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Speed in Context: Real-time News Reporting and Social Media

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Lamenting that the acceleration of the news cycle leads to a decline in the contextualising of news events and the quality of the coverage is not a new criticism of the news media. It has been around for at least as long as the 24-hour news channel but the argument has been reignited lately with the immediacy of breaking news reporting through social media.

Over the last 12 months we have seen two major international conflicts reported primarily through the use of social media with different outcomes. Real-time reporting by amateurs and professional journalists provided much of the news coverage in both the Palestine-Israel conflict this summer and the toppling of the Ukrainian government in February and the armed conflict that followed.

There is a genuine concern that real-time news reporting is threatening to turn into the relaying of disconnected snippets of information that exist outside any meaningful context and analysis. To some extent I would like to challenge such a generalisation, while not dismissing the claim altogether through the examples of the coverage of both these news events.

Speaking as a reporter, I, understandably, do not wish to simply regurgitate information without having any meaningful input of my own in the news covered. I want to be given license to tell it as I truthfully perceive it, and to create meaning from the abundance of news in this information age. Yet, I find myself in a reactive rather than proactive position, chasing a news agenda that seems to have been decreed by a greater and often elusive power and that appears to be transforming at a breathtaking pace. Speed is all that matters and as a result it is easy to argue that dominant narratives are reinforced as information is embedded in easily accessible storylines on different news issues. The sheer lack of time does not permit any investigation into those narratives, or the ability to challenge them where need be.

However, it is not quite true that real-time news coverage via social media is always necessarily understood in a disconnected way and leads to a loss of context. Many of the amateurs sharing breaking news online are doing so within a very explicit context shaped by their interests and biases. Many critics of news media would argue that this is in no way different from the authority previously granted to the journalist except that now everyone can narrate news events.

In his book The Emancipated Spectator, French theorist Jaques Ranciere correctly argues that above all news coverage consists of commentary by experts, journalists and

politicians providing context and analysis of news events.[1] It constantly seeks to reinforce the chasm between those with the power to contextualise and ascribe meaning and those deemed ignorant and in need of being given knowledge, in other words the audience. He proposes that we must challenge the distinction that is made between the role of spectator and narrator. We must all be empowered to slip into either roles, to either interpret and narrate, as well as to stand back and watch. And surely the citizen journalist or the protester does just that when they take to Twitter to report what they see as they see it.

Much of the Palestine-Israel conflict and the Israeli military operation in Gaza this summer was reported in real-time via social media. With dozens of reporters on the ground in Gaza as well as amateurs publishing eyewitness accounts and visual material the speed at which breaking news was reported seemed to impact significantly on the type of reporting that was witnessed. Here, a nuanced narrative emerged that made it impossible to ignore the human cost of Israel's military operation in Gaza by even staunchly pro-Israel news organisations.

Social media allowed reporters and activists to paint an unedited picture of the strikes that killed approximately 2,000 Palestinians. With regards to contextualising the conflict, Israeli authorities, despite their strong social media presence, seemed to lag woefully behind in getting their message across. As Israeli authorities published infographics, blunt and staged propaganda messages and aseptic aerial footage of strikes on Gazan targets, the circulating images of buildings reduced to rubble, and of the wounded and killed, that were the human cost of the Israeli airstrikes, stood in stark contrast.

This shocking stream of human suffering straight to our mobile phones called for a different contextualising of the conflict and asked questions off a long-established narrative that often exhibited bias in Israel's favour. It also seemed to trigger a change in public sentiment with several sizeable protests staged in the US.

Channel 4 correspondent Paul Mason, who was reporting from Gaza, wrote in July[2] that social media made it possible for reporters and amateurs to bypass the editorial process providing an unfiltered version of reality that, especially in the US, broke with the pro-Israel agenda. It was the speed of the reporting which, for the first time, put it outside of the control of the news editors acting as gatekeepers, that achieved this different perspective.

