

# **Analysis**

## **Introduction**

This report seeks to answer the question of how social media are changing business reporters' sourcing practices. In the past, reporters depended on face-to-face interviews or email. With the popularity of social media in the newsrooms, there are new ways of reporting — finding sources and user-generated content on social media. This study aims to find out in what situations social media is most used for sourcing, how reporters utilize it, the benefits and drawbacks of this method, how reporters overcome the drawbacks, and what the future could be like for social media sourcing.

Social media are virtual communities and networks where people create, share and exchange information and ideas on Facebook, Twitter and the like. They are playing an increasingly important role in reporting. We're seeing more and more media outlets use social networks to access sources for their stories.

They send tweets. They tell their Facebook fans about the stories they're working on, and they encourage sources to contact reporters. They ask the public for story ideas and readers to send in comments or photos. Many reporters use social media to develop or maintain relationships with their sources. A 2011 study by Arketi Web Watch shows 39% of business journalists use social network sources for their stories. This is an incomplete list of new ways of sourcing that have emerged with the popularity of social media.

The study is of importance to reporters since credible sources are a key aspect of journalism and could determine whether a story is doable, and sometimes even dictate the direction of the story. Although social media and journalists' sourcing patterns are

changing fast, some core journalistic values remain intact, such as credibility, objectivity and transparency. Therefore, this study, by offering insights on journalists' protocols or standards regarding social media sourcing, will shed light on how the traditional values of media are still maintained. Take the BBC as an example. BBC recognizes the value of social media in news gathering to "find a wider range of voices, ideas and eyewitnesses quickly" (Bakhurst, 2011). In the meantime, it asks its reporters to process the materials in order to "reinforce journalistic values that audiences expect, in particular accuracy" (Bakhurst, 2011). That was how BBC managed to avoid use of a fake Osama Bin Laden body photo after his killing.

### **Research Questions**

This research explores how social media are changing business and financial journalists' sourcing practices. Based on that premise, this research will seek to answer: in what situations do journalists use social media to find sources and content; how do they plan to use social media for sourcing in the future; what are the benefits and drawbacks of social media sources; how can reporters use social media effectively and responsibly; what are current newsroom standards regarding social media sourcing; and how can newsrooms build on these policies and take new directions in the future.

### **Theoretical framework**

One of the most applicable theories is gatekeeping, which refers to the process of filtering information for publication (Stacks & Salwen, 1996, p.79). Gatekeeping occurs at all levels of media structure, such as a reporter deciding what stories to publish and what sources to include in a story. According to Shoemaker, gatekeeping in a communication context can be studied at at least five levels: individual, routines,

organizational, extramedia and societal (Stacks & Salwen, 1996, p. 83). Sources belong to potential extramedia influences. Shoemaker said sources are “frontline gatekeepers”(Stacks & Salwen, 1996, p. 83), because they choose what information to provide. At other levels, reporters and editors decide which sources to include and which to leave out based on news judgment and values. Social media sourcing shows that multiple tiers of forces could influence gatekeeping. First, social media users decide whether to publish their comments, stories or photos. Then, reporters process the information, sift the quotes or sources, and decide whether to verify and use them. There might be other levels of gatekeeping as well, such as newsrooms’ protocols regarding social media sources.

This concept of tiers of gatekeeping forces was further developed in Shoemaker and Vos’s study on gatekeeping in the era of new media. They proposed that in a digital age, the movement through a gate is no longer “unidirectional” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 135). Instead, there’s a brand new stage in the traditional gatekeeping process, where the audience participate as secondary gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 7).

The notion of gatekeeping is changing with the popularity of the Internet, with which basically all people could create, disseminate and select news. In this context, Singer identified changes in the role of professional journalists as gatekeepers, evolving from content dictators to curators (Singer, 1998). The same study indicates that journalists’ new gatekeeping role involves both “quality control and sense-making”. In particular, they consider themselves as “credible interpreters of an unprecedented volume of available information as fundamental to their value -- even their survival -- in a new

media environment”. Similarly, Weaver and Wilhoit found that journalists no longer see themselves as news gatherers and disseminators only, but also interpreters (1996, p. 170).

This study on how social media are changing business reporters’ sourcing patterns will take a look at what kind of gatekeeping roles reporters and online sources are performing, and the specific process of them carrying out these roles.

Gatekeeping theory is used in many similar studies on social media and sourcing. In conference paper “Social media as news source: speed of updates and credibility of information”, Westerman et al. argued that the main concern of using information sourced through social media is credibility, and that perceived source credibility is a result of gatekeeping (2011, p3). In a digital era, people face two challenges, one is an overload of information, and the other is a lack of uniformity in content quality. People suffer from too much information and too few professionals to monitor content. Therefore, the authors argued that the mission of gatekeeping has been shifting from traditional news makers, journalists, editors and even advertisers and owners, to news consumers. Several avenues could affect whether a piece of information is regarded trustworthy, such as site design features and attributions. After a three-condition experiment, the study found a positive relation between speed of updating, cognitive elaboration and perceived credibility. That means, faster updates would lead to increased source credibility.

