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The Social Media Revolution In Breaking-News Journalism:

Tips From the Front Line

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In the olden days of breaking-news journalism, 15 years ago, the go-to resource for locating potential sources quickly was the reverse directory.

The big books, which cross-referenced addresses with names and phone numbers, are now relics fit for the Newseum—like videotape, hot type and manual Underwood typewriters.

Reporting is different today.

“When a big crime story happens now, every reporter and producer attacks Facebook for information and sources,” says Paul LaRosa, a CBS News producer. “It’s the first thing we do, and everybody does it.”

Why? Because Facebook worldwide includes more than 700 million users searchable by names, occupations, hometowns, schools and interests. Each page is a potential lode of the biographical information that journalists crave. It also provides links to friends who might serve as secondary sources.

And while one reporter scours Facebook, a colleague is likely plugged in to TweetDeck, monitoring Twitter feeds about a breaking-news event, with the same scrutiny and trained ear police reporters once gave to police radio transmissions.

“Twitter is our wire service today,” says Mo Krochmal, a journalist and founder of Social Media News NY.

CYBER JOURNALISM

At its heart, journalism hasn’t changed. It is still the process of collecting, organizing and disseminating information, just as it has been for 300 years. But the use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter is revolutionizing each facet of the news business, whether we like it or not.

This transformation of breaking-news coverage comes with some nettling questions and concerns. Does the use of social media encourage passive reporting? Is it ethical to use photos and other materials stripped from Facebook? As the traditional media wrestles with law enforcers and advocates for control of the essential message of a breaking news story, do news consumers win or lose?

Facebook has helped transform sourcing and information-gathering. Tools like Topsy, Hootsuite, WhosTalkin, Trendsmap, Storify, Spokeo, Tumblr, Reddit, Foursquare, ScribbleLive and Scoop are being used to find, organize and curate the information.

New electronic gadgetry is being added to the journalist's toolbox each day.

And dissemination has become instantaneous, as NPR's Andy Carvin proved in his paradigm-establishing Twitter coverage of the Cairo and Libya protests of 2011, using the developing skills of crowd-sourcing and geo-mapping.

"It's damned hard being ahead of the curve on this," says Krochmal, who covers newsmakers and innovators in the social media realm. He estimates—admittedly roughly, based upon anecdotes and his observations--that just one in five news organizations has fully grasped the potential of social media.

"Engagement" is the social media buzzword among journalists.

Yet the use of social media by many news operations is stuck in the infantile stage. One example of its lamest use is the ubiquitous trend in broadcasting, from the smallest local stations to CNN and the broadcast networks, of anchors reading aloud Facebook posts and Twitter messages.

Krochmal says a single plugged-in journalist—like Carvin—often will drive his or her news organization to understand the potential.

"We're talking about changing traditional news cultures," Krochmal says. "That's not going to happen quickly or easily."

But cognizant journalists say it is simply beyond argument that the transformation is happening.

"The ability to listen to and monitor the social media, especially during a breaking story, is a fundamental, necessary skill for journalists today," says Chip Mahaney, director of digital content for the E.W. Scripps Co. broadcast division.

"I cannot emphasize enough how much time we devote and consideration we give to using social media to get our content onto laptops, handhelds and tablets because we know that's where people live today," says Tracey Minkin, features editor of GoLocalProv, a news website in Providence, R.I. "The days when the media could publish great work and expect people to come find it are long gone."

In "Picture Snatcher," a 1937 newspaper flick, an ex-con character played by Jimmy Cagney begins his journalism career by conniving his way into the homes of crime victims, where he would steal photographs of the dearly departed so they could be plastered in the next day's newspaper.

“You don’t knock even have to knock on anybody’s door anymore,” says Josh Bernoff, the author of “*Groundswell*,” a highly regarded book about the social media phenomenon. “Now they essentially come to you with the photos, on Facebook.”

Not every journalist is enthralled with this particular social media trend. There are nettling privacy issues about grabbing photos and other personal information from Facebook. But the evolving newsroom ethic seems to be that anything accessed on Facebook is fair game for use on breaking crime and scandal stories. LaRosa calls Facebook “everyone’s worst fear” in terms of online privacy violation. At the same time, it has become a go-to source.

I talked (by phone and follow up emails) to working journalists, news managers and social media innovators to measure some of the ways in which breaking-news coverage is evolving. Here are their stories.

Howard Altman, *Tampa Tribune*

At 51, Howard Altman is an old-school journalist who is plugged in to new-fangled reporting.

