

**Should Perspective be Shared:
Journalists, Opinion and Social Media**

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Case Presentation (686 words)

Journalists assume a role of objectivity and professionalism in order to convey news as accurately as possible, but these standards are being challenged by the ever increasing levels of connectedness and digital intimacy offered by social media. As media outlets and publications continue towards further leveraging the popularity of social media platforms, many journalists are required to maintain a social media presence, often merging their personal and professional online personas. The same is true for freelance professionals, who often rely on social platforms for branding and community-building. On average, more than half of journalists use social media, with blogs being particularly popular among freelance journalists (Gulyas, 2013).

Journalists' social media is often not only an alternative repository for news and community interaction, but also a means for journalists to interpret, publicize and orient aspects of their professional and personal lives with an engaged, equally subjective audience (Chu, 2013). In this sense, the line between unbiased fact collector and media pundit can be blurred — the medium is focused on conversation, with a keen interest in the opinion of participating individuals, despite ostensibly being labelled as a journalistic platform (Rogstad, 2014).

The blogs of professional journalists are often the most explicitly vague form of journalistic social media. Referred to as j-blogs, these forms of community discourse are often the most susceptible to opinionated discussions. Even political reporters, whose position is often most scrutinized for objectivity and fairness,

commonly maintain blogs rife with opinion and commentary (Singer, 2005). While it is natural for reporters to have individual perspectives on the objects of their work, sharing these perspectives has lasting influence on both the image of the journalist and those with whom they are associated. Mark Thompson, then BBC Director General, warned of the influence that social media could have on journalists and their industry:

“There isn't really a Chinese Wall you can draw between personal opinion and what appears on the BBC – the same thing with the blogs and the tweets. What you can't do easily is take off the cloak of the BBC and put it back on at will.” (Newman, 2009)

2018 saw a spat of seasoned journalists under scrutiny for previous tweets or blog posts, a few of which showcased the most explosive examples of social media presence erupting into professional life. *The Atlantic* separated from Kevin Williamson a month after his hiring due to public outcry over Williamson's hardline anti-abortion tweets four years earlier (Grynbaum, 2018). In rapid succession, *New York Times* found itself at the center of debate for hiring tech writers Quinn Norton and Sarah Jeong, both of whom had shared controversial and racially charged opinions over social media years back (Peiser, 2018; Windolf, 2018).

Each of these cases centered around the journalists personally ran social media, not company accounts. While many professionals maintain a more private online presence separate from their professional account, the conflict caused by the aforementioned journalists' social media brings into question the limits of

journalistic responsibility — reporters are also people, just as deserving of the right to expression in public forum. The stringent requirements for objectivity apply when serving in an explicitly professional capacity, but the always-on nature of social media make these requirements nigh untenable outside the newsroom, as the journalists professional online persona is often intrinsically linked with their personal identity.

In all of these cases, the dispute centered around what views are acceptable in mainstream journalism, and to what standards of professionalism we should hold journalists. However, with the growing pervasiveness of social media and the professional lines it blurs, we need to question *if* the sharing of personal perspective or opinion from journalists is acceptable, regardless of the medium. No reporter can ever claim to be entirely objective in their craft, but the presence of social media use promulgates these individual perspectives to a wider audience than ever before, changing the question from “how opinionated should reporters be in their work” to “should reporters share their opinions at all, on any medium?”

Ethical Issue

Should journalists share their opinions and perspectives on social media, even if said social media is personally owned and branded?

Literature Review (992 words)

Proliferation of the terms citizen journalist, j-blog and pundit journalism denote the popularity of discourse-oriented, blog-based reporting in contemporary media. Research based in the sociology of occupations largely show the merging of

formal and informal reporting mediums, and as j-blogging grows, the medium continues to fill positions typically under the jurisdiction of traditional journalism. Findings by Lowrey and Mackay (2008) indicates that the implementation of local blogs into the fact-gathering and reporting process is more than a tangential involvement; as blogging and topical social media use increase within a newspaper's target area, editors and managers become more likely to utilize social media within their production cycle.