Knight did not explicitly mention gatekeeping as its theoretical framework, but the study did talk about the fundamental role of sources to “the agenda and framing of a story as it unfolds” (2012, p. 3). Previous researchers have pointed to a reliance on specific kinds of sources and ways of communication with them as a substantial part of framing a story, a reflection of public discourse being controlled by dominant interests in society.

Many researchers have proved that the choice of sourcing could influence the angle of a story presented. A simple example could be the more governmental sources used, the less critical the stories are of government policies. There are multiple factors that could determine the likelihood of a specific sources being used by journalists, such as reliability, authoritativeness and articulateness.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers interested in media's sourcing practice have long been criticizing structural flaws in the selection of sources (Bennett, 2007, Chapter 5; Fishman, 1980, p. 51). They recognize that there is a "hierarchy of credibility", a term introduced by sociologist Howard Becker (1967, p. 241), during the sourcing process, and journalists tend to have "bureaucratic affinity" (Fishman 1980, p. 52) to official sources. Using and referring to elite sources is an important means to achieving journalists' goal of objectivity, or to "promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespersons of 'real-life' events" (Zelizer, 1992, p. 414), for the reason that elite sources are generally perceived to be more credible than ordinary people (Austin & Dong, 1994, p. 973). As Becker remarked, "any tale told by those at the top intrinsically deserves to be regarded as the most credible account... Thus, credibility and the right to be heard are differentially distributed through the ranks of the system" (1967, p. 241). Even with the popularity of the Internet in newsrooms, official websites, such as those of government agencies, were referred to the most (Garrison, 2003, p. 67).

The aspiration for enhanced authority, credibility and professionalism comes with a cost, however. Elite sources subtly change the media's agenda (Feldstein, 2007, p. 504; Lewis et al., 2008, p. 2), shifting their attention to certain topics or opinions. The media

may lose its vigilance as a watchdog to reveal the hidden misconducts of big powers. Ordinary people find it hard to enter public discourses, leaving some voices unheard. They become ignored in the news production process, even when they are the subject of the news. Exceptions are common people as eyewitnesses of unexpected events (Mencher, 2006, Chapter 20), such as crimes. But even in these situations they're pushed into "illustrative, anecdotal roles" that are quite marginal (Keyser & Raeymaeckers, 2012, p. 827). In some occasions ordinary people would be considered useful when journalists need them to voice something different to make their sourcing more diversified. Accordingly, listening to the common people as potential sources for news was not an end (Singer, 1997, p.193), but a means to journalistic goals such as objectivity.

Some of the sourcing habits are changing, and the Internet undoubtedly plays a role in this shift. It has been easier for the public to disseminate and produce news. The rise of citizen journalism and traditional media's shrinking audience and revenue have forced these legacy media to rethink incorporating more public input. The idea of getting citizens involved in news production got a "concerted effort" by traditional media in the early 1990s (Glaser, 2006). By the new century there was a larger presence of "grassroots, Internet-powered journalism" (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.49). One important landmark was the September 11 attacks, where the public captured most of the photos and video footages of the crash into the World Trade Center Towers (Gillmor, 2004, p.49). The 2005 London train bomb was another example in which citizens used cell phones to record the event.

Since then, more and more journalists and newsrooms have begun to embrace the possibility of a more "balanced relationship" with the audience (Keyser & Raeymaeckers,

2012, p.828). The magnitude of this “crowdsourcing” lowered the cost of news production, as journalists find it easier to get hold of news sources. In some less technical topics, citizens can serve as experts. When many people are asked to join in one effort, the knowledge of the masses can emerge (Boriss, 2007; Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.49). Journalism scholars like Gillmor insist that “readers (or viewers or listeners) collectively know more than media professionals do” (2004, p.111), and hence the news industry should make use of their expertise. Meanwhile, the public has seen the door open to more engagement. The Internet tremendously reduces the news distribution cost for ordinary people (Baker, 2007, p.99), and thus “the reading public is at last evolving into a writing public” (Hartley, 2008, p.690). No longer reliant merely on the traditional media, people could chime in and speak for themselves, adding new dimensions and perspectives to news stories.

In this context, some researchers set out to explore the interaction between mainstream media and audience participation. Duffy talked about different models of journalism and journalists’ roles in these models. For example, apart from traditional journalism which barely has public involved in news production, there’s interactive journalism, participatory journalism, public journalism and citizen journalism (2012, p. 4), each with increasing levels of audience involvement. Public journalism, or civic journalism, according to Duffy, encourages the public to be engaged in news production, including editorial meetings and polls (2012, p.5). Interactive journalism is not radically different but includes more technology savvy means. Participatory journalism invites the audience to make news; let them “play an active role in collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news” (Willis & Bowman, 2003, p.9). Finally, citizen journalism

encourages a wider range of participation in news production. With increasing participation on the public's side, journalists start to shift their role of a gatekeeper to a moderator or curator. This collaboration creates value in several ways, such as improve editorial diversity, disseminate news more efficiently and make news more relevant to the general public (Beckett, 2010).

