

Teaching Journalism in the Era of Social Networks

WJEC 2022 Online Conference

Stream meeting summary by rapporteur Uma Shankar Pandey, Associate Professor, Head of Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, Surendranath College for Women, University of Calcutta, India; expert/background report by Professor Elena Vartanova, Dean & Chair in Media Theory and Economics, Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia (see wjec.net/2022-online-conference/ at conference streams tab); panel chair Anna Gladkova, leading researcher, also of Lomonosov Moscow State University.

The discussion began with Elena Vartanova's, Lomonosov Moscow State University, deliberations, which focused on the present challenging and controversial times in the media and communication landscape with social media posing a potent challenge to traditional media. An important point of contention is that authorship of content on social media is often unclear. At the same time the digital environment minimizes the role of journalists, with the multifarious role of bloggers and other content creators on various platforms. She also highlighted the complex hierarchy of misinformation and fake content. With the advent of cutting-edge technology, the complexity of this phenomenon is getting more and more intense for various stakeholders. The use of AI tools in news production is a very important development. At the same time these tools are not sufficient to identify fake content and audience manipulation. There is a need to look at "digital literacy" instead of "information literacy." The concept of audience also needs to be dealt with in a more sophisticated fashion. In the digital ecosystem, the audience is not a passive consumer. At the same time a chunk of the global audience is excluded at times for a number of reasons.

She concluded that challenges for journalism educators are manifold. For training digital journalists, they need to update themselves in understanding the technical and intellectual processes in digital news production. At the same time there is a need for greater social responsibility among journalists in not only understanding the media dynamics but also by developing trust.

Merja H. Myllylahti, Auckland University of Technology, highlighted the audience's role in the attention economy. She said there is also a need for more detailed examinations of platforms, since it makes a difference whether they are publishers or buyers of news or patrons of journalism.

Speaking about the importance of journalism literacy, she asked journalism educators to look at how we teach about platforms. After all, they intersect journalism and news as a product in many ways. Another important question is whether the platforms are promoting or preventing certain kinds of news. Which algorithms make news visible is another important question. She concluded it is also especially important to examine how journalists are impacted by platforms and how the audience's attention is being monetized.

Yubo Wang and Robert E. Gutsche Jr., both of Lancaster University (UK), deliberated on the limitations of viewing media innovation through a Western focus. The Chinese access platform *WeChat* has over 1.2 billion consumers with over 330 million using the service for video-calling. Gutsche pointed out the difference between WeChat's public face and private

one. This format allows for a diversity in content, which includes short, long, narrative and storytelling content. Another important feature is the use of “moments.” Consumers use a variety of WeChat features (chat, pay, scan and search). Also, Enterprise WeChat and the green QR code are important innovations. The platform allows for elaborate security while providing for creative storytelling formats.

Discussants added that there are also affordances for critical content on the platform, such as the ability of users as a collective to resist censorship in creative ways.

Anna S. Smoliarova, St. Petersburg University, spoke of how her students created intense short form content for social media that made them appreciate direct audience needs and the responsibilities of creating content. Examining various formats’ public pages – Instagram, Telegram, Podcast and VK, etc. – brings out important perspectives. The students’ involvement in the entire process of creating content, such as planning, editorial team role playing and performance on deadlines, helps them better understand professionalism. While such project-based work makes evaluation easier, a drawback is that the content does not remain public after examinations.

Ziming Yuan, Communication University of China, discussed social media and methodology. Presenting her work involving in-depth interviews of students, she spoke of the unique perspectives of present-day students exposed to social media in a big way. She said while they are especially sensitive to social phenomenon, they remain distant to an outside world different from theirs. Also, their opinions are often one-sided, and they have a greater tendency to believe rumors.

She argued challenges for educators include students no longer relying on them as sole sources of information. Often their knowledge comes from search engines. This requires administrators and others to rethink pedagogical approaches to incorporate the latest technologies, such virtual reality. For present-day journalists, apart from news awareness, news sensitivity and language competence, an element of critical thinking is vital. At the same time there is a feeling that knowledge impartment should not involve indoctrination. A systematic study of the impact of journalism education is necessary to incorporate teaching methods relevant to the times.

Danara Ismetova, AlmaU University (Kazakhstan), provided a comparative perspective of a group of her students working on traditional journalism and social media projects. Interestingly, her students found it difficult to scout for news sources for the print media while covering real events for a magazine publication. On the other hand, they were extremely comfortable working as social media managers and also creating content for the digital media. In many cases they were faster than their instructors in editing and filming. That said, less than a third were comfortable creating content for television.

Karlyga N. Myssayeva, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan), discussed her work identifying the key features of “fakes” during the pandemic and their channels and mechanisms of distribution. Fakes involving conspiracies were as high as 26 percent on Kazakhstan social media. This includes rumors about disinfection by helicopters and 5G deployment. She added other kinds of problematic content include clickbait and content that evokes strong emotions and global conspiracies. Facebook has been the primary social media platform for disseminating disinformation in Kazakhstan. Also, fakes appeared as event

updates or as short commentaries, short text, video and audio messages. The most common used formats were reports and storytelling.

Sumitra Srinivasan, The University of Toledo (U.S.), highlighted the role and impact of the economy of emerging technologies in the backdrop of globalization 4.0. Another important factor is the industrial revolution 5.0, which helps automate manufacturing processes better using real-time data. Both cyber space and physical space are vital as technology plays the role of a positive enabler. Making sense in a clutter of information is a challenge for communicators. For educators it is important to create conditions for diverse voices to be represented, she concluded.

Recommendations

1. Journalism educators must regularly update themselves with the technological developments and skill components required in the field.
2. User Experience must be the focus of journalistic content in the era of social networks. Robust research tools are needed to decipher the needs of the news and content consumers.
3. Updated pedagogical approaches are needed to foster digital literacy among students. For example, more interesting teaching methods are needed to engage students who have more access to information and knowledge resources.
4. Innovative content formats need to be developed for an audience, which has greater choice.
5. Students must be empowered with engaging storytelling tools to make content more accessible in a clutter of information.

Conclusion

It is important to identify the ontological challenges facing traditional journalism in the digital ecosystem. Content is no longer the sole preserve of professional journalists. At the same time, it is a challenge to hold the attention of news consumers who have greater choices of platforms, formats and content types. The problem of fake content in the media ecosystem is a real one. It needs to be combated on different fronts. Technological innovations in the field makes it imperative for educators to regularly update themselves with relevant technical and intellectual skills.