He had his epiphany early, on April 16, 2007, when a gunman killed 32 people and wounded 25 others at Virginia Tech University.

Altman wanted to localize the story, so he turned to Facebook seeking leads on Virginia Tech students with Tampa Bay connections.

“In fact, I didn’t find any that day, but it made me realize what a valuable sourcing tool Facebook could be,” says Altman.

As his newspaper’s crime and cops team leader, he became an advocate in the newsroom for the use of social media as a reporting tool.

“I use social media mostly for three purposes,” he says. “First, to reach family and friends of victims and suspects, and to get photos and gather information. Second, I use TweetDeck and other social media to gather intelligence and keep on top of trends and subjects. Third, I use social media to build branding, get my name where it needs to be and build sources.”

Altman, who has 1,100 Twitter followers (@haltman) and nearly 2,000 Facebook friends, has changed to a new job: senior writer with a focus on military affairs. But he says he continues to use social media on a daily basis. He says he uses TweetDeck, a versatile dashboard device, to monitor keywords for evergreen subjects of interest on his beat—“Afghanistan” or “drones,” for example. But he also adds subjects intermittently to monitor breaking news.

“I don’t know how you can exist as a reporter today without having access to multiple social media sites,” he says.

Altman says he views the use of social media as a complement to traditional reporting, not as a replacement. He bristles at the idea that journalists no longer need to climb steps and knock on doors.

“Anybody that tells you that it replaces knocking on doors, they’re lazy,” he says. “Social media is a great supplement, but if you don’t get out of the office, you’re not getting a complete story. You can never replace the things you see and the people you talk to when you go to the scene. Nothing replaces boots on the ground.”

He notes that, as an editor, his favorite phrase to his reporters was, “Let’s roll out on that.”

“You’ve still got to roll on stories,” he says. “Social media is passive reporting. It might give you a jump on the competition (with a name or an address)...but the first reporter to get to a victim’s family is usually the one who is going to get the best story. They have things they want to say about their loved one, but when they say it once, they feel like they’ve talked to the media.”

Chip Mahaney, E.W. Scripps Co.

As a social media oracle and advocate for his company, Chip Mahaney is keenly aware of the pockets of resistance within the business.

“I really cringe when I hear employees of organizations—in the media or otherwise—who say something like, ‘The company is trying some new thing on social media, and we have to do it,’” Mahaney says.

At this point, Mahaney concedes, resistance is futile.

“I believe that the fundamental thing that every journalist should have now is the ability to listen in social media,” he says. “That’s simply a necessary skill today.”

Mahaney is director of digital content for the Scripps broadcast division. His purview includes online content initiatives and strategies for Scripps’ 10 television stations.

He makes the common-sense suggestion that news organizations seeking to enhance their use of social media begin with “early adopters”—staff members who already use it extensively on a personal basis.

Training and practice are essential, he says, but too many news organizations are forced to learn on the fly by diving into the social media realm while an important news story is breaking.

“To be good at social media, you have to invest real time in it,” he says. “You have to practice on days when it’s quiet and you have the time...Just learning to write in 140 characters on Twitter is a skill unto itself. Twitter is like a canvas. You just don’t figure it all out the first day. Everyone can draw. But not everyone is an artist. Some tweeters are artists.”

And some are baloney artists: fake news has become a sport on social media, and more than a few journalists have been sucked in.

In December 2011, for example, news spread via social media that a teenager named Tyreek Amir Jacobs had been killed in Maryland as part of a nationwide frenzy over the sale of a new model of Air Jordan sneakers. More than 10,000 people joined a series of tribute pages to Jacobs on Facebook.

Justin Fenton, a social media-savvy crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, helped expose the alleged death as a fake.

Editor’s note: For links to these and other stories mentioned in this study, see Resources section at the end.

Mahaney says stories like that reinforce the idea that journalists must be vigilant in parsing the credibility of social media sources—the skill that NPR’s Carvin used so artfully in his choice of tweeted links and retweets in his Twitter coverage of the Cairo and Libya uprisings.

“Those are skills, too: What to retweet, whom to retweet, the consequences and benefits of retweeting, the credibility of tweets,” says Mahaney. “Are they where they say they are? Are they whom they say they are?”

Carvin has said that he made his decisions based upon “authentication and triangulation.”

He said Twitter biographies and tweet logs offer the best clues about a source’s veracity. Tweeters with confirmable bios, a long history of tweets and retweets, and a large number of followers and followings would be considered more reliable than more opaque individuals who claim to be at the scene of a breaking-news event. Location, use of language and tweeted photographs all can be used to confirm a potential source’s viability.