However, traditional journalists don't always embrace public involvement with open arms, and public involvement entering into traditional newsrooms is not always without controversies.

Traditional media are often depicted as "defensive" when it comes to their attitudes toward challenges posed by citizen journalism and user generated contents. That's because conventional journalists see themselves as trained professionals (Schudson, 1998, p.138), and they don't want to forfeit their role as agenda setter and gatekeeper. Therefore, they tend to maintain their authority and uphold journalistic norms (Chan, Lee, & Pan, 2006, p.6). When using public generated contents, they would evaluate their newsworthiness and credibility against standards and norms of professional journalism. Singer and Ashman's interviews with *Guardian* journalists found that many of them were ambivalent about contents generated by the online public. On one hand, they appreciated the opportunities for open dialogues. On the other, they expressed concerns about credibility and responsibility. The result was their embracing public involvement with "a traditional journalistic approach in order to ensure accuracy and fairness" (2009, p.15).

Lee's research on four major Hong Kong newspapers (Oriental Daily, Apple Daily, Ming Pao, and Headline Daily)'s use of YouTube videos came to a similar conclusion that although the proportion of citizen sources was quite high in news about

online videos, the majority of sources remained elite ones. The 342 articles quoted a total of 284 elite sources and 234 citizen sources. About 57% of the articles had an elite source as the first quoted source, whereas only 41% quote a citizen as the first source. Moreover, reliance on elite sources has increased and the use of citizen sources have decreased over time: the 2007 articles quoted a total of 126 elite sources and 165 citizen sources, whereas the 2008 and 2009 articles quoted a total of 158 elite sources and only 69 citizen sources (2012, p.9).

Knight had similar findings. The study was to find out how extensively social media as a tool for sourcing were used by mainstream media in the U.K. in covering the Iranian uprising in June 2009. The findings are that these media, including the Guardian group, the Independent group, the Telegraph group and the Times group, didn't use social media extensively for sourcing. The traditional way of coverage continued to ensure that traditional voices and sources are heard. For example, of all the 365 articles studied, only 25 used social media as sources, while 177 were affiliated with the Iran government. However, the researcher also found 30 stories that were about social media as a factor in election. This extensive discussion on social media's role implied that journalists were much more reliant on social media as a source than is apparent from the analysis of articles (Knight, 2012, p.69).

Keyser and Raeymaeckers' findings are in that vein, too. In "The printed rise of the common man", they conducted a content analysis study of five Flemish newspapers in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The results show that citizens were indeed more visible in news coverage than a decade ago, as number of articles involving citizen sources rose by more than a third from 2001 to 2011. The phenomenon nevertheless

remained a shift in the margins. News coverage involving ordinary people still filled only a small part of the news hole.

Although most researchers contend that news reporting using public generated contents online is still marginal, almost all of them agree on the fact that social media are playing an increasingly important role in news production. Based on this premise, some researches stem from how social media are employed by traditional journalists for sourcing purposes, using case studies of typical situations or exploring relevant strategies and protocols.

Muthukumaraswamy explored five typologies of crowdsourcing in which citizen participation and traditional newsrooms intertwine to produce news contents, providing an inside look at how journalists use social media, what strategies are employed in each case, and their benefits and pitfalls. The study used *Wired* Editor Jeff Howe's definition of crowdsourcing as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call” (cited by Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, pp.48-49). Unlike citizen journalism, which facilitates a larger role for citizens to contribute to news stories, crowdsourcing is a collaboration between news organizations and the audience (Rosen, 2007).

A simple version of crowdsourcing by a news organization is to ask the audience to recount their observations. A more complicated form engages the readership in “analyzing information, crunching numbers or interpreting documents” (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.50). Journalists tend to play the role of moderator or facilitator while borrowing the crowd’s expertise in certain topics. These topics usually are of general interest, such as daily life and public issues. The second form can be

further divided based on the nature of the topics. In the first scenario, the media recruit experts from a large audience to solve the intricacies of complicated topics, such as scientific reports or financial stories. Second, the media bring a large group of experts of varied backgrounds on a single issue, such as in a big investigative project.

One example of pooling a general audience together on a general interest topic is New York Public Radio's *Brian Lehrer Show*. In 2007, the show asked people to count the number of SUVs relative to total cars in their neighborhoods, and later encouraged them to report the costs of food at their local stores. Instead of doing this on social networking websites, the show asked readers to comment on a thread on its website. The information was pretty significant because of a large number of contributors. This large audience engagement helped the show attract four times more audience members (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.51). Such crowdsourcing methods help alleviate the burden of journalists in collecting a large quantity of data.

*Wired* magazine's Science Blog launched a Facebook page, an example of traditional media recruiting experts from the general audience. The page was designed to tap into science communities and to "close the distance between readers and writers," as staff writer Alexis Madrigal said (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.55). In doing so, the journalist's role becomes more of a middleman, making sure the scientists write in a way that ordinary people could decode. The information disseminated via such social networks could be more transparent since it "bypasses the spin of press releases transmitted by the mainstream media" (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.56). Using social media as a sourcing tool also saves traditional media the trouble of sending a reporter somewhere to cover an event.

