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Journalists and their sources:

The twin challenges of diversity and verification

Jamie Matthews

“Journalists are becoming more passive, often merely passing on information to the public that they have been given.”

O’Neill and O’Connor (2008: 497-498)

“The development of social networks for real-time news and information, and the integration of social media content in the news media, creates tensions for a profession based on a discipline of verification”

Hermida (2012:l)

Interrelating financial, organisational and technological factors have spurred considerable changes in the professional practices of journalism. They include declining sales and advertising revenues, the emergence of new multi-media and digital technologies and a blurring of the boundaries between promotional communication and genuine news reporting (Blumler, 2010; Deuze, 2008; Franklin, 2011). Responding to a compressed news cycle, journalists often find themselves spread across a range of stories, producing material for multiple platforms, and frequently denied the space to specialise or to work a particular beat. In short, they can face severe restrictions on the amount of time they have to identify, select and investigate the stories they believe are worthy of their attention (Davis, 2003). Understandably, this has led to a restructuring of the relationship between journalists and their sources.

What we may regard as the traditional view held that interaction between journalists and their sources resembled a

dance, a symbiotic relationship, where sources were in the ascendancy during the story selection stage but where – and this is crucial – journalists took the lead to develop and shape a story (Gans, 1979). More often than not these days, however, this relationship is out of kilter. With the professionalization of communication, particularly where public relations or PR strategies for media management are concerned, sources have become more pro-active. At stake is not only access to news as a voice worthy of inclusion, but also a desire to influence the way a given issue is presented in the ensuing story. Journalists with limited time and resources may appear to be rather too passive as a result, some critics suggest. Increasingly reliant on a narrow range of proactive sources, they are accused of simply passing information on to the public with little by way of checking for accuracy's sake (O'Neil & O'Connor, 2008).

Due to practical considerations, journalists have routinely drawn on a small pool of sources for information (Gans, 1979), allowing them to act as the 'primary definers' (Hall et al., 1978), which shape the character of a particular news story (this can have even more to do with ideological fit than expediency, Hall et al suggest). As pressures have intensified, there has been a growing dependency on those types of sources that can be counted upon to provide information in a convenient, accessible form. Recent studies indicate this means that pre-packaged news copy derived from PR sources or wire agencies will be more likely to feature prominently in news reports (Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008). Research has also shown that some journalists tend to use other news outlets as sources, feeling pressured into rewriting copy published elsewhere in order to keep up with the competition – and not always giving due attribution to the original article (Philips, 2010). These and related practices reflect what some have described as 'churnalism', where source material is effectively churned into 'news' stories in an uncritical fashion as quickly as possible (Davis, 2009).

Journalists forced to be more reactive to their sources will seldom have the opportunity to look beyond this ready-made material. Some suggest that this practice is impacting on the diversity and range of sources represented in news, thereby undermining journalism's democratic function as an independent monitor of the privileged and powerful. As the balance of power tips away from journalists toward those who

supply story information, the plurality of opinion represented in news discourse is reduced. A well-resourced PR department, for example, may prove rather formidable in its efforts to present (or 'spin') a news story sympathetic to the organisation they represent. To the extent the news media are unable to seek out alternative voices, whether they corroborate or challenge a source's position, journalism's status as a producer of authoritative knowledge is weakened (Hermida, 2012). The diversity of perspectives represented in the news is central to questions of balance, accuracy and impartiality. By relying on a small number of sources, journalists risk relaying misleading information as news while, at the same time, permitting these sources to shape the boundaries of interpretation around an issue or event. As some argue, this may ultimately reduce the quality of reporting, even diminishing journalism's capacity to act in the public interest (O'Neil & O'Connor, 2008).

Alongside these factors impacting on journalist-source relations, emerging media technologies and platforms are enhancing the opportunities for journalists – at least in principle – to identify a more diverse array of sources, and to interact with them in more effective ways. Such technological developments have facilitated the blurring of boundaries between journalists and their audiences, with the latter increasingly inclined to engage in newsmaking themselves. That is to say, ordinary members of the public may now be inclined to perform the work of 'citizen journalists,' either by sharing material with journalists or by actively reporting what they see or hear, such as through blogs, Facebook or Twitter. Examples abound, such as when the 'official' account of the events leading up to the death of Ian Tomlinson during the G20 demonstrations in 2008 came unravelling when challenged by cameraphone footage filmed by a passer-by. It showed a police officer striking and pushing Ian Tomlinson to the ground. Some assert that new media technologies are 'restructuring the conditions of access' by both increasing the opportunity for 'ordinary voices' to challenge elite discourse and precipitating the development of alternative journalistic forms (Atton and Hamilton, 2008, p90).