During breaking-news coverage of another shooting on the Virginia Tech campus on Dec. 9, 2011, a tweeter tried to lure news outlets into falsely reporting

that the shooter had killed a second law enforcer at a location far off campus. His Twitter handle was an indicator of his lack of credibility: Drunken Bastard.

But sometimes Twitter sourcing works out.

Paul LaRosa of CBS says he was monitoring Twitter on Jan. 8, 2010, after the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and 20 others in Tucson by Jared Loughner. He spotted several tweets from a woman claiming to be a high school classmate of Loughner. He alerted the network's news desk, and CBS interviewed the woman after confirming her connection. She provided good breaking-news details on the accused killer's nature and background.

Mahaney says every news operation should have an ear and eye on Twitter during important breaking-news events.

"Get TweetDeck up on your computer screen," he says. "Learn how to search it, how to listen, how to follow a breaking story. Develop social media relationships with police leaders, political leaders. Learn how to use the tools it gives you—how to do a geographical search of everyone tweeting within a five-mile radius, for example...To me, those are skills that everyone in our newsrooms ought to have. And the second step is, now that I have learned it, what do I do with it?"

He suggests journalists should seek out social media models: Twitter artists who have developed a voice and are skilled curators who know when and when not to retweet. Among others, he cites James Spann (@spann), a broadcast meteorologist in Birmingham, Ala., with more than 40,000 Twitter followers.

Mike Voss, *Washington (N.C.) Daily News*

Mike Voss admits that he was one of those journalists who did not heed Mahaney's advice about preparing to use social media before you really need it.

With Hurricane Irene bearing down on his coastal North Carolina city on Aug. 26, 2011, Voss phoned his social media guru to ask for urgent help.

Power outages were expected and mobility would be limited, so Voss, 56, was looking for ways to stay connected to readers of his 9,000-circulation newspaper, which has a news staff of just four people.

His former colleague, Mo Krochmal, the New York journalist who specializes in social media, helped him set up a Twitter account, @bbqmike.

On the morning of Aug. 27, Irene's arrival day, Krochmal (@Krochmal) tweeted that his friend Voss was a Twitter newbie who was looking for local sources to help track the effects of the hurricane.

Voss began monitoring a Twitter feed of the hashtag #Irene, and he was soon getting messages of support from, among others, Leslie Jane Thornton (@ljthornton), a journalism professor at Arizona State University who saw Krochmal's tweet. Thornton "stayed with me the whole time" throughout the storm, Voss says.

"The whole Twitter community was like, 'Welcome aboard, and how can we help you?' That meant everything to me," Voss says. He says Thornton advised him, "Just keep doing it. The more you do it, the more comfortable you'll get with it."

And Voss says he found that after about three hours of noodling, he did get comfortable with Twitter.

He used Twitter to connect with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for big-picture details. He also connected with about 50 residents of eastern North Carolina who provided local updates that allowed Voss to track the movement of the storm and the extent of damage as it moved over his paper's coverage area.

"I was able to tweet about where the storm was spawning tornadoes," Voss says. "Twitter was sort of mapping out the worst locations of the storm. I was able to know much, much faster what damage was happening where."

"I was getting tweets from people saying, 'This is what's going on here. We've got winds at X miles per hour, we've got minor flooding,'" Voss says. "It was all personal anecdotes: 'Our street looks like a war zone.' We followed up and went out to some of the areas that were damaged. I remember thinking, it can't be that bad. Oops, wrong. I had never seen so much wind damage in 30 years of doing this."

Voss says the local Twitter posts provided a pipeline of stories ideas, and he and other staffers followed up on many of them during and after the storm.

"The one thing I regret is that we weren't able to follow up on every single story lead we got, but it was nice having all those tweets to sift through for ideas," he says.

Voss says his use of Twitter has diminished since the storm coverage, but he continues to monitor hashtags of interest in his work—for example, North

Carolina politics. He says he derives a story idea or two every week from social media.

“I found Twitter very useful as far as its ability to provide almost instantaneous information as to what was happening at different places,” Voss says. “It saves so much time. It just works.”

He adds that he has dabbled in Facebook as a sourcing tool. In one case, he sent a Facebook message seeking interviews with unemployed men and woman for a story. Every source in that story came from Facebook, he says.

Paul LaRosa, CBS News

The “Craigslist Killer” saga, which broke in Boston in April 2009, was a keystone example of how the use of social media has transformed crime reporting.