The ripening of citizen involvement doesn't come without drawbacks, and it certainly doesn't mean retirement for journalists. As Muthukumaraswamy put it, "people can provide good eyes and ears, but job of putting together a story is that of the journalist" (2010, p.58). Several researchers have endeavored to study the implementation of social media as a sourcing tool, and the underlying philosophies.

Lee's study on Hong Kong journalists using YouTube as a source for news content found that the media approached it with professional incorporation and content standardization. That means, journalists tended to incorporate online content into their practices according to existing needs and norms, just as they incorporated phone interviews, data sets or personal descriptions. After a textual analysis, Lee found that although these online videos were mostly produced by ordinary people, they were used less by traditional journalists as story content than as records of social phenomena for officials, academics and experts to comment on or react to. Lee concluded that citizen generated contents did not transform traditional media in Hong Kong substantially. Rather, they were adopted by journalists to be more in line with conventional norms.

Wardle, Williams and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011, p.793) found that BBC journalists had different attitudes toward different types of user-generated content online. They were more ready to use content that could be readily incorporated into other traditional journalism units, such as footage of breaking news. In other words, they saw social media as a source for news and material, not something to alter the traditional way of reporting.

The extent to which social media can be implemented as a tool for sourcing is dependent on newsroom norms, which includes the nature of the media, the willingness of managers to let the audience participate, and the areas of coverage. For example, social

media are more likely to be used in covering breaking news or international news. Also, some media may encourage their journalists to take the public seriously while others do not. Keyser and Raeymaeckers's study on five Flemish newspapers shows that popular newspapers are more likely to crowdsource than quality dailies. A tentative explanation offered by the two researchers is that the former appreciate citizen involvement better "intrinsically and not simply numerically" (2012, p.832).

Scholars and news practitioners have been studying the impact of social media as a sourcing tool in traditional newsrooms. Crowdsourcing undoubtedly brings convenience to journalists and the public, but it also poses challenges that require traditional newsrooms to pay more attention to information verification.

With social media helping to inspire story ideas, generate materials and recruit sources, ordinary people are provided with a larger stage to voice their opinions and gain easier access to public discourses. Traditional media are generally susceptible to the "hierarchy of sources", paying less attention to the poorer, less privileged community (Bagdikian, 1997, p.112), where finding sources can be an obstacle in certain situations. Open sources could enlarge the media sourcing base and reduce sourcing bias posed by excessive use of official sources, thus downsizing "political and commercial agenda setting" (Bruns, 2005, Chapter 4) if media recruit people from less privileged backgrounds. Also, crowdsourcing may strengthen media's role as a watchdog (Lee, 2012, p.4), to the extent that representing the less powerful and politically marginal has implications for how the media perform their democratic roles (Cottle, 2003, p.5).

However, this point of view is rebutted by some scholars who hold that there's a sourcing hierarchy even in citizen sources. Muthukumaraswamy (2010, p.60) contended

that “a crowd is a crowd only to the extent that it can access the technology required to participate... and the intellectual ability to contribute.” For example, people who have the competency to participate in dialogues about specialized topics are experts in certain areas like public policy, science and finance. Thus, social media as a tool to recruit these people may enlarge the sourcing base but not change the media’s inclination to use elite sources. As Daren Brabham, a crowdsourcing researcher at the University of Utah, put it, “You start investing in these projects with this kind of democratic freewheeling and then you find out that the ideas are coming from a much more wealthy, elite, white crowd” (cited by Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.60). Atton and Wickenden gave an example in their research on alternative media.

The researcher did a content analysis of stories published by an alternative media outlet, *SchNEWS*, and found the sources they prefer are protesters and activists who voice opposite opinions (2005, p.355). These people were not mainstream because of their social status. Therefore, instead of offering access for ordinary people, the media still may operate in a way very similar to the old sourcing practices: preferring the elite on extreme.

The biggest concern with crowdsourcing, as many have argued (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.59; Vasilendiuc, 2012, p.14), is compromising accuracy and credibility. Critics point out that anonymity may have encouraged many online citizens to provide information that is simply not true. Failure to reveal conflicts of interest (Cohen, 2005) may cause bias due to unknown incentives and potential rewards. Thus, a large amount of work in coordination, oversight and verification is required by journalists.

The Associated Press has set an example with guidelines about using social media for sourcing. It requires its reporters to verify the identity of sources found on social networks, although it can be difficult. For example, if a source claims to belong to a company, reporters must call the company to confirm the identity. When using quotes, photos or video from social media, reporters are asked to use the information provided by the social network website to establish direct contact with them and interview the source over email or by phone. When reporters want to quote celebrities and politicians, it's the reporters' responsibility to make sure the individuals themselves manage these accounts, not their handlers. AP's guidelines also specify ethical and legal issues involved with social media sourcing. For example, before quoting from tweets or posts, the reporters should determine who controls the copyright. Reporters should respect sources' privacy, and not to ask questions that may put sources in danger or put them in difficult situations (2013, p.5).

