

# Facebook and Twitter Are Reshaping Journalism As We Know It

By Rory O'Connor, [RoryOConnor.org](http://RoryOConnor.org). Posted January 20, 2009.

[http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/121211/facebook\\_and\\_twitter\\_are\\_reshaping\\_journalism\\_as\\_we\\_know\\_it/](http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/121211/facebook_and_twitter_are_reshaping_journalism_as_we_know_it/)

The rise of Facebook and Twitter herald changes for journalism, and pose serious challenges to about journalistic credibility and trust.

*Editor's Note: This article combines two interviews by Rory O' Connor with the CEO of Facebook and the Co-Founder of Twitter.*

I spent much of last fall at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government as a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics and Public Policy. While there, I researched issues related to journalistic trust and credibility -- and in particular what role emerging social media might play in addressing those concerns. One of the most prominent online social networks, of course, is the seemingly ubiquitous Facebook. Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg, who created the platform as a Harvard student along with roommates Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes, was unavailable for comment, as was Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg. But Randi Zuckerberg, who is part of the network's creative marketing organization "where she regularly interacts with media organizations to discuss ways they can partner with Facebook," did agree to a recent email interview -- the first in a series of posts on the topic of trust and journalism.

Rory O'Connor: With slumping public approval, journalism is facing a crisis of trust. We're looking at how people can find and share credible news and information in hopes of regaining this trust. Do you think Facebook plays a role in this process at all? If so, how?

Randi Zuckerberg: The concept of "the trusted referral" is integral to the success of content sharing on Facebook. We've found that it is tremendously more powerful to get a piece of content -- an article, a news clip, a video, etc -- from a friend, and it makes you much more likely to watch, read, and engage with the content.

People will always want to consume content from experts and they will always look to trusted news sources and journalists for important news and current events, but the market has become so oversaturated that it is now just as important to rely on one's friends to help filter the news. When you get a news clip from a friend, they are putting their own personal brand on the line, saying "I recommend THIS piece of content to you out of all the content that is out there," -- just as they would recommend a restaurant, or a movie.

We are beginning to see journalists and news/broadcast companies creating a significant presence on Facebook to engage with Facebook users and help facilitate this notion of the trusted referral to assist with the viral spread of content. When journalists can really engage with this audience and enlist Facebook users to market and share their content, that is such a powerful way to share credible news and information and tap into the implicit trust that people have with their friends.

ROC: The conventional wisdom in academia is that social networks do the opposite, they serve as polarizing echo chambers where users reinforce their own views rather than being persuaded to listen and perhaps agree with others. Why or why not does Facebook fit this mold?

RZ: This is a great question. I think this greatly depends on where you look within a social website. If you are looking at a user profile, you'd probably be correct in that people use that real estate on the site to build their own personal brand. They post photos of themselves, write about their view points, and tell their friends what they are doing and what they are thinking. So yes, if you look at only the profile, you might believe that social media is just a place for a one-sided posting of information about oneself.

However, if you only looked at the profile, you'd be ignoring a tremendous amount of activity that takes place, on Facebook and other sites. Facebook users join groups to discuss issues, topics, and activities that are important to them. They become "fans" of celebrities, brands, public figures, and businesses. They use applications to see photos of their friends traveling the world, read their friends' blog posts, and keep up to date with news and content.

And most importantly, people use Facebook to learn new things about their friends and the world around them. Our mission as a company is to encourage people to share information that is important to them with their

friends. Through the news feed on a user's homepage, Facebook users see what their friends are doing, thinking, and talking about. They discover new books, new articles, new videos, new places to visit, and new people to become friends with.

I can't even begin to tell you how many new things I have personally discovered through Facebook and how my Facebook friends have broadened my horizons and introduced me to new things I never would have discovered before. On many days, I hear about the current events because my Facebook friends will post articles and write thoughts about it ... even before I discover it from a news site. I have discovered new places in the world to visit, have been introduced to new and incredible people, have discovered new music and bands to follow, and have had my views challenged on everything from politics to taste in Broadway musicals.

