



A Snapshot of Social Media Storytelling Apps: How One Class Covered a Typical News Event Through Social Channels

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When I started reporting in the early 1990s, my reporter's toolkit consisted of a reporter's notebook, several ink pens of various colors, two highlighting pens, a point-and-shoot camera and maybe a micro-cassette recorder. Reporters scribbled notes furiously into the notebook, snapped a quick picture and maybe recorded the interview for accuracy or future notes. Reporters quickly drove to the newsroom and hammered out a story for the next edition. Fast-forward through the technology space-time continuum to today where I'm now sending students out to do all of that and more with only their smartphones.

Background and Rationale

Mobile reporting using social media tools is on the upswing. Almost 75% of journalists reported logging into Twitter at least once a day, and 67% reported that they regularly used social media for at least two hours a day in 2015, up from 29% in 2012 (Cision, 2015). McCoy (2015) surveyed journalism educators and professionals and found that digital and mobile reporting skills are now expected in the workplace. To prepare students for this world, journalism educators must provide either social and mobile media assignments integrated into existing classes or set up a social media and mobile reporting class. Either way, Adornato (2015), who developed his own social and mobile media class, asserts that student success depends on flexibility to adapt to new technologies such as mobile and social reporting.

Description of Assignment

In the second-level newswriting class at Murray State, students learn how to write for print, broadcast, online and mobile/social media. Near the end of the spring 2015 term, the university president announced a town-hall meeting in which he planned to outline budget challenges. In previous semesters, I had assigned students to cover a town hall meeting, craft a handful of tweets and write an online story on deadline. The class either used the university-issued hashtag for the event or used the class hashtag, and their story became embedded on the course blog.

Rather than assigning students to write a news story, I divided the class into five groups of three and assigned students a social media app to use for the coverage as a way to demonstrate the challenges and issues associated with social media reporting. I chose to place students into groups with the apps so that each group could concentrate on mastering one platform for this particular story.

Apps selected were:

- Periscope
- Twitter
- Facebook Live
- Snapchat
- Instagram

These apps were chosen on the basis of their usage for news. A Knight report found that 70% of people use Facebook every day for news, 34% use Twitter, and 20% use Instagram (Knight Foundation, 2016). Snapchat grew in popularity for news organizations

with the early 2015 launch of its Discover function for snazzy videos and graphics, but no specific data is available (Lichterman, 2015).

Prior to the town hall, I worked with the adviser to the campus newspaper to secure access to the newspaper's Twitter and Periscope accounts as a way to help measure audience engagement and to help the campus newspaper free up reporters for online and live coverage.

The assignment fell during a two-week unit about writing, reporting and using social media for engagement. Students read a variety of articles from Nieman Lab and Poynter web sites about how reporters currently engage in storytelling on mobile and social platforms and analyzed coverage on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Periscope and Snapchat. Facebook Live launched for public figures in 2015 and to everyone else in early 2016 (Simo, 2016), so the app usage remained fairly new at the time of the assignment in late April 2016, but I decided to try it as an experiment.

I asked the students to arrive approximately 15 minutes early so they could sit near the front and set up equipment. This helped the students to learn how to position themselves for the best audio, video and photography.

Students in the Twitter and Instagram groups had specific numbers of posts (15 for Twitter and eight for Instagram) while the video groups and Snapchat group did not have such quantifiable parameters. The video and Snapchat groups were left to their own devices to best tell the story with videos.



Murray State University journalism students prepare their phones and other mobile devices as they use social media apps to cover a university-wide meeting about impending budget cuts

Student Results

Students produced a variety of content for each platform that tried to summarize the town hall meeting and put the budget crisis into easy-to-understand terms.

For Facebook Live, students had to run the video from their personal accounts. The views ranged from a low of 32 to a high of 64. One student decided to break up the videos into six shorter segments of about three to five minutes each. He reported no comments from his Facebook followers.

For Periscope, the group divided videos into shorter segments rather than streaming a long continuous video. Again, they thought a series of shorter videos might be better, and they found that they had to reposition themselves frequently to get better audio and video. Audio proved the biggest challenge as students did not have an external microphone handy.

The student who used the *Murray State News*' Periscope account through Twitter recorded four retweets for the series of videos, and he reported that the highest number of viewers ended around 25. Periscope has not yet caught on as a social media tool for the campus newspaper even with repeated usage. Comments for the Periscope ranged from reactions of the hearts to comments such as "We're watching on the fourth floor" of an office building. No viewers asked questions via Periscope.

The tweets fared better with eight retweets from the *News*' account. Even the university president noticed the live tweeting and pointed out several of the tweets for local media coverage.

Student Reflection

Overall, students liked the ease with which the social media apps provided them for storytelling, but they admitted each app had limitations. They also mentioned that it would have been more difficult had they had to juggle two apps at the same time, so they appreciated the ability to specialize their coverage.

For instance, students who used Snapchat said they had difficulty piecing together a fluid video story or even a photo/text story because they didn't know what the president would say next, and even though they use Snapchat socially, they said the app seemed a bit difficult for news coverage.