In its social media guidance, the BBC specifies its golden rule for news sourcing: "Have a second pair of eyes prior to publication (2011, p.3). Also, reporters must discuss what they are proposing to do with editors.

Bloomberg's social media policy states that core principles of fairness, accuracy and transparency must be upheld (2011, p.1). Reporters should be skeptical of any information forwarded on a social network and are asked to apply strict standards of verification. A second review is required before any posting, and in the event of an incorrect post, a reporter should delete it and issue a corrected version. When in doubt, a reporter should contact an editor for guidance.

Many researchers believe social media greatly cut the costs for newsrooms and journalists of finding sources. Newsrooms may no longer need to send reporters elsewhere in order to cover events. Journalists can sit in newsrooms and get in touch with people they want to talk to. Also, the audience can let their voices be heard at virtually no cost. All in all, the transaction costs are minimal (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.59). On the other hand, the oversight responsibilities may require a monetary investment. For example, Gannett, one of the pioneers in participatory journalism, has pumped both time and money into equipping its newsrooms: to train the staff on social media skills, enhance website performance and set up new departments (cited by Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.60).

Traditional newsrooms also must come up with innovative ways in order to keep the audience engaged and to generate revenue. *Wired's* Science Blog has suffered from lack of public interest due to the complexity of the subject matter. There also could be scant public interest in topics that lack relevance. News organizations should come up with ways to “make a persuasive call” (cited by Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.59) to the public.

## **Methodology**

Since this research focuses on journalists' practices of using social media as a sourcing tool in business reporting, a semi-structured individual interview with journalists and editors has been adopted as the most effective research method. Semi-structured interviews generally have pre-formulated questions but can get open-ended answers, with other questions emerging from the dialogues (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p.206). Semi-structured interviews combine the flexibility of unstructured, open-ended interviews with

the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level.

I chose interviewing as my research method because of the wealth of detail it can provide. Individual interviews can reveal the respondents' opinions, motivations, experiences, feelings and values. Also they can be customized to individual respondents. Instead of asking the same questions, the interviewer can form questions based on the respondents' answers. Interviews do have their limitations, though. First, because interviews take time, it is difficult to get a big sample. Thus, generalization may occur. Second, individual interviews may be subject to personal bias, or generate different responses and make the data difficult to analyze.

Atton and Wickenden's study on sourcing routines in alternative journalism in the UK combined interviews with discourse analysis. For example, to find out in which situations *SchNEWS* journalists used citizen sources, they interviewed the journalists and quoted one of the interviewees: "We try and critique what the government's official sources are saying and we balance them with what activists and local people are saying." Also, interviews were helpful in finding out the relationship between these journalists and citizens. The paper quoted one journalist as saying that, "If we weren't here, we'd be up the road at the Blackwood protest (a road protest site in South Wales), they totally reflect our values" (2005, p. 356).

Zvi Reich's research on technology's role in obtaining news employed face-to-face reconstruction interviews with reporters to "identify the respective contributions of different entities to the production of news" (2008, p.629). To compensate the shortcomings of this method, such as memory inadequacies and bias, the researcher did

follow-up personal interviews. All these interviews offered a detailed picture of how extensively web technologies were used and some common situations.

Vasilendiuc's study on sourcing practices of Romanian news media conducted semi structured researches with 73 journalists. The study endeavored to explore professional practices and constraints of the gatekeepers. For example, through interviewing reporters, the researcher found that all of them believed that the Internet facilitated the access to information, but because the news flow is extremely high and often of poor quality, journalists can retrieve false news. Thus, some journalists said they preferred long time sources with whom they've established relationships for years.

Much crowdsourcing research focuses on breaking news or international reporting. This research will focus on crowdsourcing used by business and financial media, an area relatively understudied. I will select about 10 reporters in business and financial media with the help of my committee, and conduct in-depth, semi structured, individual interviews with each of them. Here's a list of 10 questions I will ask. I may alter the questions based on their answers to previous questions.

1. In what situations do you use social media as a sourcing tool and how?
2. Can you give me one or two good examples?
3. What are the benefits of using social media as a sourcing tool?
4. Have you found any drawbacks?
5. How do you overcome these drawbacks?
6. How has the use of social media for sourcing evolved?
7. What would you like to see in the future?

8. What are the policies of your newsroom regarding the use of social media as a tool for sourcing?
9. Do any of them need to be changed?
10. If you could dream big, what would you like to see in terms of sourcing?

Below is the list of questions for social media editors as interviewees.

1. In what situations do you or your fellow reporters use social media as a sourcing tool and how?
2. Can you give me one or two good examples?
3. What are the benefits of using social media as a sourcing tool?
4. Have you found any drawbacks?
5. How do you overcome those drawbacks?
6. How has the use of social media evolved in your newsroom?
7. What would you like to see in the future?
8. What are the policies of your newsroom regarding the use of social media as a tool for sourcing?
9. What do you do to help reporters use social media for sourcing more effectively?
10. If you could dream big, what would you like to see in terms of sourcing?