Over a six-day period, three female sex workers were accosted at hotels in the Boston region by the same well-dressed young man. One of them, Julissa Brisman, who had posted an online ad for sexual services, was found dead at the Copley Marriott hotel in Boston.

Prostitution is dangerous work since sex workers generally don’t ask clients for resumes before they complete their business. Assaults and even murders in the sex trade are usually local stories, at best.

But the Craigslist Killer case ascended to the top of newscasts nationwide when an arrest was made four days after Brisman’s murder. That is because the alleged perpetrator was a handsome medical student at Boston University, a dentist’s son named Philip Markoff.

The news that a young man of privilege was accused of committing murder after trawling the naughty online crannies of Craigslist sent the story “into the media stratosphere,” as Paul LaRosa put it.

LaRosa is a producer for CBS’ “48 Hours Mystery,” who specializes in crime news, working frequently with correspondent Erin Moriarty.

Before social media, proximity gave local reporters an advantage is accessing sources close to victims and perpetrators in breaking-news crime stories. That has changed.

Working from New York, LaRosa says he “attacked” Facebook. Julissa Brisman had a personal page, but most of its content was blocked from non-friends. LaRosa reached out to a number of the friends listed on her page.

“I talked a friend of hers into giving me his (Facebook) password, so I was able to go in as a friend and get access to everything she had there,” he says. “I pulled down all her photos and made a printout of all the comments she had made over the past year...Some people might have a problem with that, but this is the new reality. Our rule of thumb is that you can use this sort of material in the heat of the moment for breaking news.”

LaRosa and his colleagues crashed Facebook for information about Markoff, as well. He had a Facebook page, and CBS and others who were quick on the draw managed to copy photos found there before the page was taken down shortly after his arrest.

Journalists then turned to secondary Facebook sources.

“We knew he was scheduled to graduate from Boston University Medical School in 2011, so we searched for everyone we could find in his class and sent dozens and dozens of them emails and messages,” LaRosa says.

They contacted a number of Markoff’s non-med school friends, as well, and sent entreaties to his fiancée and her friends, as well.

Journalists found one other trove online: like many couples today, Markoff and his fiancée had created a website concerning their planned nuptials. Photos were taken from that source, as well.

LaRosa’s materials from Facebook were featured in an hour-long segment on the case that ran within days of Markoff’s arrest.

(LaRosa, who moonlights as a True Crime author, points out that he did not use those materials in his book about the case, *“Seven Days of Rage: The Deadly Crime Spree of the Craigslist Killer.”*)

Before moving to television, LaRosa worked in the 1980s and 1990s for the *New York Daily News*, where the reverse directory was the go-to resource for reporters trying to ferret out biographical details on the principals of stories like the Craigslist case.

Its value was hit and miss. Sometimes neighbors had a nugget of information to offer, but most of the time they didn’t—either because they didn’t know the subject or they didn’t want to tattle to the media.

“It’s so much easier now,” he says.

Facebook pages function as autobiographies where some people post their most intimate details.

“In a way, this was everyone’s worst fear—that Facebook was going to take away your privacy,” says LaRosa. “There’s a wealth of information online because people still put all kinds of stuff up there, which probably isn’t a good idea if you’re involved in a crime.”

Josh Bernoff, Forrester Research

Lawsuits testing the media’s use of material pulled down from Facebook seem inevitable, says Josh Bernoff, a social technology strategist with Forrester Research in Cambridge, Mass., and the author of two books on the subject, *“Groundswell”* and *“Empowered.”*

He is surprised that so few journalists seem to share his concern about the growing use of photos and information drawn from “non-official personal communications,” including Facebook pages.

“There has always been an uneasy relationship between reporters and their sources when it comes to the exchange of personal information,” he says. “I’m sure that most people today who post pictures and comments on places like Facebook don’t consider the privacy implications when they do so.”

Bernoff says Facebook strikes him as a cheap and easy replacement for legitimate reporting.

“There’s often absolutely no verification,” he says. “Journalists work very hard in collecting information and sometimes get it wrong. Imagine how often they might get it wrong if they don’t have to work hard, if they’re just pulling the stuff off a secondary source like Facebook?”

He adds, “There’s a huge potential for good here in that reporters are bringing things to light that wouldn’t be found any other way. The flip side of that is that the truth can seem to be optional.”

Bernoff also worries that the competitive pressure to post material online quickly has winnowed down the traditional vetting process of breaking-news stories, which once went through several sets of editing eyes before publication or the start of the next news cycle.

Today, he says, many journalists post brief story highlights on Twitter before any supervisor sees them.