This chapter will consider two challenges that arise from these shifting dynamics of journalist-source interaction. First, it will examine the conditions underpinning journalists' reliance on news sources, particularly with respect to the relative diver-

sity of views or perspectives being represented. It will discuss the extent to which pre-packaged or syndicated news copy from a single source has become normalised, as well as its possible impact on the types of sources able to access the news agenda. Pertinent here is whether new media technologies, including the development of social software, will serve to enhance source differentiation. Second, the chapter will also explore how the discipline of verification is evolving in response to the changing nature of interaction between journalists and their sources. Social networks will be shown to have considerable potential in this regard, possibly providing the basis for a participatory model for substantiating source material with the capacity to improve news reporting (Kovach, 2006; Hermida, 2012).

A wealth of news sources: PR, news agencies
and news cannibalisation

An important starting point, then, is to consider the development of public relations and its influence on news.

It is clear that PR as an industry has expanded considerably in recent years. Some fear that this alongside dwindling resources in newsrooms is tipping the balance of power over information in favour of PR departments (Davis, 2002), with journalism becoming increasingly dependent on external sources and pre-packaged information subsidies (Davis, 2008; Gandy, 1982). While 'journalistic reliance on public relations is not necessarily a negative outcome of changing newsgathering routines' (Franklin, 2008, p18), where others perceive benefits with the expansion of PR for enhancing opportunities for groups without significant financial resources to challenge the views or opinions of well-established sources. Some suggest, as we noted above, that it has reduced the diversity of perspectives represented in news (O'Neil and O'Connor, 2008). Research examining the extent to which pre-packaged material was used to create news copy, for instance, found that 60% of newspaper articles in the UK were derived 'wholly or mainly' from PR sources, with material sometimes cut and pasted directly from a press release (Lewis et al., 2008, p14).

Relying on a single source has obvious dangers. PR sources by their very nature have a desire to control the flow of infor-

mation or to present a favourable public image of the organisation that they represent. So, even if a statement seems credible and arises from an authoritative source, it may not provide all the relevant facts. Part of the professional ideology of journalism, one that lies at the heart of its public service role as a provider of credible and accurate news, is that journalists take steps to confirm the veracity of information. This is usually through corroborating information with another independent source. Using a single source, one that seeks to present a positive image of an organisation, obscures the boundaries between promotion and truth-seeking and may weaken journalism's authority to provide objective and balanced accounts of issues and events. As Davis (2008, p255-6) acknowledges, the concern is that PR is only part of the picture. Strategic communication and covert communication are also prominent within the mix of promotional communications. Therefore, if journalists are unable to take the time to independently verify information with a second or third source, journalism risks becoming open to manipulation and misinformation.

It is not only journalism's close relationship with PR that poses a challenge for source diversity and verification. News agencies provide a great deal of the syndicated content that journalists use as primary source material. Studies have shown that news agency copy featured in 65% of Australian news content (Johnston & Forde, 2009), 70% of UK news items (Davies 2008, p74) and up to 80% of news material in Germany (Baerns, 1991 cited in Quandt, 2008). When it comes to breaking news on online newspaper websites, content is now almost exclusively reproduced from wire copy, with 80-90% of stories taken directly and without revision from a news wire. Some argue that it would now be more accurate if this section on news sites was described as 'Breaking News from the Wires' (Johnston & Forde, 2009, p9).

It is important to recognise, however, that agency copy has featured prominently in news content for decades. Agencies such as Thomson Reuters and cooperative associations, which include Associated Press and the UK Press Association, were set up to reduce the costs associated with news gathering by providing syndicated copy to news organisations (Silberstein-Loeb 2009 cited in Phillips, 2010). The challenge, then, when information is presented in such a convenient and accessible

form, is for journalists to be able to seek additional sources to interrogate and confirm the accuracy of this material. Agencies are well resourced, staffed by experienced journalists and have established reputations of delivering high-quality news. As a source, they maintain a great deal of credibility. The issue then is not over the trustworthiness of material that is offered by news wires but the extent to which journalists are able to further investigate or challenge this information, or whether it is simply reproduced verbatim and without alteration.