### **Findings and discussion**

Overall, the interview results fall within the scholarly findings explained in a previous section of this paper. Social media sourcing has become an increasingly popular option for reporters when they look for sources or user-generated content, but it only contributes

to a small fraction of the total number of sources. It is more frequently used in international news and breaking news.

Journalists and editors, while recognizing the benefits of it as fast, easy and comprehensive, have long been aware of the pitfalls of online sourcing and have given proper caution when using it. Verification and confirmation have been very important aspects of online sourcing. Interviews with these social media editors who work at some of the nation's most prestigious newsrooms provided new perspectives and offered fresh, innovative ways of leveraging social media tools for sourcing.

**1. Social media source is gaining momentum, but it lags behind traditional sourcing because reporters still tend to find sources by phone or email, or rely on sources they already know.**

First, social media have been an increasingly used tool to find sources and content, according to all interview participants. Deborah Petersen, social media editor at the *San Jose Mercury News*, said more than two and half years ago that no position as social media editor existed at the newspaper, and that the *Mercury News* had limited Twitter and Facebook followers. Now, they “use Twitter and Facebook all the time for sourcing,” at least daily. The most common way of social media sourcing is to post on Facebook what they call a “fetcher.” For example, on July 16, [a crowdsourcing message was posted on Facebook](#) seeking vegetarians only look for vegans on online dating sites. This was the appeal:

Do you only date fellow vegans? Hope to live long and prosper with a kindred "Star Trek" spirit? If you've used one of the many "niche" online dating sites - and

especially if you've met your true love that way -- please contact reporter Angela Hill by Friday at 510-208-6493 or [ahill@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:ahill@bayareanewsgroup.com)

Lou Dubois, social media editor at NBC News, said few stories in 2013 did not use social media in some capacity as a sourcing tool. “Whether as a discovery tool to stories happening around the world, as a source to find images and user-generated content from the ground, or as a way of furthering profile information on key figures in a story by investigating their digital footprint, social media have a key role in the newsroom,” Dubois said. One recent example: The “Today Show” collected images from viewers who had babies in July using the hashtag #BabyPic to commemorate release of the first family photos of Prince George.

Second, despite the increasing use of social media sourcing, traditional ways of sourcing, such as creating a reservoir of consistent sources and conducting in-person interviews, remain most important, which is in line with the scholarly findings.

Bazinet, who manages the social media accounts for Kiplinger Letter, said although he thinks Twitter can be an efficient sourcing tool, he still largely relies on the sources he has developed and known for years. “I have been a reporter on the frontline for 20 years,” he said, “My sources are cultivated in the old-fashioned way.” Bazinet said he does not often use Twitter to make new sources a lot, but he does use it to locate old sources.

J. Ford Hoffman, a freelancer who has worked for various media outlets including *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*, said he sometimes begins his research by asking colleagues and friends what they know about the topic or sources. “A wise reporter,” he said, “will seek information from a variety of sources, and e-sourcing is just one more tool.” One point he made about finding content online is that readers want to know what

happens before it happens, and when a reporter finds something on Twitter or Facebook, it is already too late for news.

## **2. Social media sourcing is not always successful because the audience is not always responsive to crowdsourcing.**

This is what social media editors are working to do – making their social media posts more attractive to readers and boosting engagement and response. For example, the *Mercury News* always includes a photo in the post because, as Petersen says, photos bring at least 50 percent more likes.

Katy Stewart, social media editor at the *Houston Business Journals*, found that readers are not very responsive to crowdsourcing partly because Houston “isn't known as a 'social' town yet,” with energy and healthcare as its major industries. She noticed that some industries, such as technology, are intrinsically social media heavy, and a lot of knowledgeable sources are already on social media. However, for esoteric or expertise-heavy topics, she said, there may not be a lot of people who know about or have interest in and can respond to the reporters.

The dilemma, as Stewart observed, is that popular topics are not necessarily important topics, while important stories are not always sensational and eye-catching. Also, more readers are interested in basic and easy-to-follow advice than difficult and complex articles. Janet Stauble, social media editor at *Bankrate*, said she found *Bankrate* readers are generally more interested in fundamental advice on mortgage rates, credit card rewards, etc., than in sophisticated and complex investing stories.

## **3. Twitter as a search tool for people and content is the most common way to use social media for sourcing.**

Of all the social media tools, Twitter was most mentioned for its powerful searching function, speed and ease to interact with audience and to incorporate information into stories. Facebook is important too. Other social media websites like LinkedIn, Tumblr, Google+, Pinterest and Instagram are mentioned as well.

Generally, newsrooms use Twitter more than Facebook in terms of sourcing. When asked how to effectively use Twitter for sourcing, almost all interviewees said Twitter's essential function is to search. Reporters look for people and content based on location, hashtags, and their expertise. For instance, Petersen said they use social media to find people who work at a particular company, attended a particular school, or maybe find the friends or family of an accident or crime victim. Reporters use social media to be tipped off to news ideas, not as a news story vehicle itself. They still need to conduct research and interviews and, ultimately, produce stories.