“The concept of a published news story as we’ve always known it is beginning to break down,” Bernoff says. “Stories no longer necessarily go through the rigors of the editing process before they are made available to readers.”

He notes that conflicts have arisen at some news shops during breaking-news events as reporters tweeting from the scene have essentially scooped their own stories before they are aired or published.

Lauri Stevens, LAWS Communications

A generation ago, David Brinkley, the late network news anchor and commentator, was asked to define news.

He replied, “News is what we say it is.” By “we,” he meant the media.

So much has changed in the 20 years since.

Lauri Stevens, a Boston-based social media consultant for law enforcement agencies, sees a tug of war today as various interests try to “own” a story on social media.

“Everyone is learning about this at the same time,” she says. “Journalists are learning to use these tools about as fast as the cops and criminals are...Everyone is scrambling to keep up with each other to see if they can be the first one out there.”

She says the media’s longstanding status as news arbiter has been diminished by advocacy groups, citizen tweeters and law enforcers who use social media to try to wrest control a story—or at least add a voice to the media message.

“I tell my law enforcement clients, ‘Be the first voice out there,’” Stevens says. “If you are, people will trust you and follow you.”

In Canada, Toronto police, regarded as leaders in the assertive use of social media, use Twitter proactively during breaking-news events with keen public interest—a school shooting, for example.

The department’s social media officer, Constable Scott Mills, will quickly create hashtags that drive Twitter traffic, both from the media and citizens, back to police officials.

“The police then occupy the position as the go-to place for information on that news event,” Stevens says.

In Dallas, one of many American cities with a testy relationship between the police and the local media, crime reporters have complained that the police media unit treats beat reporters like any other member of the public. Press releases are posted on Facebook, for example, at the same time they are emailed to journalists.

The situation reached a new level of absurdity on June 22, 2011, when the police issued a press release that read, in full, "Please check the Dallas Police Department's Facebook page for a press release."

Brinkley's old-school adage has given way to the trend of participatory journalism, where everyone gets a chance to have their say on a story.

"Social media allows almost anyone to go directly to the public with their message," Stevens says, adding that many members of the traditional media feel threatened.

"The media feel like they have to compete with cops, too, now," she says. Meanwhile, they must also keep an eye on Facebook and Twitter, which can become "a swirl of perpetuated rumors" on controversial stories.

Facebook played a leading role, for example, in June 2010, when Kyron Horman, 8, disappeared from his school in Portland, Ore.

His stepmother, Terri Moulton Horman, became the target of rumors and accusations on social media. That was part of a broader trend, Stevens says.

"I see a lot of citizens speculating and throwing out information on social media, interfering with crime cases and overwhelming local law enforcement with evidence, most of which is not any good," she says. "And I see the media monitoring this speculation and reporting on it."

In the Portland case, Mrs. Horman declined most media interviews, but she frequently posted status updates on Facebook concerning the disappearance. In one post, a few days after the boy vanished, she wrote, "Please don't listen to the news. It is inaccurate. We will give details as soon as we can. Thank you all for your well wishes. There are a lot of people looking."

A couple of weeks later, on June 17, the social media blew up with a false rumor that the boy's body had been found.

Based on the social media rumors, KOIN-TV posted a news bulletin on its website about the alleged discovery. *The Oregonian* was compelled to write about the social media's impact on the investigation with a story headlined, "Rumor Mill in Kyron Horman Disappearance Reaches Fever Pitch."

Sometimes, crime victims themselves commenting on social media can cause a morass of competing interests.

In May 2011, a self-proclaimed hippie woman living in a school bus (which she called Wayne) was raped in the Ybor City section of Tampa. The next day, she posted about the attack on Twitter:

"6'2 black man, with scruffy beard, blue shirt, tan shorts, driving commercial truck. Broke into Wayne and raped me, glad i'm alive."

The victim had tweeted under her real name. When some media outlets used her name in stories about the tweet describing her rape, she protested that she had been “outed.” So journalists stopped using her real name, even though she had done so on Twitter.

Adding to the confusion, Tampa police asked the victim to stop tweeting about the rape, saying her information might compromise the investigation.

Stevens says the media is scrambling to define the new protocols of social media reporting. But so far, the road map is covered in smudges.

“I see the media just trying to figure out what it all means to them and how they do their job,” Stevens says. “But at the very least, everyone understands that they have to be a part of this—that social media is part of the future of the news business.”

Tracey Minkin, GoLocalProv

GoLocalProv, a news website that went live in 2010 in Providence, R.I., hits some counterintuitive notes when it comes to the use of social media.

