

Chapter 39

How Social Media Offers Opportunities for Growth in the Traditional Media Industry: The Case of Travel Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Under threat from social media and interactive Web 2.0, the traditional media industry seeks new models to maintain its viability. This chapter studies both consumers and prospective producers of one genre—travel journalism—to advocate a model that could help arrest the industry’s decline and return to growth. It argues that one way forward for traditional media would be a new model of curatorship, in which a professional journalist collaborates with amateur contributors. It suggests that such a hybrid arrangement will be recognisable neither as professional newsroom nor as amateur social media, but a new model with features of both. This offers a way forward so that rather than contributing to the declining fortunes of the traditional media industry, as many journalists fear, social media can instead encourage progress.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism has worked hard to build and maintain professional values. It defines itself by norms such as objectivity, accuracy, independence and neutrality (Fredriksson & Johansson, 2014; Johnstone, Slawski & Bowman, 1972; Weaver, 1998). Such ideology is intended to distinguish between journalism and other writing to “self-legitimize their position in society” (Deuze, 2005: 446). Now other forms of writing are forming a credible opposition as information and opinions are provided by social media, which includes social networks such as Facebook, user-generated content (UGC), bloggers, and online user review sites (OURS). Given the resulting crisis in the Western news media industry since the turn of the millennium, there is little confidence or consensus about what journalism should be or do (Frank-

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lin, 2012; Spyridou, Matsiola, Veglis, Kalliris & Dimoulas, 2013). While scholarly focus has been on citizen-centric hard news as a champion of democracy, this chapter considers consumer-centric lifestyle journalism—specifically about travel—and advocates a new model that could help arrest journalism's decline and return it to growth.

The media (in travel and tourism as in other areas) has been changed by Web 2.0, which “can be thought of as the technical infrastructure that enables the social phenomenon of collective media, and facilitates consumer-generated content” (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012: 262). The key word is ‘consumer’. Travel journalism developed within a specific environment—newspapers, magazines and broadcast media directed at an audience of consumers. That environment has changed as the traditional media finds its economies, readership, professional relationships and status all undermined and altered by the rise of digital social media content distributed on the Internet (Benson & Morgan, 2015).

Crucially for this chapter, Web 2.0-enabled social media assumes some of the roles of journalism but follow different rules. It often abandons objectivity, accuracy and neutrality in favour of subjective opinion, dubious factuality and subliminal partisanship. Despite this, it has conspired to limit journalists' role as “new media technologies challenge one of the most fundamental ‘truths’ in journalism, namely: the professional journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world” (Deuze, 2005: 451). Yet it is possible that, far from challenging these professional values, social media can be integrated with them so that both are enhanced.

Journalism has its professional standards; Web 2.0 introduces social standards. This chapter argues for an integration of the two as a way forward for traditional media, suggesting that such a hybrid will be recognisable neither as professional newsroom nor as amateur social media, but a new species with features of both.

The argument is based on studies of two groups connected to travel journalism. The first study is of consumers, assessing the relative value they ascribe to professional versus amateur content, and what their attitudes towards social media might indicate for the practitioners who supply professional content. The second is of the next generation of travel journalists, and it assesses how social media influences them.

Both groups—consumers and prospective producers alike—share similar attitudes towards social media and traditional media, which offers a direction for the media to take. Yet, as it is unlikely that the practice of each can be reconciled with the values of the other, what is needed is a media model where they can merge. Looking at travel journalism, this chapter outlines how social media might be integrated with traditional media, the effect on the work practices of individuals within it, and some commercial implications.

I focus on travel journalists because they operate in a compromised area between the values of hard news reporting and the commercial values of softer, lifestyle writing. Their genre is one in which subjective experience is preferred over the expected journalistic standards of objectivity, offering a locus for an alternative to traditional professional practice.

I contend that one consequence of the changes wrought by social media and travel information freely available online will be to divide the roles of traveller and journalist, so that the traveller can deliver the subjective, credible reports-from-abroad, while the journalist packages (and sells) these under the auspices of the accepted, objectivity-based practice of the traditional media. This offers a way forward—for lifestyle and travel journalism, at least—so that rather than contributing to the declining fortunes of the industry, social media generates growth.

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