Mason wrote that while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Natanyahu was blaming Hamas of serving up "telegenically dead" to win the information war it was the mute graphic images filling Twitter feeds that were losing hearts and minds. These raw images,

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[1] Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2011, 96

[2] Paul Mason, *Why Israel is losing the social media war over Gaza*. Available from: http://blogs.channel4.com/paul-mason-blog/impact-social-media-israelgaza-conflict/1182. [21 July 2014].

appeared to have superior authenticity to news bulletins. As hard evidence of Israeli violence they could not be ignored and it was the absence of the established context that allowed for a more even-handed narrative of the Middle Eastern conflict to emerge.

When NBC correspondent Ayman Mohyeldin was pulled out of Gaza after he live-tweeted the killing of four boys playing on a beach by Israeli airstrikes, many speculated that the move was a form of censorship by his employer. NBC cited security concerns as reason but sent Mohyeldin back after mounting accusations of censorship. Mohyeldin stopped short of confirming the speculations but on Twitter thanked those who had supported him. Without the filter of the news editor vetting the finished story the NBC reporter had provided a damning glimpse of Israel's brutality.

CNN's Diana Magnay was also reassigned to Moscow after she vented her frustration at Israeli civilians who were watching and cheering on the bombing of Gaza from a hilltop in Sderot, threatening to destroy her crew's car if she says "a word wrong". In a tweet that was later deleted she called them scum. CNN was more forthright about their decision to pull out Magnay, confirming that it was in response to the tweet.

For reporters social media has become an invaluable tool for reporting but for their employers it is a liability that remains outside of their control. Policies around social media reporting are fuzzy and it is as yet unclear how much self-censorship is expected off journalists using it.

Undeniably though, it is a tool that is impossible to police, that lends itself to impulsiveness and which precisely for this reason may create a different but not necessarily less accurate account of the truth.

In Ukraine the real-time reporting of the unrest in Kiev that led to the toppling of the government and eventually descended into an armed conflict was characterised by a very one-sided view. The Foreign Policy magazine wrote in mid-March[3] - almost four months after the start of the protests - that the coverage of the unfolding crisis was accompanied by a 'dearth of nuance'. There was virtually no closer look at those who ousted the government were although the protest in central Kiev had been building for three months. In the most part news organisations focused on the immediacy of the day-to-day events and the spectacle that they provided.

There was a huge amount of information swirling around providing fodder for the press; the snipers, the rising death toll, makeshift hospitals, dozens of captured police,

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[3] Andrew Foxall, Oren Kessler, *Yes, There Are Bad Guys in the Ukrainian Government*, Available from: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/18/yes_there_are_bad_guys_in_the_ukrainian_government, [18 March 2014]

rumours of Russian involvement, etc. It was practically impossible not to get sucked into the moment.

Many news organisations took their cue from well organised media activists, many of them under the banner of 'Euromaidan'. As news media were chasing the latest developments of the unrest that culminated in the horrendous images of the killing of protesters in Kiev, there was little said about the over 8 million ethnic Russians in southern and eastern Ukraine who were far less eager to see a move away from Russia. It also largely ignored the unsavoury elements involved in the uprising, namely the far-right Svoboda party.

In the absence of an easily accessible and well established context, Euromaidan had the opportunity to define its own. One might say it was as if we were encouraged to believe we were watching the fall of the Berlin Wall all over again. Such was the most accessible framing for the events and it was used to full effect by the political opposition behind the protests. The developments lent themselves to such a comparison when the political opposition's hopes that Ukraine would align itself closer with the EU crumbled under Russian pressure on former Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich to withdraw from an EU associations agreement.

Social media does not give a voice to everyone equally and it provides a perspective on the truth but is rarely able to offer a rounded picture, at least not at first glance. In Ukraine, as in a number of examples from the Arab Spring, the voices that resonated the most were representing a small demographic of largely well-educated, English-speaking, tech and media-savvy individuals in Kiev.