As might be expected today, GoLocalProv aggressively promotes its content on Facebook and with a 25,000-address email blast at 6:30 every morning.

“I cannot emphasize enough how much time we devote and consideration we give to using social media to get our content onto laptops, handhelds and tablets because we know that’s where people live today,” says features editor Tracey Minkin, a veteran New England magazine writer and editor.

But readers looking for news aggregation won’t find it at GoLocalProv. The site features original reporting, with a focus on enterprise, accountability and service journalism, and it competes against the traditional print and broadcast media in its home state.

Minkin says GoLocalProv prides itself on “old-school” journalism.

“When it comes to reporting, we’re very much an old-fashioned organization,” she says. “It’s reporting with your feet, it’s reporting with your phones, it’s reporting based on relationships developed over time.”

She says GoLocalProv writers and editors engage with some 70,000 total followers on Facebook. While they might derive story ideas from posts there, they consciously avoid soliciting sources on Facebook.

“We’re not on Facebook asking things like, ‘Contact us if you’ve ever been raped in a church,’” she says.

The news website was designed as the prototype of a media model, GoLocal24, that could be transported to other cities. Its cofounder and CEO is Josh Fenton, a Rhode Island PR and marketing executive and former Providence city councilor. He is said to be looking at other mid-sized metropolitan areas for GoLocal24 franchises.

His business model is to engage with today’s mobile news consumers via social media platforms that are more relevant to the way people live than the “antiquated” newspapers and TV news broadcasts. Surveys indicate that roughly half of adult Americans get at least some of their local news and information from phones and tablet computers.

“Our goal is to create high-value local content,” Fenton told Providence Business News. “We talk about it endlessly: content is king.”

Success is measured in part by website visits ushered through Facebook. But editor Minkin says reader engagement on Facebook is also highly valued.

“We love days when stories get posted to Facebook and there’s a 42-comment thread about it,” she says. “We think that’s a great story.”

The site eschews the “hyperlocal” label, which can connote attention to more routine meetings and events than GoLocalProv generally covers.

Minkin frequently posts GoLocalProv links to her 2,100-friend Facebook page, often with a tease such as this one from a Jan. 2, 2012, story about popular college majors for 2012: “Great up-to-the-minute information from Cristiana Quinn...Is your kid thinking about one of these majors?”

Minkin started in the business in the era when promotion began and ended with a newspaper tossed onto a porch. That won’t fly today, she says.

“It’s a noisy world and people today are doing 20 things in the hour that you and I used to use to accomplish one thing,” she says. “You can’t afford to put

your content out there and hope people will find it. You have to put it where they hang out, and social media is where they hang out.”

Mo Krochmal, Social Media News NY

Journalists who use Twitter, Facebook and nontraditional sources to collect and disseminate news material should properly view themselves as information arbiters, not echoers, says Mo Krochmal, a veteran reporter and educator who has carved out a niche as a social media expert. He is particularly facile in the use of electronic “tools” for journalists.

“You have to be hyper-vigilant about what you’re sharing because there’s such a firehose of information coming at you” on social media, he says.

But like the Scripps Co.’s Mahaney and others, Krochmal says he cannot imagine why journalists would resist using these new tools to build stories.

“Facebook is a sourcing tool,” he says. “Twitter is another type of tool, a form of news wire. Storify is a production tool. TrendsMap, WhoTweets—there’s a new tool coming out every day that allows you to parse information and pare it down to what you’re really looking for. If you’re a plumber, these are the pliers. But you’ve got to figure out how to use them.”

At about noon on Dec. 9, 2011, Krochmal learned from his Twitter feed that there had been a shooting on the Virginia Tech University campus in Blacksburg. He used a number of these news tools to hypothetically cover the event—or at least stay abreast of breaking developments—from his position in New York, 500 miles away.

Over the course of several hours, he used Topsy, various Twitter trending sources, including Hootsuite, his own “News Cruise” curation page, Trendsmap, WhatHashtag, Foursquare and Facebook to follow the story. A gunman shot and killed a campus police officer, then killed himself. But for a number of hours, the campus was locked down because authorities feared the gunman was at large.

Krochmal created a slide deck that serves as a tutorial on how he accessed information, what tools worked and what did not. Here’s the link: <http://krochmal.posterous.com/social-media-tools-for-journalism-in-breaking>

During the course of his reporting-from-afar, Krochmal faced the sort of crowdsource credibility question that crops up frequently in breaking-news coverage.

