



Help Students Get Started Building Their Social Network

Darren Sweeney, Central Connecticut State University

When I started in the TV news business in 2000, the station I worked for barely had a working website. When I volunteered to get a site up and running, management told me, “Don’t post anything until after the news airs; otherwise no one will want to watch.”

Flash forward 14 years later and management now tells us all, “Think digital first.” Not only has the practice of how we gather and report news changed, but showing prospective employers just how “networked” you are can make you a more valuable player in the competitive news job market.

As a meteorologist/reporter for the NBC affiliate in Hartford, Conn., I have grown to incorporate digital into the daily information we gather. In fact, digital is now first priority over print or broadcast when covering any story. Not only do we do this to stay connected with viewers (and the world), but managers take great notice. Every few weeks on-air talent receives “Social Media Score Cards” listing the gain (and sometimes loss) of followers on various sites like Facebook and Twitter. We are not only measured against our colleagues at our own station, but also against every person in the market. The station’s significant gains and losses are highlighted.

One station and newspaper in the Hartford market has mandated each of its print, digital and broadcast reporters to tweet at least twice a day. At our station, we are expected to engage with viewers on our pages daily. Students tend to like the fact that employers want them using Facebook and Twitter. Many younger students think that it sounds “fun” to be encouraged to use Facebook and Twitter during the workday, but in reality, real skills are needed to

obtain these jobs. Social networking skills are now needed for many broadcast and print.

Recent job postings reflect this change.

- KNBC in Los Angeles advertisement for an assignment editor: “Experience using online and social media resources as news researching tools (Accurant, LexisNexis, Facebook, etc.).”
- The *Austin Daily Herald* in Austin, Minn., posted a position requiring a “...journalist who eagerly reports in multiple formats, including web, newsprint, magazine and social media.”
- WHP-TV in Harrisburg, Pa., seeks a full-time reporter who “...must be able to work well under deadline pressure and have a working knowledge of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.”

“Having a background in web publishing and an understanding of social media is something we look for in each candidate we interview,” said Jason Old, manager of digital Content at WIS-TV in Columbia, S.C. In an interview, Old said there is an art to engaging with viewers and without a solid social network and proven audience engagement: “Candidates have a lesser chance of being hired.”

“I created my Facebook and Twitter accounts years ago, for sheer entertainment value, never anticipating they could serve as professional tools,” said Ari Mason, a 2013 University of Connecticut graduate who was just hired at NBC Connecticut with the official title of “Web Editor.”

“Social media helps us to track down the major players in our stories and find out more about them—who they are, what they do,” Mason said in an inter-

view. “It’s a wonderful way to bring news to life. And, if you’re like most college students, you’ve got those social media accounts already. This gives you a leg up.”

What Students Need to Learn

As WIS-TV’s Old notes, there is an “art” to social media when it comes to newsgathering and news dissemination. It’s not about the highest numbers of tweets or followers but more about the utilization of resources.

Spending time on social media provides journalists with opportunities to learn about what conversations are going on in their communities.

One way I get my students to learn build best practices on Twitter and Facebook is to have them create accounts. I make them aware of job opportunities that require social media experience. I ask them to begin following others and to begin tweeting. I don’t give them too much guidance on what to tweet, but loosely tell them to keep their discussion topics related to journalism or issues related to media/journalism business. Keeping the guidelines loose tends to motivate them to tweet more freely. Their choice of tweets is sometimes telling when we start to analyze the accounts.

After having them use Twitter and Facebook for a couple of weeks, building followers and following others, I ask volunteers to put their accounts on the big screen. The class analyzes their followers, tweets and content. More times than not, there are questionable follows and tweets along with pictures and video. Many times there are selfies or narcissistic tweets (e.g., “This shade of lipstick looks great on me”). It is usually eye opening to the class when many students cannot share their content on the screen for the class to see because of questionable content.

Another element to the demonstration is to take a local story and have students tweet and retweet about it. At Central Connecticut State University, where I teach, the campus was locked down because of a suspicious person, and the main form of communication was via Twitter. We analyzed some of the student’s tweets and retweets in the class. It was revealing to

learn how much rumor and innuendo were retweeted. The students received a good lesson on questioning and researching their sources before trusting/spreading other people’s tweets.

By the end of the exercise the students develop better understanding of how important social media skills are and how those skills are now required tools of the trade. They also realize they should apply the same standards they use when publishing in a newspaper or airing a broadcast when posting to Twitter.

Knowing How-To Isn’t Enough; Responsibility Counts

In the years following Twitter’s 2006 launch, journalists who used the platform did so to expand their reach. Knowing how to use social media was a nice extra to have but not essential to employment. However, now that social-media skills are a requirement in most newsrooms, our students need skills beyond the basics of following and tweeting. They also need an appreciation for the responsibility of tweeting ethical content.

As evident in the classroom exercise, the message wouldn’t be complete without showing how all aspects of the journalism process should go into every single 140 character tweet (or click to retweet). Would your student reprint libelous information that comes from another source? Hopefully no. However, it is easier for them to retweet libelous information coming from another source. It only takes one click.

Social media is in its infancy, and journalists are making mistakes using it every day. Our students can learn from these mistakes. Journalism pedagogy has revolved around ethics, lead writing and other basics for students to become trained and hired by companies. It’s evident that writing the best leads or producing the best portfolio may get overshadowed if students can’t effectively showcase their talent and their ability to use social media effectively.

Darren Sweeney is an assistant professor at Central Connecticut State University.