The organizational constraints of traditional journalism also contribute to the merging of the mediums; while newsrooms harbor the resources for predictable revenue wide coverage and division of labor, they lack the means of niche and continuous, in-depth coverage (Lowrey, 2006; Singer et al., 2011). Although co-optation of blogging and social media brings many of its structural benefits to traditional journalism, these benefits are inseparable from the informal traits associated with communal discourse — the iterative perspective necessary for a blog's discourse introduces a level of subjectivity the co-opting newsroom has historically tried to avoid.

While this could be a source of friction in the process of integration, the continuous atomization of modern journalism indicates that the industry's future is more specialized, discursive and opinionated than the current norms (Abrahamson, 2005). When combined with the trend of traditional news outlets integrating blogging into their digital presence, it can be inferred that the traits of social media will experience some degree of bleed over into the mainstream journalistic process.

Research into the presence of opinion in these co-opted blogs shows the normalization of perspective in otherwise objective reporting, supporting the idea that reporting norms are evolving towards the direction of blogs (Vobič, 2007; Abrahamson, 2005; Singer et al., 2011).

Given the evolution of journalism towards more niche, recursive and discourse-oriented content, understanding the purpose and necessity of opinion within digital journalism is crucial. Lewis and Usher (2013) propose a framework centered around the culture already established in many tech communities, relying on iteration and participation as guiding principles for the future newsroom. Within this structure, the melding of opinionated social media and traditional journalism aids in the innovation and democratic drive behind new forms of news — an optimistic outlook shared by much of the existing research (Lowrey, 2006; Abrahamson, 2005; Singer, 2011)

Perspective in j-blogs and social media are also shared for critical purposes. A niche of journalistic blog know as the “watchblog” has been used to monitor political reporters, often expressing disdain for journalists with a perceived history of bias or inaccuracy (Glaser, 2004). It is also common for news outlets to integrate forms of participatory journalism into the final product of the journalistic process, where comment and discussion sections include conversational interaction between reporters and readers addressing questions or concerns (Singer et al., 2011). These forms of opinion and perspective are clearly different than the more explicit

examples we often see in the media, but propose novel and ill-defined additions to the journalistic process nonetheless.

These structural evolutions beg the question of journalist/citizen distinction, questioning whether an off-the-clock reporter is still held to their professional standards and if “citizen journalists” should be held to a different set of standards. As professional journalists operate social media throughout their day in the discourse-based ways outlined above, the democratic boundaries of journalistic practice become a focus. As Tony Harcup (2013: 124) explains:

“Yet we should not forget that journalists are citizens too ... Journalists can be active citizens by producing journalistic output that acts as a watchdog on the powerful in society, but their citizenship need not end there. Journalists can also be active citizens by reflecting on journalistic practice itself and by taking part in democratic discussions about – and the questioning of – such practice.”

In this sense, the proliferation of always-on digital media and its hunger for personal perspective and discussion is not only an issue of professional limits, but also the ethical boundaries of allowing or disallowing journalists, who are also inherently citizens, from “taking part in democratic discussions.”

Professional limits, however, are also a key factor in consideration. Podger’s (2009) research into workplace guidelines for social media use show examples as diverse as they are opaque. The sheer volume of content needed to effectively utilize social media combined with its need for personal interactivity to thrive result in a

tool equal parts engaging and chaotic. A personable blog or Facebook account linked to a news outlet can effectively drive readership and build community, but that same personability is just as liable to betray journalistic ethics or accidentally endanger sources. Beyond these extreme possibilities, the need to be relatable for social media presence to be effective often produces posts that, while harmless, blur professional lines. Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012) found that one-fifth of posts made by journalist within their sample group were entirely personal with no journalistic content.