The concern is that without drawing on other sources, journalists risk reporting claims which are imprecise, if not entirely false. The pressures of a 24-hour news cycle mean that there is a need to get to the story first, with inaccuracies corrected during the process of news discovery. When, for example, news of the London bombings in 2005 broke, a number of media outlets initially reported the incident as a power surge on the underground, attributing this information to agency or Transport for London sources. This was soon corrected when raw information started coming in from the public and it became clear that a number of explosions had in fact occurred across London's transport infrastructure. Although it would be unreasonable to claim that accuracy is now secondary to immediacy, there is always the danger that unsubstantiated information may turn out to be inaccurate. Despite the pressures of a compressed news cycle, not all news organisations are adopting an 'information first verify later model.' The BBC's approach during the London bombings, for example, was to wait for official confirmation of what they were seeing in the grisly images and video footage shared by members of the public, thereby reflecting what it perceives to be wider public service role when reporting crises. Its relationship with its public revolves around its credibility, that is, its status as a trustworthy, reliable source of news – a relationship that can come unravelling should it rely upon unverified evidence that turns out to be wide of the mark.

Two further issues arise from journalists' increasing reliance on agency copy. First, some argue that it is creating uniformity in news content, due to this dependency on the 'bland and predictable news product' provided by agencies (Paterson, 2006, p6). This reduces the plurality of sources represented in the news, with reporting characterised by topics or issues that reflect the interests of economic, political and cultural elites

(whether they be corporate leaders, politicians, celebrities, and the like). In a global context this manifests itself in news that shows a bias towards western interests (Manning, 2008). At a local level, where news organisations have had to make efficiency savings, the in-house journalists with the knowledge to seek alternative sources or to explore local angles may well be replaced by copy provided by news wire services. As a consequence, critics maintain, news tends to centre on official accounts, thereby reflecting too narrow a range of perspectives.

The second issue is that an increasing dependency on wire copy has begun to normalise the practice of rewriting or re-angling second-hand material without attribution to the original source. While some journalists have regularly used material from the established agencies without acknowledgement, recent studies indicate that there is now a tendency to use wire copy without providing attribution to this external content (Johnston & Forde, 2011). This is particularly evident in the online environment where the pressures for immediate release leads news organisations to publish stories without recognising that the copy was picked up from an agency source. The effect of this practice is that it reduces transparency, thereby risking compromises in the value of news. Source attribution empowers the reader or viewer by allowing them to weigh up the veracity of information and the authority of the source to provide this information (Friendly, 1958). Even if the material is rewritten to a certain extent, the relationship between journalists and their audience is undermined without acknowledging the original source for a story.

According to Philips (2010, p375) another worrying trend that arises from the changing practices of journalism and the pressures on journalists' output is a tendency to 'use material from other news outlets without follow up or attribution.' She describes this process as 'news cannibalisation' and, in part, ascribes it to the relatively open nature of information available across the Internet and the difficulties this creates in attempting to maintain any degree of exclusivity over content. This, she argues, makes it easy for journalists to pick up stories from other news outlets almost immediately as they are published, which can then be rewritten or reworked and filed as copy. Interviews with journalists from national newspapers in the UK revealed that this practice is becoming more common as

the volume of articles that journalists have to write increases, with stories, particularly those in specialist areas, routinely rewritten without crediting the original sources (Philips, 2009). Not all news organisations, however, accept this practice. The Guardian's editorial code, for example, is clear when it states that 'sources of published material obtained from another organisation should be acknowledged, including quotes taken from other newspaper articles' (Guardian Editorial Code, 2011, p2). Overall, through, the picture is of a trend toward recycling content obtained from competitors but without providing adequate attribution. In the online environment a comparative study of European and US online journalism found that 'copy and paste' is so widespread that it may unfortunately become the 'basic principle' (Quandt, 2008).

The Internet and new media technologies

It is understandable that with the ease of access and wealth of material available online that the Internet has now become an important tool for gathering information and for interacting with sources. It could be argued, however, that this excess of information may encourage passivity in source selection and verification. Journalists can research background to a story, develop alternative story angles or substantiate information at the click of a mouse. While much of the information to be found over the Internet is trustworthy and accurate, there is equally a vast amount of material that is merely opinion or rumour. The challenge for journalists, and for anyone else for that matter, using this vast online library, is to be able to confirm the authenticity and validity of material sourced online. Routine fact checking and corroboration of documents, comment or audio-visual material, whether from a blog, social network or from participatory knowledge resources such as Wikipedia, should not be bypassed simply because it is published in the public domain.