Language and accessibility of information often crops up as a factor in what is reported. Due to the pace with which news is delivered, that which is not easily accessible to news organisations risks falling by the wayside.

While Euromaidan supporters mostly use YouTube, Twitter and Instagram accounts - the same social networks we are accustomed to and know how to navigate, Russian separatists and their supporters are often sharing information on VK.com, a Russian social network similar to Facebook.

Obviously, pro-Russian groups were in a reactive position and the scene had been set, so it wasn't until their anger at the developments in Kiev manifested themselves in a physical way that mainstream media became aware of them. The separatist militant group Donetsk People's Republic emerged over time and while they are now also running a social media information campaign it took a while to organise.

Many of those who are the most active on social media are time-rich or working in some form of media or communication role and this is obviously not representative of any wider population. Therefore, it is the role of the professional journalist to seek out the dissenting voices and provide a sense of balance. In Ukraine news media often

failed to counter the spin of the movements behind the uprising that claimed that pro-Russian elements were a small group of Russians sent to Ukraine to disrupt the democratic struggle and that fascist elements in this struggle were exaggerated by Russia to discredit the uprising.

It took professional journalists on the ground to provide some perspective on these claims and counterclaims and it requires a proactive approach to seek out balance since in real-time reporting via social media one side will usually have the upper hand.

Looking at these two examples, it appears that where there was a long established context speed helped to infuse it with more nuance than had previously been the case. The real-time nature of the reporting straight to our Twitter feeds made us feel far more connected to the events than a news broadcast could and with widespread awareness of the conflict the graphic imagery demanded that news organisations put them into a context that rang true.

With regards to Ukraine most people had little understanding of the forces at play. It was the real-time contextualising based on the perspectives gleaned from social media movement that misrepresented the wider public mood and failed to acknowledge the complexity of the situation. Devoid of a strong pre-existing context, the perspective of the most vocal group on social media was able to fill that space.

We're left with a catch 22 situation. It is impossible to turn back the clock on how news is delivered. With social media now considered a news source in its own right, real-time reporting is here to stay and this is largely outside of the control of traditional news media. Mainstream media has to compete in this space.

So, if nothing else, perhaps an approach of, do the least damage is sometimes the only way forward. Verifying the accuracy of reports is a must and although this does consume some time, in many cases it is possible to say with a degree of certainty whether an image, a video or a report is true in a timely manner. If you can't then it seems obvious not to publish, or to be transparent about the fact that the information is unverifiable.

As with political communications it is the professional journalist's job to be sceptical of spin on social networks. The questions, who are the sources providing a piece of information and what are their motivations need to be asked. Having an agenda obviously doesn't mean that what is being said is incorrect but it warrants scrutiny and finding the other voice, even when this voice appears to be small.

It is impossible for reporters to be experts on everything but in this information age it is often what we're expected to be. Time pressures means that frequently we go for the low-hanging fruit and when social media delivers news content straight to our desks

complete with analysis, it's easy to lap up. But we cannot just allow the flood of information to wash over us.

Mike Ananny, an assistant professor at USC Annenberg, wrote for Harvard's Nieman Lab after the Boston Marathon bombing that the press needs to become more comfortable with silence when it has nothing substantial to add. In real-time reporting it needs to ask: "Why do you need to *know* something now? And why do you need to *say* something now?" [4]

There will always be a deluge of commentary by those who have access to social media. Where there is a lack of understanding of the circumstances, going for the most accessible interpretation is tempting but remaining quiet until a more rounded picture can be provided shows more integrity by news networks and a commitment to add something of value to the story. Else, the press risks becoming no more than an aggregator of the information already accessible to everyone online anyway.

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[4] Mike Annany, *Breaking news pragmatically: Some reflections on silence and timing in networked journalism*, Available from:
http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/04/breaking-news-pragmatically-some-reflections-on-silence-and-timing-in-networked-journalism/ [23 April 2013]