Stewart was the only one who mentioned the use of LinkedIn. In fact, LinkedIn is *Houston Business Journals'* big resource, she said, both for sourcing and for traffic, and the Journals consistently encourage its reporters to use LinkedIn for stories. Reporters have all taken the LinkedIn training courses, which offer an upgrade to LinkedIn Premium for a year. The reason, Stewart said, is that LinkedIn is “more of a messenger service than a mass blast like Twitter,” and it feels a little more “intimate and familiar, like email.” The way they use LinkedIn is to dig around relevant groups for leads, interesting news and contacts within a company. For example, according to Stewart, a reporter who covered finance and banking often “trolled the Houston bankers groups on LinkedIn for stories.”

#### **4. Embedding tweets is the most widely used way to display social media content.**

Newsrooms use quite similar ways to blend online content into journalistic stories, including live chats, Storify, embedded tweets and blogs. For example, Rebecca Dolan, *Kiplinger's* social media editor, hosted a live chat on the personal finances of college students on August 1, 2013. Readers could submit questions on Twitter or come to the chat to pose questions. About five *Kiplinger* reporters were in the chat to answer questions, offering personal finance tips and referring readers to previous articles that could further answer these questions. Pulling together audience questions is an example of crowdsourcing, and the interaction between the audience and reporters is an example of how professional and public input can create content together. Storify has been a major social media tool to display information borrowed from social media and serve as a bridge between public content and journalistic stories. Ries Brian, social media editor for *The Daily Beast*, offered several examples of using Storify to incorporate user-generated content into stories. [One recent example](#) is an August 9, 2013, story on about a plane that crashed into a house in Connecticut. The story pulled together a YouTube video, pictures of the scene from Instagram, and several tweets by witnesses to show how the accident happened, what it looked like, and the effects on the neighborhood.

**5. Business reporters and social media editors embrace social media sourcing, as it pulls together a huge quantity of information, eases the job of reporters and can give voice to the voiceless.**

The speed and the power of the crowd are the major reasons that have encouraged reporters to use social media in their reporting. Social networks have grown in size, and there are few sources who don't leave a digital footprint, Dubois commented. Therefore, discovering information about someone has been made easier with social media. Stewart

said social media have made it easier to access information, because people on social media are “already in a sharing mindset.” Gathering user-generated content can ease the burden of the reporters, as people on the scene are already doing basic reporting, Brian said.

In today's fast-paced newsrooms, reporters often don't have a lot of time to spend on a single story. Social media work better for breaking news and international news because it easily transmits information that is around the world for reporters. Social media are also a good way to see what is going viral, Dolan said, such as videos and memes, if that is a reporter's niche. Getting different angles from different people could expand the breadth of knowledge on a topic, Hoffman said. “More reporting tools could bring more voices into stories, especially the under-covered voices, the people who usually aren't quoted or pictured in traditional news coverage,” he said.

**6. Reporters are aware of the biggest pitfall of social media sourcing — misinformation — and they stress the importance of fact checking.**

Social media sourcing is more likely to be subject to misinformation than traditional ways of sourcing because things can go viral quickly on social media. Some posts may not be true; sources may have their political dispositions, photos may have been taken from a previous event or have been manipulated by software like Photoshop. Hoffman gave an example. A 22-year-old Brown University student was named a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013. In fact, he wasn't a suspect. But that didn't stop Reddit, Facebook and Twitter, and even media outlets such as BuzzFeed, Politico, NBC News and others, from spreading the incorrect information to millions of people. [A July 25 Times Magazine story](#) titled “Should Reddit be Blamed for the Spreading of a

Smear?” reviewed this incident. Dubois noted that media is “only as good as credibility and trust,” and that there is little value to be first, but wrong. Having this in mind, all newsrooms in this study urge their reporters to verify the information they get from social media. *The Mercury News* encourages reporters to use other means for finding sources to support what they find online, and to build a strong source network in advance. *The Associated Press* asks reporters to tweet people privately to arrange phone calls and talk to actual people.

### **7. Verification has become even more crucial as a way to cut the potential risk of false information from social media sources.**

Hoffman and several other interviewees made a point about misinformation and verification. Hoffman said, “the problem is with the singers, not the songs or the instruments.” The only way for reporters to get correct information is to work hard. “It's the same basic rules they teach in journalism school about sourcing,” Bazinet said, “If you get one tip, confirm it with one more.” Dubois also said the only way to overcome the pitfalls of inaccuracy and misinformation is by solid reporting.

Reporters should stick with accepted standards in terms of sourcing and use their journalistic instincts. “If a photo or a story seems too good to be true, it probably is,” Dubois said, “Take the idea of not trusting anything until it's been confirmed by reputable sources that your organization would be comfortable reporting.”

Almost all interviewees said their newsrooms will not report information based solely on a social media post. Without a second source, the story doesn't get written, Bazinet said. Brian named a few things reporters should look for when they try to verify online sources, such as the location of updates, Twitter and Facebook bios, whom the sources

follow and who follows them, what they have posted in the past, and how new their accounts are. “Reporters used to pound pavement. Now some only pound pads. I urge journalists to pound both,” Hoffman said.