The group that used Instagram agreed that pictures and video helped to tell the story, but as one student wrote, "I learned that it is better to always come up with a caption when posting a picture on In-

stagram with something that relates to what your picture is trying to say.” She mentioned that her personal Instagram posts may not always feature a caption, but she now realizes news organizations must provide the context and background just as a reporter would for a story. Another student who used Instagram said he learned that the story can be told as effectively through visuals, particularly through a speaker’s body language and actions.

A student who used Periscope likened it to Facebook Live and said she imagines Facebook Live eventually will overtake live-streaming apps Periscope and Meerkat because people are already invested in finding news and information on Facebook. The Twitter users said they preferred the ease and speed of using Twitter, and they understood how live tweeting can help to quickly inform an audience.

A student who used Twitter said it best: “I also think that if a news station had two or three people covering an event at once, it would be the best of both worlds of social media.”

Her comment sums up what I hoped to accomplish: Cover an event with a variety of social media apps to tell a complete story. By asking students to use a specific social media app and dividing the class, we told a story in a variety of formats. While the story may not have been a traditional one, we provided information that reached various segments of the university community for an experiment in social storytelling.

During the next class session, students discussed their views of solely using social media to tell a story. Most of the class agreed that Twitter offered the best choice for combining text with photo or video when it came to a serious news story like a budget crisis. They also agreed that Snapchat appeals to their generation, but the app proved clunky for actually assembling a story about a serious matter. They said they could easily envision Snapchat for a feature story or a sports story, where their elements could be easier to select and edit with additional text or filters. The class split on their perception of Facebook Live and Periscope.

The students who used Twitter more seemed to embrace Periscope because it does embed through Twitter, but some students said they imagine Facebook Live might replace both Periscope and Meerkat because the live video functionality is already embedded within Facebook. Students remained mixed about Instagram. They said they see it as a great method to communicate visually, but again, a story about a Uni-

versity budget did not seem to play well for visuals.

Future Assignments

For future assignments using social media, I will develop a quantifiable number of posts or videos that students must do and develop a clear grading rubric that includes parameters for framing, video quality and storytelling. To increase the “fun” factor, I may try to find a campus event that better lends itself to photos or videos, which may help to increase engagement. Additionally, social media must be infused into every assignment rather than reserved for a two-week unit, as social media is no longer a separate skill for today’s journalists. It’s required along with the regular work load.

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Assignment Details

A University Hall meeting has been scheduled for Thursday, April 28, 2016, beginning at 2 p.m. in Room 240, Alexander Hall. The University Hall meeting will provide us with an opportunity to highlight end of the academic year successes and also discuss our current fiscal realities, including future potential tuition and fee increases.

The University Hall meeting will also be available via live streaming through the following url: murraystate.edu/streaming (Links to an external site.)

Assignment: We will cover this event as social media reporters. Reporters now turn to a variety of social media tools in order to cover an event. Of course, one reporter cannot do ALL the coverage tools at once, so Professor Wright has randomly used her sorting hat (via Canvas) to sort you into groups. For this exercise, we will use the following social media channels:

1. Periscope (link through your Twitter and/or Murray State News) for live streaming. Film and engage with the audience, assuming that we get anyone to watch.
2. Facebook Live (Link through your FB and/or Murray State News if access allows) for live streaming. Film and engage with the audience.
3. Instagram – How can you tell the social story through Instagram? You must take at least eight pics and post. Tag Murray State's account and use a hashtag appropriate for the event. You may use a combination of photos and video.
4. Snapchat – Use Snapchat to tell a story.
5. Twitter – You must cover the event live and tweet interesting comments, quotes, observations, etc., with the official event hashtag and tag @murraystateuniv so that we get more fol-

lows. 15 tweet minimum.

Save the Periscope, FB Live, Instagram and Snaps to the camera roll of the device, especially if you use the iPads, so that you can turn in the video files for Professor Wright. You may either download the file and upload on Canvas or return the iPad with a sticky note with your name on it. The assignment is worth 75 points for doing it and doing it well. (Video quality, audio quality, picture quality, framing, composition, etc.)

Reflection is worth 25 points. Write it on a Word doc file and upload to Canvas.

1. What type of social media did you use to cover the event?
2. Now that you have covered an event via social media, how effective do you believe social media channels are for reporters?
3. What lessons did you learn from your coverage as well as watching or following coverage from your peers?

Social media unit readings:

Snapchat: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/02/snapchat-stories-heres-how-6-news-orgs-are-thinking-about-the-chat-app/>

Periscope and Meerkat: http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2015/03/meerkat_and_periscope_the_live_streaming_apps_aren_t_changing_the_news.html

Facebook: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/27/business/media/how-facebook-is-changing-the-way-its-users-consume-journalism.html?_r=1

Facebook and Twitter: http://mediashift.org/2015/07/pew-facebook-and-twitter-becoming-influential-sources-of-news/?utm_source=MediaShift+Daily&utm_campaign=991957def9-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_70e55682fc-991957def9-299992437

Who does social media at a news org? <http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/05/whos-behind-that-tweet-heres-how-7-news-orgs-manage-their-twitter-and-facebook-accounts/>