ROC: Journalists are using Facebook in unanticipated ways. What are some of the main trends you have noticed? Are you surprised at these novel applications? Can you give us details about your interaction with ABC in the past and where you hope to take things in the future? What has your interaction been with other media outlets and individual journalists?

RZ: I think journalists are only beginning to discover what a powerful tool Facebook can be for their content. In my discussions with many mainstream media companies, I constantly hear them talk about why they are squeamish about posting their content on other sites -- their content is their lifeblood, it's all they have ... why would they give it away for free on other sites?

However, I see more and more media companies understanding the importance of allowing people to consume content anywhere they want to consume it on the web, not just at the media company's website. As I mentioned before, I don't think expert journalism will go away -- people will always want a trusted, expert opinion when it comes to news, politics, current events, and important topics -- but people would rather get that content on a site they are already on, like Facebook, rather than traveling off to another site if they are already on Facebook engaging with friends and doing other things.

When we worked with ABC on the presidential primary debates, we built a really powerful tool together in the "U.S. Politics Application." In this area on Facebook, we allowed users to consume ABC News content and set up special pages for the reporters who were on the campaign trails where they could blog about their experiences and engage with Facebook users. We also strove to make this area extremely interactive, by turning almost every article, piece of content, and question into a "debate/discussion topic" where Facebook users could post their viewpoint and see what all of their friends thought about a specific issue. This information helped power some of the pundit commentary for a high-profile, televised primetime presidential primary debate for the New Hampshire primary.

Understanding that there is still a struggle in which media companies prefer to keep their content on their own site, we recently launched a product called Facebook Connect, which allows companies to incorporate Facebook's social tools into their website. Facebook users can log into other sites with their Facebook login and see what content their friends are consuming and activity their friends are taking on that site. Companies like CNN and CBS have done a great job implementing connect and this is clearly only the beginning.

ROC: Do you agree that Facebook is increasingly becoming a sort of conveyor belt for the mainstream media's news products? Do you have metrics showing how often and what type of news stories are posted and disseminated on Facebook?

RZ: I would agree with your initial question. We have an incredible tool called Lexicon, which shows trends and insights into what Facebook users are talking about. Around the presidential election, it was fascinating to look at terms such as "Obama," "Palin," "voting" ... even "Tina Fey!" to see trends in Facebook user discussion as election day got closer and closer. Lexicon allows you to look at the buzz around a certain word or topic on Facebook, and even allows you to drill down to see exactly where in the United States people are most talking about that topic. As this data becomes more and more refined, I think you will start to see this becoming a really powerful way to show the type of news that is posted and shared through Facebook and how often Facebook users are discussing certain topics.

Twitter

The first report of the miraculous rescue of 150 passengers from a U.S. Airways jet floating in the Hudson River also provided the latest evidence -- if indeed it was still needed -- that emerging social media are not only supplementing but supplanting the legacy mainstream media.

Twitter, the "microblogging" short message service created in 2006 and now used by millions, beat the world to the story that a jet had gone down in the drink. Despite the fact that the headquarters of international wire services, major metropolitan newspapers, and big-time television networks are literally opposite the crash site, Twitter user Janis Krums scooped them all when he "tweeted" his report of "a plane in the Hudson" and posted an iPhone photo on TwitPic, all while rescue boats were still en route. The image spread around the social media world so rapidly -- nearly 40,000 viewed the photo in four hours -- that heavy traffic soon crashed the site.

When it comes to breaking news -- from heroism on the Hudson to terror in Mumbai to calamity in California -- Twitter leads the pack these days. Early adopters have known of its news utility for sometime. Although not envisioned or designed for use as an 'instant' information source, it quickly morphed into one, as short bursts of text and images from citizens on-the-scene of both manmade and natural disasters began to spread virally around the globe at the speed of light. In short order, and in a world where legacy media is downsizing and shutting bureaus worldwide, Twitter has become a go-to source of news you can use when and where you want and need it -- often when and where the legacy media cannot yet or no longer supplies it.