**8. Other drawbacks of social media sourcing include neglecting readers who are not online and potential copyright issues.**

Petersen, Hoffman and Dubois noted that social media sourcing only draws a limited pool of people. “Only 16% of Americans are on Twitter, and less than that use it regularly. Not everyone is active on Facebook,” Dubois said. Hoffman said “reporters who seek e-feedback need to be aware that they are seeking input from only one part of the readership.” Eric Carvin of the *Associated Press*, Petersen and Brian all mentioned that reporters should ask permission to use content they found online and provide necessary credit.

**9. Business reporters and social media editors identify social media as a marketing tool, and boosting a social media presence is their priority.**

Although newsrooms have been embracing social media in their reporting, sourcing is not the primary purpose. Almost all interviewees said their priority is to promote content via social media. Bazinet commented that social media sourcing is still in Step One, as there is too much risk of making mistakes, but there are plenty of opportunities to promote what reporters write. “It's a very inexpensive marketing tool,” he said. Stewart said the current priority at Houston Business Journals is to boost engagement, and to make readers more active on social media. When she promotes a story about a company on social media, the company also will have a stake in getting the message out. When they retweet it, the conversation gets going and more people will share the story. Dolan

said social media are a useful tool for both newsrooms and journalists to build themselves into brands. Stauble said social media are a means of public relations. “It's more important to leverage sources to promote content,” she said. *Bankrate* would tweet other media's content whenever there is a mention of *Bankrate*, and they treat all media equally, whether it is the *Wall Street Journal* or a local television station. *Bankrate* uses social media not only in its editorial team, but also in the sales team to interact with advertisers.

**10. Business reporters and social media editors would like social media sourcing to develop into a productive tool as a way to interact with sources and the public.**

Many of the interviewees think of social media sourcing as a tool, similar to the telephone or email, and a way to find and connect with sources, but not something they can lazily build a story upon without sufficient verification. They consider social media as a way to interact with the audience and draw civic involvement. When asked what they want to see in the future in terms of social media sourcing, most of their answers centered on building social media into a smarter tool for audience interaction. For instance, Petersen said she would like to see an app where sources could follow reporters and reporters could follow them. The app would divide the sources into categories of expertise. With just a tap of a button, reporters could find sources for a story, and sources could contact reporters and offer what they know for a story. Brian talked about constructing a reliable network of breaking news contributors who happen to be first on the scene and would provide reliable pictures and have them delivered over Twitter. He also talked about having a direct line to the president and all his staff. Dolan, along that line, said she wishes to see more media organizations have something like CNN's iReport, so sources can send stories in directly. Tools that help better incorporate user-

generate content with journalistic stories are also important to have, Brian said. He said it would be helpful if there is a “Storify this” functionality within Tweetdeck, or a way to create a Twitter list based on a location selected with Geofeedia.

### **11. Almost all newsrooms have written or unwritten policies regarding social media sourcing.**

Of all the newsrooms only the Associated Press has a written policy dedicated to social media sourcing, but all of them have at least unwritten rules addressing problems that may arise from using sources or content from social media. They encourage reporters to find multiple sources, to verify content, to use common sense and media ethics, and to talk with senior editors. Also, most newsrooms have provided social media training to their employees. For example, Petersen said during the past 12 months every journalist at the *Mercury News* has been required to take eight hours of digital training, and about 80% of the training covers social media.

### **Conclusion**

After conducting interviews with nine journalists and social media editors, I discovered that social media as a sourcing tool has not changed the fundamental sourcing habits of business journalists. Instead, social media have become only an extra way of finding sources and interacting with people to facilitate reporting. To quote Bazinet, social media are more of a “control point” than a direct source of content or story ideas.

Social media sourcing doesn't replace the traditional sourcing process or any of the verification steps. Reporters treat online sources as any other source they get from other means, and sift and verify them against traditional journalistic standards. Reporters still

need to make sure information is accurate and the sources are reliable, and then apply necessary ethics as required in any other situation. To quote Hoffman: “Social media sourcing doesn't make reporters good; thorough reporting – no matter the form – makes reporters good.”

It is no denying that social media have made sourcing easier and faster, with its timely and vast supply of information. It can save reporters time when information quickly, witnesses to breaking news events, and the expertise that might otherwise be difficult to find. Most importantly, it has helped establish better relationships between reporters and readers, making it easier to interact with each other. This is what most of the interviewees view as the most important function of social media sourcing, and that is why when asked what they want to see in the future, most said they would like more ways to connect and interact with sources and make content more audience-driven.

This study has its limitations. Because of ever-changing social media technologies, it is hard to predict what will take place in years or even months ahead. Therefore, I found it difficult for journalists and editors to answer questions about what they think will happen to social media sourcing and what they anticipate. Their comments about the current landscape are useful, but rapid change in technology might make them quickly outdated. Still, the findings are a foundation upon which to build a subsequent study as social media evolve.

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