Social: Shouting so loud, we lose our voice

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We tend to be nostalgic about the past. Media and news are good examples. We often romance the content and integrity of publications and television outlets. However, the vast majority of us have always consumed our world through one-line headlines and conversations overheard, often misquotes or dubiously represented.

Perhaps contemporary **social** media is simply a celebration of this human penchant for thin data and lots of it.

Social Haiku

Twitter became successful because of its wonderful ability to tap into Churchillian sound bites. It made people quotable and, most importantly, consumable. We – read as I – spend gobs of time in Wi-Fi-enabled cafés, fashioning that perfect sharable, letter-pinching constrained line.

The **Facebook** post, **Instagram** image and **Snapchat** story, has moved the Tupperware home or water-cooler office flow of ideas and information into a **digital** version on an incredibly large scale.

Like a global game of tag-your-it, **social** memes rise and fall. The Web is now a news barometer with headlines reading, "**Twitter's** Highs on the Presidential Debate" or "Tweet Storm on Jose Bautista's Bat Flip."

We should not be surprised with the Pew research results on news consumption.

Sixty-four percent of United States adults use **Facebook**, and a whopping half of those users get their news there and nowhere else. That means that more than 30 percent of the general population gets their news from a **social** media network. When you add YouTube at 10 percent, **Twitter**'s 8 percent share and Reddit's 2 percent, it is not surprising that traditional media outlets are under siege.

There is further pressure from news-entertainment platforms such as **John Oliver's** This Week Tonight.

Mr. **Oliver** has taken over the leadership role of the Daily Show, which along with the satirical publication, The Onion, managed to create a new category of reductive and highly consumable news content. Search the "Daily Show" on **Google** or **Verizon**, **AOL** TV or **TiVo** and the warning reads that it is "not a news program and only uses newsworthy stories as a jumping-off point."

So where does the average consumer find "newsworthy stories"? Incumbent news publications and broadcasters are losing their audience and, without eyeballs, ad revenue has drained from the physical and **digital** pages and channels.

While a few content providers are able to command a paywall, the vast majority of news providers are desperately trying to diversify, sign partnerships with **Facebook** and **Twitter** for distribution and **advertising**, generally sliding down a greased skid to irrelevancy.

For the publisher that cannot repatriate the power game and own the relationship with the consumer, it will have to hang tight to its **brand** in the hope that the consumer will remember it within a generation.

Lost art of thinking

But can **social** media provide the same value proposition as our incumbent news media?

A hashtag can attempt to sew together ideas and trends. However, while good for a chatroom environment, it is a challenge to focus discussion and hard to drive editorial content and oversight.

Twitter has defiantly fought to hold to its 140-character constrained tweet. While powerful for one-liners and hyperlink, it is ill suited for narrative. Because of this limitation, **Twitter** has become a Bitly to longer articles and thoughts dotted about the Web.

Reductive sharing is ubiquitous across **social**. Whether its adding a "Je Suis Paris" filter to your profile picture on **Facebook**, upvoting a meme on Reddit, or uploading an infographic on Pinterest, the conversation is horizontal and there is no structured editorial oversight.

When **social** readers want more roughage, there are longer-form **social** platforms – the Mediums, **WordPress** and **Tumblrs** that offer a microphone to reader and writers.

While these long-form **social** tools democratize publishing, they continue to undermine the incumbent punishing infrastructure – similar to self-publishing on **Amazon**, undercutting the author/agent/publisher vetting process and creating a **marketing** place challenging for a reader to navigate.

There must be more.

Unquestionably, **social** media provides profound value. It has given rise to citizen journalism and defiantly fought for the right to challenge the status quo.

However, in the process, it has weakened the strength of the editorial voice. I discussed this issue with my colleague, **Ethan Zimmerman** at MIT, the democratization of news. How each person now can be instrumented for information. A citizen can even carry a biosensor kit with herself so a person in London can report information on pollution and a person in Fukushima on nuclear levels. We all become content beacons. It is as if a person is an Internet-of-Things thing.

We have the ability to access the raw news data. The challenge is the curation of this data and the discovery of this data.

"People are hardwired to pay attention to the people who are in our inner circle," Mr. **Zimmerman** said. "It's one of the strongest and best-documented **social** forces. We pay attention to the people to those who are in our immediate **social** network."

Conversely, we tune out information and opinions from outside this circle.

While this is not a new phenomenon – a Republican reads the New Republic and a Democrat reads The Nation – our circles become ever smaller with fewer external experts to guide the dialogue.

Reintroducing an expert

There are tools that help **brands** and publications aggregate this content: Storify, Rebel Mouse, Mass Relevancy. They cherry-pick the past. I call this forensic **social**. These are powerful platforms but they are more archival and less editorial.

These tools tell an effective story about a **brand**'s past and the ability to moderate their present. However, they do not let the **brand** editorialize their future.

For many publications and **brands** creating new content **social**ly is dangerous. A publication may throw in a Disqus platform to capture its readers' comments below its curated content seemingly to play lip service to a **social** voice.

A **brand** may actively manage a hashtag. However, there is noise on the Web that **brands** often find daunting to navigate.

Shelly Palmer, a tech blogger based in New York, wrote very pointedly in response to **social** hate posts: "The good information must be programmed better than the bad information, and it must be propagated in overwhelming amounts. We can select the **social** media world we want to live in and **social**-engineer our way back to safety."

So how can we structure **social** to be a little smarter? We have models in the physical world that we seem to respect and continue to support.

For example, when we go to an industry conference, the content chair has arranged a keynote and a few panels on relevant topics, maybe a fireside chat with a pundit.

From **TedTalks** to a PBS electoral debate, there is a universal model of knowledge transfer: there is stage and an audience. The stage has microphones with thought leaders that have spent their lives becoming experts on an idea.

On the stage there is, hopefully, a smart moderator who can move the ideas around, challenge and weave the narrative. The audience can tweet and ask questions that the panel can, in turn, field. In the **digital** world, we run webinars using the same virtual formula.

However, in **social** we have few expert stages.

There are structures to build on.

ScribbleLive has developed real-time tools for delivering content for publishers. Thinkwire is a startup that is pushing the boundaries of creating an editorial stage while allowing for a **social** "lanyard" for audience participation.

AS WE LOSE the traditional curators of content, we need to build more **digital** stages for expert editorial narrative and, in the words of Mr. **Palmer**, "**social**-engineer our way" forward more effectively.

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