



When Catastrophe Strikes, News Media Turn... to Social Media?

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The importance of having a good social network

When snowflakes began flying on Oct. 29, 2011, in Connecticut, newsrooms heeded the warnings of the meteorologists: heavy, wet snow on still-leafy trees meant disaster. Nearly a foot of snow fell in some areas, and Connecticut faced one of the biggest disasters in history.

When damaged trees fell on utility wires, the state experienced its biggest blackout ever. More than 800,000 people were without power, and some were stuck in their houses for up to two weeks because of downed trees, wires and power poles.

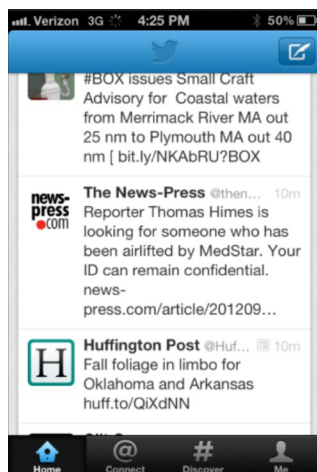
I was working as a reporter/meteorologist for the NBC affiliate in Hartford, and this was going to be one of our biggest stories. Because of the massive blackout, few people could see our reports, however. Before this storm, using social media had been just another aspect of the job. After the storm, I was thankful, as were my managers, that I had built up a social network via Facebook and Twitter. This “electronic Rolodex” helped me cover the stories following the storm, and my experience gave me some lessons to take back into the classroom.

Search the Web for the words “crowdsource” and “lazy” and scores of articles appear that are written by journalists, and, in my case, by some colleagues. Some of the articles are informative and positive, while others sound the alarm that crowdsourcing is a lazy person’s journalism. To some extent, it’s true that crowdsourcing can be used improperly, but the benefits of this contact with the news consumer far outweigh the negatives.

Based on some recent trends in a newsroom

where I work as a reporter and anchor, I have started to incorporate more information about crowdsourcing in my Introduction to Journalism courses. As an on-air weather anchor, I regularly interact with viewers, answering questions about weather. But the lessons learned during the disaster of October 2011 were deeper ones about the power of social media. Since then, I have incorporated crowdsourcing into at least one assignment during the semester. I’ve learned that when the mainstream forms of disseminating news break down, journalists must be ready to find innovative ways to reach audiences.

Before coverage of the October stories could begin, my photographer and I had to spend more than one hour finding a gas station where we could fill up our vehicle. Most were closed because they lacked power. At every turn, I found it hard to meet my deadlines: Public information officers weren’t answering their cell phones, offices were closed, and even the traditional reporting method of driving around to find our story was a chore because many roads were blocked. I desperately needed to find localized storm damage in town but needed alternative methods to get the information. I decided to log into Facebook to see what people were talking about. Luckily, I had built up a social network of more than 8,000-plus users (Twitter/Facebook combined) as a result of my anchoring and reporting duties. I post daily and respond to the posts of others to keep the interaction going. At first I feared that social networks would be suffering from the power outage, as well, but I discovered quite the opposite. I found some of my best stories from postings. I also was able to track down



Crowdsourcing is alive and well, even outside of catastrophes. This screen shot of my Twitter feed (from Sept. 2, 2012) shows a local newspaper in Southwest Florida seeking interview subjects for an upcoming story it's doing.

power crews and local officials and even get information from the governor via Twitter. Although I wasn't crowdsourcing every story, I found myself doing something that I told my students many newsroom traditionalists frown on.

This also was the first time I was able to reach out to mayors and other town officials (mostly via Twitter). Whether they responded directly to me or in a public tweet, I was able to get a quote or an answer for my reports on a timely basis. Danbury Mayor Mark Boughton interacted with the media and his constituents via Twitter. He would publicly set up meetings with camera crews and interact with the media to both obtain and disseminate information.

He said in a recent email that during the storm, Twitter was "a critical tool; power outages, trees down, roads closed, all were reported through social media. Since many people now carry a smart phone, in many cases, this was the only form of communication from the city that people were getting during a difficult time."

He added, "Having a large contingent of press follow has allowed me to communicate directly with reporters, anchors, and producers about important information that our residents need to know."

Anchor and reporter Shirley Chan at NBC Connecticut said, "While I have never been a big fan of the use of Twitter and Facebook, it became apparent that during a crisis, it makes a big difference if you're connected to a few thousand people. You can grab better stories and hone into areas where journalists might not be able to go. In this case, storm damage prevented us from getting into some areas."

Forget your copy for air; update Facebook first

Because a majority of our viewing area couldn't watch

our coverage, our focus shifted from getting our stories on the air to getting them uploaded online first. Our Web managers and newsroom managers wanted extra hustle in the field to get pictures any way possible uploaded to both the station's Facebook pages and our personal pages. Although we didn't neglect our television deadlines for the viewers who could still watch our product over the air, this is the first time in my 12-year career when getting pictures up on Twitter and Facebook pages was more of a priority than getting the copy posted.

A lesson for our students

The dynamics of this catastrophe changed the way we operated as a news organization and I knew I had to make this part of a classroom activity. Once classes resumed after the storm, I began to revamp the syllabus for us to follow what was going on in the media at the time. I also changed one of the stipulations for one of the students' projects. I made them gather sources only from Facebook pages and/or Twitter. For each source for one of their field print reports, they were required to either crowdsource or use Twitter or Facebook to secure the interview. This challenged some of the students who had not fully understood the nature of the changing business. It was clear that some students had not heeded my warning of the need to build a solid social network before entering the workforce. Some students found they weren't contacting people the proper way on Twitter. Others had to work quickly to follow certain news organizations or "like" those news organizations' Facebook pages in order to have access to a large part of the public (many pages don't allow public posting).

The students' reactions were mixed about the project. They now had to use social networking for something other than just socializing. Some adapted quickly. Others found that they had a learning curve to overcome, especially when it came to Twitter. The

Photos of residents' plea for help from local power companies were in high demand from our newsroom for our Facebook pages.



students noted they were able to reach some higher profile people they otherwise might not be able to reach through telephone or email.

Incorporating social media into simple reporting was easy. Nevertheless, the students still had a lesson to learn about the changes technology is having on the business. In this project, many students also found that social media aren't always the best avenue for sources. Students learned about how reporting is done today, whether their projects turned out stellar or problematic. Of course, the concerns about laziness and crowdsourcing remain.

I made sure to show students that I might have used a form of crowdsourcing, but the crowdsourcing led me to the scene. I didn't use crowdsourcing simply for a quote. I showed the students that in broadcast, a reporter can gather dramatic video and let the viewer

hear directly from a source. I made the contrast that, in print, if a reporter relies simply on online quotes or information, that reporter is missing out on seeing the scene and getting the true emotion.

My colleague, reporter Shirley Chan, summed up the ongoing debate about the use of a social network versus good old-fashioned reporting: "You can connect with people online, but the quality of your stories is still going to rely on how well you connect with that person by using a camera or your notepad. Human interaction and follow-through is the only way to truly gather a story. Social networks can be the start of the interaction but can't be the only interaction."

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