He saw a tweet from a man claiming that the Virginia Tech assailant had also shot a state trooper and that the street where it happened was being closed due to police activity there. Krochmal mulled the veracity of the source. His

Twitter biography said he had 74 followers—a meager number—but a record of more than 1,000 tweets. He then noticed his Twitter nickname: “Drunken Bastard.”

“Um, name doesn’t speak cred,” Krochmal concluded in his slide deck account. He was rejected as a valid source.

Laura Norton Amico, *Homicide Watch D.C.*

The mission of Homicide Watch D.C., an online news start-up in Washington, is made clear by the slogan in its banner: “Mark every death. Remember every victim. Follow every case.”

At times, while facing a dearth of information from official police sources, reporter/editor/proprietor Laura Amico has managed to follow that credo through clever use of website analytics and the social media.

She calls her operation “a bit of a media lab.”

Amico invites participatory journalism by creating story pages on Storify that allow people to visit and comment, not unlike a funeral registry.

One of her Storify pages, concerning the shooting death of Jamar Freeman, 17, in the fall of 2011 has had more than 1,300 views and collected 28 comments from friends. One comment came from a young woman who tweets @TaraLOVES_BWxo. She wrote, “Facebook is too sad cus all I see on my Newsfeed is 'RIP Jumar.'”

That particular homicide created a case study in the innovative use of modern reporting tools, including the social media.

(Here is a link to Amico’s own account of how she got the story, posted on her Tumblr notebook: <http://lauraamico.tumblr.com/post/11316313807/online-investigative-journalism-more-on-reporting>)

On Oct. 9, 2011, a Sunday morning, Amico visited one of her regular DC listservs and saw a mention that a young man had been stabbed to death the previous evening on Quincy Street NW in Washington. She found that no reference to the homicide on news websites and no substantive details from police.

Using Google analytics, she found that visitors to her website overnight had searched the terms “killing of jamal in dc October 8 2011,” “a 16 was kill in washington dc” and “a man was murdered on quincy st. nw on oct. 8 2011.”

She took those search terms to Facebook and Twitter, and within an hour she had teased out the essential 5-W information about the murder: Jamar Freeman, 17, had been stabbed to death at 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 8 at the Raymond Recreation Center and Park on Quincy.

With the details triple-checked via her version of crowdsourcing, Amico posted the story, including an identification of the victim—more than a full day before the police department did.

She acknowledges that traffic to her site spiked that day, and that she was as proud as any journalist would be about being first on a story.

But she says her early posting mattered for more personal reasons, as well.

“Jamar’s family and friends, those who live near where Jamar was killed, etc., wanted and needed a place to find information and connect with others experiencing the tragedy. The only place for that to happen was Homicide Watch,” Amico wrote. “I was providing a public service. I made a place for Jamar’s uncle to ask for help. For his teachers to share memories. For his friends to comfort one another. And that’s what reporting on Homicide Watch is all about.”

A month after the homicide, Derek Johnson, also 17, pleaded guilty to stabbing Freeman during a petty dispute. The teens had been high school classmates.

Amico, a former newspaper crime reporter in California, says she has used analytics and the social media to identify homicide victims “early, first and correctly” five or six times since the website launched in September 2010.

TAKEAWAYS & TIPS

Although she uses cutting-edge technology in gathering information for her stories, Laura Amico brings an old-school crime reporter’s sensibilities to her work. She says she learned the value of on-the-scene reporting during her days with the Santa Rosa, Calif., *Press Democrat*, and that ethic defines her work with Homicide Watch D.C.

She interacts with—or engages—her audience on several levels.

This sort of easy fluidity of interaction with the community you cover may prove to be the genius stroke of social media, in the long run.

I cringe every time I see Jack Cafferty, a good newsman, live on CNN five evenings a week reading tweets and Facebook posts aloud to viewers. (To be fair, you see this sort of thing everywhere in the medium, from the Weather Channel to ESPN to the broadcast networks.)

The goal is engagement, I suppose, but the effect is superficial to the point of silliness. The act of reading posts aloud is not interactive, is not sound reporting, and does not make good television.

Journalists like Amico in Washington, Paul LaRosa in New York and Howard Altman in Tampa have grasped the essential application of social media for journalists: It is a tool to be used at the beginning of the reporting process. It is not the end of the process.

Many years ago, my editor at the *New York Daily News* sent me to knock on a door in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. I stepped through a lobby door whose glass was missing and ascended a couple of flights of stairs. The woman who answered my knock had lost a son the day before in an ugly, racially tinged conflict. She graciously invited me inside. It was Christmastime, and several packages under the artificial tree had the son's name on them. Tears came to her eyes—and to mine—as she spoke about her son's abbreviated life.