While most journalists recognise the perils of sourcing from the Internet, there are a number of recent cases where news acquired from or substantiated by information gathered from online sources has subsequently proved to be inaccurate or false. The use of Wikipedia by journalists, in particular, when used to research the backgrounds of public figures or

celebrities has led to a number of reporting errors. The death of French composer, Maurice Jarre, for example, was widely reported using a quote taken from the composer's Wikipedia page which said that 'when I die there will be a final waltz playing in my head that only I can hear.' It later transpired that this quote had been created by an Internet hoaxer who had updated Jarre's Wikipedia entry following his death (Timmer, 2009).

Journalists now also routinely use weblogs as a source. In the US, the influence of the blogosphere has increased to such an extent that blogs are becoming an important source for print journalists. On the flip side, bloggers are acknowledging the traditional media as sources, providing links to their online news sites (Messner & Distaso, 2008). This process has been described by Messner and Distaso (2008, p459) as a continuous source cycle, where traditional media first report an issue, which is then commented on by bloggers who cite the traditional media as sources. When it comes to journalists' use of independent media as a source, this indicates the potential for sourcing to become a more transparent, collaborative enterprise. This is particularly so when professional news organisations link to amateur blogs or user-generated content (UGC) providers, such as Demotix (Atton, 2011). This commitment is in sharp contrast with those instances where agency copy or material from news organisations is regurgitated without acknowledgement. Importantly, as journalists embrace these emerging forms of attribution, it suggests that there may be greater opportunities to identify sources that reflect alternative opinions and perspectives around particular issues. The devastating tsunami that struck the north east coast of Japan on 11 March 2011 was captured by those caught up in the destruction. Before correspondents could get to the area, international news organisations were reporting the disaster using amateur footage and photos sent in by the Japanese public--a remarkable response considering the sheer scale of destruction and its huge impact on the telecommunication infrastructure of the affected regions.

This process of involving and engaging with audiences has been described as both citizen (Allan & Thorsen, 2009) and participatory (Singer et al., 2011) journalism. Both perspectives conceptualise this practice as the way ordinary members

of the public contribute to the production of news content. Significantly though, the proliferation of citizen material is now impacting on journalists and the editorial processes of major news organisations as they develop new verification processes to deal with this type of source material. The BBC, for example, which invites its audience to contribute pictures or comment through its 'Have your Say' section of BBC News Online, updated its editorial guidelines in 2010 to include specific advice to its journalists on how to deal with user-generated content (McAth, 2010). These guidelines outline the steps journalists should take to verify the provenance of audience submissions and confirms the BBC's editorial commitment to ensure the accuracy of UGC. To support this process the BBC now has a team of journalists working through its User Generated Content Hub who are responsible for filtering and validating UGC. Hub journalists identify and authenticate pictures and videos that can be used to contribute to a story, but they also put journalists in touch with people who have submitted material (Stray, 2010).

In spite of the initial warmth towards UGC and the claim that it would lead to a new model of public journalism - characterised by engagement and cooperation between journalists and their audience - it remains the case that much citizen content is unverifiable, and often has little value as source material (Harrison 2009; Massey and Haas, 2002; Domingo et al. 2008). Several studies that have examined journalists' use of UGC have found that, despite the considerable growth in this type of source material and enhanced opportunities for audience contribution, journalists still act as gatekeepers (Harrison, 2009). News organisations tend to translate the traditional way of doing things to the web, repurposing not only their content, but also their journalistic culture' (Deuze 2003, p219). As a consequence, they retain a traditional gate-keeping role when adapting to new methods of newsgathering and verification afforded by the Internet (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). So, while journalists now see their audience as potential sources of information, forging a collaborative relationship is proving challenging. News producers and audiences still tend to remain as distinct, separate entities, with audience participation often merely a 'euphemism' for subsidised newsgathering (Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011).

Social media as a source

Social media play an important role in news discovery (Reich, 2009). These extended collaborative networks are a place where rumours can circulate quickly and where public individuals often make their view, experiences and feelings open to all through a tweet or status update. Social media are often the places where news breaks first before being picked up by mainstream media, as with the deaths of celebrities (Michael Jackson and Amy Winehouse being two recent examples). Social media may also be valuable resources when access to information is limited, with news and source material originating from individuals who may be caught up or close by an incident. Twitter, for example, played an important role in breaking news of the Mumbai attacks in 2008 (Hermida, 2012) and the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 (Pew: Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011), with both initially reported citing unconfirmed tweets as sources.