Difficulty in regulating and setting boundaries around journalists' social media usage fits into the larger concept of understanding media "awareness systems." Hermida defines awareness systems "broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on systems are enabling citizens to maintain a mental model of news and events around them," often powered by social media and digital news (Hermida, 2010). While much of the research into awareness systems and ambient journalism focuses on the readership's role and how the systems are redefining news output, the implications of *how* digital media producers utilize these systems remain largely unexplored.

As news outlets and journalists utilize social media in new and untested ways, the subjective and personal content shared posit unique ethical quandaries for traditional journalistic standards. The growth of specialized content, awareness systems and discursive, discourse oriented media bring more perspective and

opinion into the journalistic fold daily; as the system evolves, so should our understanding of its ethical issues and associations.

Analysis (1335 words)

The source of ethical friction in journalists sharing opinions over social media is the blurring of role-related responsibilities inherent to contemporary journalistic practice. In his analysis of the morality associated with roles, role-enactments and role-acceptance, R.S. Downie establishes a framework viewing society's roles through a moral lens and establishing their connection to the individual assuming said role. Downie states that individuals are bound to a system of rights and patterns associated with their role, creating a "a system of social roles conceived in abstraction from its operators as a network of responsibilities for and to." (1964)

The role of a professional journalist hosts a confluence of unique traits which force the journalist into a position of always-on moral authority: their position in the surrounding community can lead to a quasi-celebrity status where their name is recognized as a source of unbiased information, a recognition that follows them outside their professional lives as their name is also used in non-official social media and other personal affairs.

This shared identity is integral to transparent journalism as it enforces accountability — when a reporter's identity is tied to their work, the social pressure which binds them to Downie's role-responsibilities is inescapable. The very same mechanism making these pressures inescapable, however, also inhibits the journalist from enacting their democratic right to discourse as a citizen outside

their role. If a particularly famous journalist were to have a publicly accessible personal social media account, the shared identity inherent to their name would compromise the journalist's reputation as an unbiased source and potentially mislead readers into assuming the journalist's opinions are news.

A journalist's twin professional and personal identity transforms the classification of opinions and the mediums they occupy into an issue of breadth: neither opinions nor social media are binary entities, both are predominantly grey areas where classification is concerned. The dichotomy of one professional and one personal, privated social media account may be the simplest example for which to make normative ethical prescriptions, but it is also far from the most common example. Similarly, opinions staking a partisan claim with the intent of transforming fans into political peers is an obvious opinion to criticize when posted to a professional account, but most journalists shy away from explicit partisanship.

Due to the fluidity of both opinion and social media platform, axiomatic approaches such as those discussed by Podger are often unwieldy and ignored (2009). A company's attempt to standardize social media guidelines for its reporters is an attempt to crystallize the amorphous and evolving practices of digital journalism.

These methodologies attempt to account for professionalism on professional accounts also fail to address professional discussion on personal accounts. Socio-political stances posted in professional accounts are of obvious issue, but the inclusion of less partisan but still professionally oriented opinion on personal

accounts is just as problematic. If a reporter uses their personal account, one which is primarily utilized as a means of connecting with friends and family, to discuss industry critiques or their perspective on a story, the action blurs the dissociation of the professional and the personal, bleeding journalistic requirements of objectivity into their right to democratic input and deliberation as a citizen.

Due to the necessary problem of name association and the clumsy nature of axiomatic corporate policy, an adaptable classification system from which ethical judgements can be drawn should be developed to help solidify the divide between a journalist's personal and professional online identity. The system should broadly classify the forms that opinion and social media may take in a manner relevant to journalism, and be accompanied by best practices for dissociation and professionalism.

The task of classifying the forms of journalistic social media is not a simple one, but can be done for the purposes of ethical distinction. The following is a simplistic taxonomy of journalistic social media, ranked in order of expected professionalism:

1. **Professional Account** - Typically provided by an employer, this is a platform for updates and

in-house advertising of stories.

2. **J-Blog** - A journalism blog takes one of two forms for our purposes:

2.1 **Purpose-Oriented J-Blog** - Focused on a unique niche of directed journalism, i.e.