I thought of that memorable interview as Altman got a bit riled up when I suggested that some reporters today seem to think that the use of social media has made shoe-leather reporting obsolete.

It's worth repeating his response:

"Anybody that tells you that it replaces knocking on doors, they're lazy," he told me. "Social media is a great supplement, but if you don't get out of the office, you're not getting a complete story. You can never replace the things you see and the people you talk to when you go to the scene. Nothing replaces boots on the ground."

His comment also reminded me of a famous eight-word tutorial for reporters, a Watergate-era message from a *Los Angeles Times* editor to his telephone-dependent Washington bureau reporters as they were being scooped daily by the *Washington Post*: "Get off your asses and knock on doors."

Altman and others I spoke with for this backgrounder made a number of other points worth repeating:

- The use of social media is passive reporting. Journalists who get to the scene of a news event will almost always get the best details.

- The value of Facebook and Twitter as reporting tools is now beyond argument, but many news outlets continue to lag behind, particularly those that do not have a visionary like Andy Carvin on staff to lead the way. This is not merely a fad; it is a new news paradigm.
- Learning to employ social media takes time—before an important news story breaks. As Scripps’ Chip Mahaney succinctly put it, “The ability to listen to and monitor the social media, especially during a breaking story, is a fundamental, necessary skill for journalists today.” Good news operations must dedicate staff training time.
- Every news operation should have someone like Mo Krochmal as a staffer or consultant to help journalists stay abreast of the seemingly daily roll-outs of new tools and the “firehose” of social media information.
- A generation ago, many journalists found promotion of their work to be vaguely unseemly. That has changed. Amid the information-overloaded world that most of us occupy today, as GoLocalProv’s Tracey Minkin pointed out, “The days when the media could publish great work and expect people to come find it are long gone.” Even if your operation doesn’t use the social media in reporting, it ought to be using it in promotion.
- Like many journalists and media observers, LaRosa and author Josh Bernoff are nettled by the privacy issues that crop up when information is lifted from Facebook et al when news breaks. LaRosa called it “everyone’s worst fear.” Legal challenges seem inevitable. At the very least, every newsroom today should have a policy for use of these materials, including protocols for detailed attribution to the sources.
- The scrimmaging between the police and the media over ownership of-- and access to—a breaking news event has been building for more than a generation, dating to the days when the relationship between cops and scribes went from cozy and clubby to contentious. That battle will become increasingly acute as law enforcers grow more assertive in the use of social media to cut out the traditional media as a middleman and take their information directly to the public. Advocacy groups and citizens add more competing voices to this noisy mix. The upshot: It is no longer possible for the media to “own” the story.
- The good news for the traditional media is reflected in the keystone of the business plan for news operations like GoLocalProv: “Content is

king.” Even if they can’t be the only voice on a story nowadays, journalists can provide the best-informed and most reasonable voice. We still serve as information arbiters, even if we no longer own the news.

As of November 2011, half of all Americans adults under the age of 44 used smart phones, and eight out of every 10 teenagers and adults in the U.S. had some form of access to the Internet.

As any smart-phone user can attest, this instantaneous access to information has changed our fundamental relationship with news. We no longer wait for the news to come to us, via the morning paper, a 6 p.m. newscast or a top-of-the-hour update on the radio. A headline about news of personal interest now pings into our phone or mobile computers. If we want more information, we go get it ourselves through these devices, whenever we want it.

As electronic communications and the influence of the social media continue to grow, the collection, organization and dissemination of breaking news is certain to evolve in ways and in forms that we have not yet imagined.

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EDITORS NOTE: The Crime Report (www.thecrimereport.org) has published a number of articles, guides and viewpoints on social media and journalism. Here’s a brief sampling. To see the whole list, please search the site under “social media.”

On Social Media, Cops and Reporters Parry ... The use of **social media** as a public information tool for law enforcers is fundamentally changing the way some police departments interact with the press. <http://www.thecrimereport.org/archive/2011-06-on-social-media-cops-and-reporters-parry-over-contro>

In June, 2011, the **Center on Media, Crime and Justice** at **John Jay College** hosted a conference on **Roundtable: Public Safety and Crimefighting in the Age of Twitter** . For materials from that conference including a paper written by **Dave Krajicek**, see: <http://www.thecrimereport.org/conferences>

Sample of Journalists' Tools:

- Foursquare, <https://foursquare.com/>
- Hashtags, <http://hashtags.org/>
- Hootsuite, <http://hootsuite.com/>
- Reddit, <http://www.reddit.com/>
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