verification. They have integrated it to varying degrees in all areas of their journalistic workflow, but they quite clearly state that it cannot be trusted, despite the fact that they draw most of their information on social media from known or authoritative sources, and almost a third report that they ‘strongly agree’ they would not be able to carry out their work without social media.

Most journalists still list ‘authority sources’ as their most trusted for sourcing – turning to reporters in the field, newswires, print

media, and their own direct contact with individuals. The top factor in deeming a social media source as trustworthy is a link in the social media account to a company or institutional website. When it comes to validating content found on social media, the strongest tendency is to go outside of social media – to official sources and contacts in ‘real world’ networks. Despite the stated lack of trust we believe that high adoption rates indicate a change in attitude towards social media. This change is supported by the fact that the second most important factor in determining a social media account's trustworthiness is the number and quality of posts found on the account. Number and quality of posts is a factor that exists entirely within the framework of social media – it does not rely on external links, connections to authority institutions, or connections to pre-existing sources. The current literature on Twitter adoption in the news cycle points to a process of normalisation [10], where journalists adapt social media to fit professional practices and norms, while at the same time adjusting their practices to accommodate evolving technologies [13], and our findings suggest that conceptions of trust may be evolving in a similar vein.

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