I spoke recently with Twitter co-founder Biz Stone.

ROC: What is Twitter? How would you describe it? Is it a social network?

BS: Twitter is a 24 hr feed of everyone in world; a soundtrack to our universal film; the Zeitgeist to news on wires. Twitter is social media, but NOT a social network ... it's a place where you can zoom in and out on trends and emergent topics; when you think of the entire ecosystem as an organism, that's when it begins to get really interesting ...

Twitter is about the idea of an organic approach to communication. We come at it indirectly, organically ... Twitter messages only go to an opt-in community, which makes it easier to engage in open conversation. Of course, when a news event happens, we want more engagement. At other times, you can turn it off, as the settings allow user control.

ROC: What are Twitter's uses for journalists?

BS: The news applications surprised us ... We noticed in prototypes early on, though, that things like earthquakes led to Twitter updates. The first Twitter report of the ground shaking during recent tremors in California, for example, came nine minutes before the first Associated Press alert. So we knew early on that a shared event such as an earthquake would lead people to look at Twitter for news almost without thinking.

ROC: Are there advantages to Twitter beyond speed, beyond simply being first with breaking news?

BZ: Well, during the earthquake I'm referring to, there was a lot of depth of reporting as well -- 3,600 separate updates on Twitter, which is the equivalent of a fifty thousand word book in terms of content size. And I'm confident that had the quake been worse, the next step would be in journalists using it to find human-interest stories. (Incidentally, we might also have seen social collaboration activated via the service to help people!)

It's also interesting that Verizon's voice network broke down during the quake, but Twitter's service didn't, because our packet switching technology is more reliable than telephones. But in the end, it's not about technology -- it's about the idea of connecting in groups more quickly and efficiently.

ROC: What are some ways journalists are using Twitter?

BZ: We were also surprised at how quickly and expertly news organizations -- places like the New York Times, CNN and so on -- began to use Twitter. They just jumped in and impressed us with how they engaged, and their hybrid approach. Reuters, for example, began watching Twitter for trends, and found it worked. We gave help, support, and even our API (application programming interface) to the Reuters Lab people. Then CNN began using us to access information, and to find and create stories. Rick Sanchez at CNN, for example, is using both

Facebook and Twitter and getting real time feedback ... And the Los Angeles Times took the Twitter feed about the wildfires and put it on their home page.

Another good example is last spring's story of the Twitter user who blogged just one word -- "Arrested" -- and had the story of his detention splashed instantly to the world's attention, thus leading to his quick release.

ROC: Is Twitter also useful in search?

BS: We are involved on a macro level in documenting events. If you go to Search.twitter.com you can discover and cover trends in detail every minute. You could call it 'search,' but it's really not. 'Search' on Twitter is more about filtering results before they hit the Internet -- so it's more a kind of 'filter' than actual 'search.'

ROC: Can social media such as Twitter help solve journalism's trust and credibility problem?

BS: We think that social media is largely comparable to traditional approach, in that credibility is key. In the future, social media tools will help the news media know such things as the location of the person reporting, we will be able to provide a social graph of our users ... Can we then triangulate about their credibility via algorithm? We can certainly begin to get very sophisticated on credibility with new tools, and combine that with journalists leveraging open systems such as ours to find and vet crowd sources, story leads, etc.

Looking ahead, I see more sophisticated tools to deal with this issue. A credibility algorithm may be possible one day. Maybe it is even now, as rudimentary as it would still be. Our recent election feed, for example, was a smart feed. As we go forward and learn more about open systems, we can filter better and thus get more credibility. But filtering is how we get there ... so one should not rely on social media alone.

Editor's note: AlterNet is now on Twitter.<http://twitter.com/AlterNet> Check it out. And go here to sign up for your own twitter account. to view and become a follower so AlterNet. <http://twitter.com>

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