“Watchblogs,” or

2.2 **Oeuvre-Oriented J-Blog** - Focused on deeper coverage of a journalists work or

industry-related critiques and perspectives.

3. **Personal Account** - The social media to be dissociated from the professional, should be privatized if possible.

A role-related approach to systematizing journalistic social media needs the same approach to journalistic opinions to be ethically practicable. The following types of opinion are listed from most offensive to journalistic norms to least:

1. **Socio-political Stances** - Typically overtly partisan and assume the form of calls-to-action,

biased criticism or support.

2. **Journalistic Perspective** - A journalist sharing the perspective afforded to them by their role.

Either:

2.2 **Anecdotal Punditry** - The journalist’s positive or negative experiences covering a

topic, or

2.1 **Experience** - The journalist’s experience covering a topic, not relevant enough to be

included in their output.

3. **Reader Interaction** - Non-objective discourse of tangential relation to a story.

Either:

3.1 **Industry Critique** - Normative or critical discussion of the journalistic process, or

3.2 **Public Relations** - Generic outreach and community building.

4. **Non-Journalistic Fluff** - The category for personal, inconsequential posts such as life

updates.

While this approach is simplistic, it provides structure on what is and is not ethically acceptable in an otherwise subjective area. Correlating an opinions controversiality and subjectivity to the professionalism of the platform it is being posted to aids in dissociating the journalist's twin identities and doesn't subvert expectations associated with their role-related responsibilities.

The approach is broad, but purposefully so. The innumerable permutations of opinionated language demands an approach flexible enough to pertain to as many social media posts as possible without unduly restricting the journalist. Some may be tempted to bar opinions on professional accounts entirely, but discussions of Industry Critique and certain examples of Journalistic Perspective are not only beneficial, but necessary for the transparent and accountable growth of the digital newsroom.

Regardless of the system's form, any approach to ethically understanding opinion in journalistic social media should (1) elucidate the subjective world of

opinion and perspective in a manner that (2) is conducive to the constant evolution of social media and (3) is built with the aim to distance role-related responsibilities and their associated expectations from the journalist's personal presence.

These guidelines do become contentious where freelance journalists are concerned. Freelance journalists encounter more difficulty in dissociation, as their professional identity is often entirely defined by their name. Hired journalists have the opportunity to partially define their professional online presence through the mask of their company — an independent reporter has only their name, save for those who work under a pseudonym, or small startup.

Freelance journalists also heavily rely on personal sites and blogs for community building, branding and outreach, all practices that thrive with personable, communicative interaction. In this sense, opinion and perspective are more necessary in the freelance journalist's business model — the most successful modern independent reporters often develop notoriety through their partisan approach to coverage or their level of audience engagement.

Another inadequacy with this ethical system is its application to "citizen journalists," or unaffiliated hobbyist reporters not beholden to traditional journalistic norms. The growing adoption of citizen-ran j-blogs into the traditional news process gives credence to the actions of citizen journalist, but the gamut of roles they assume adds a third dimension to the already complicated ethical analysis. Unlike traditional journalistic ethics, which tend to remain fixed across time, the citizen journalist ethos will likely evolve as rapidly as social media. This is

not to say their role should be ignored in ethical evaluations, as their growing involvement in the news process also has implications in the world of traditional journalism.

Conclusion

Although perspective and opinion are undoubtedly subjective categories, their presence in journalistic social media needs to be addressed to dissociate the twid identities of professional journalists and fulfill expectations associated with their role-related responsibilities. Understanding the level of professionalism associated with the varying forms of journalistic social media is integral to knowing where said opinions and perspectives should be allowed — stepping outside these admittedly vague boundaries can violate the mores of the journalist's role and deceive readers into confusing personal opinion and objective news. Although this system is flexible enough to apply to most forms of professional digital journalism, freelance and citizen journalism's ill-defined and transitory nature make the application of a systematic approach difficult. A better understanding of the current state and potential future of alternative journalism would solidify a means of ethically classifying their work in a similar manner.

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