As Twitter and Facebook have emerged as important tools to deliver timely information for individual opinion-leaders, companies, public institutions, and celebrities, they are being used more and more by journalists to source news. Social media have also enhanced the opportunities for journalists to interact with a broader range of sources. This may be indirectly through engaging in discussion about a particular issue via Twitter, as well as by facilitating consultation with sources to validate, challenge or clarify information. Alternatively, simply following organisations or public individuals, particularly those in the political arena, can provide journalists with a convenient quote without ever having to get the source 'in front of a microphone or camera' (Broersma & Graham, 2012, p408).

On the other hand, the sheer volume of information, and speed at which it arrives across social networks, poses challenges for journalists when they seek to verify its authenticity. James (2009), commenting on journalists' search for information from inside Iran, notes that much of material posted across Twitter and Facebook is unsubstantiated, and therefore risky to use. Others have expressed concern that journalists are embracing a platform that 'appears to be at odds with journalism as a professional discipline of verification' (Project for Excellence in Journalism, cited in Hermida, 2010). With information often fragmented or contradictory, it can be difficult for jour-

nalists to piece together details and identify their wider significance. When the amount of potentially valuable source material is staggering, particularly during fast-moving and evolving news events, journalists need to be able to filter and identify information that is verifiable on the fly. But this is nothing new. Journalists have always had to balance the often-conflicting occupational demands of immediacy and accuracy (Kovach, 2006). It may be argued, then, that we need a new approach to the discipline of source verification.

The way forward: changing practice and greater transparency

The challenges posed by the proliferation of source material and the changing nature of journalist-source interaction have led some to consider how journalistic practices may evolve in response to these developments. Herimda (2012) suggests that the process of source verification should be reframed to reflect the nature of communication across social networks. He argues that the collaborative, interactive nature of platforms, such as Twitter, may eventually lead to the adoption of an iterative approach to checking and verifying source material, as information is discussed, confirmed, refuted or challenged through social media. Kovach (2006), similarly, calls for a 'journalism of verification' to deal with the proliferation of source material and the speed with which it can be distributed through new digital technologies, arguing for a more 'citizen-orientated' approach to the method of verification. This type of conversation, which can involve journalists and their sources, perhaps to some extent already exists within the social media space, as information or news is discussed, retweeted and shared amongst users. Information disputed or challenged by other participants across a social network is likely to be deemed unreliable. New technologies that news organisations are integrating into their distribution of multimedia news content, such as the live blog format used by the BBC for breaking news stories, are also beginning to allow this form of interaction and verification to develop (Bruno, 2011, p43).

Others suggest that greater transparency in the process of sourcing and the journalistic practice of source attribution will allow journalists to respond to these challenges (Phillips,

2010). As it becomes common practice for participants in social networks to seek to authenticate their posts or tweets by providing links to additional external sources, then journalists should allow news consumers to recognise when PR or agency material has been used through appropriate referencing. In the online environment, news organisations should accelerate the implementation of the emerging practice of linking to other news sites or blogs to allow their audiences to identify and navigate to external sources. As Philips (2010, p379) argues, by advancing a 'new ethic of transparency,' though appropriate attribution, journalists increase accountability by allowing their audiences to trace a story back to its original source and investigate this information. Should this practice become more widely accepted, she contends, it would increase the 'value of original investigation' and give journalists more time to develop other stories. Ultimately, this would enhance differentiation in news product and broaden the range of perspectives and interests represented in the news.

This chapter has considered how changes in the professional practices of journalism are altering the relationship between journalists and their sources. With journalists under pressure sources are becoming more actively engaged in newsmaking. This is reflected in the narrow range of sources that are able to access the news and journalism's increasing dependence on ready-made news content. Some contend that this has reduced the relative diversity of opinion and perspectives represented in the news. At the same time, however, the emergence of new media technologies and platforms are, to some degree, creating new opportunities for journalists to identify and interact with a greater breadth of sources. Smartphones, media-sharing websites and social media have made it easier for ordinary members of the public to become engaged in the process of news making. While these platforms may ultimately enhance source differentiation by giving space to alternative voices and opinion in the news. They also pose a challenge for the journalistic value and discipline of verification due to the amount and speed at which information now arrives. This chapter, therefore, has also considered how the practice of source verification is evolving, as new methods of capturing and engaging with sources become routinised.

Challenging Questions

- What factors are narrowing the range of sources that appear in the news?
- Discuss the view that the Internet is empowering ordinary members of the public to act as sources.
- What are some of the challenges that journalists face when sourcing from across social networks such as Twitter?

Recommended reading

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