

CHANGES IN U.S. JOURNALISM

How do journalists think about social media?

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During the past decade, great changes have occurred in journalism, many of them due to the rapid rise of social media. What has happened to American journalists in the decade since the early 2000s, a time of tumultuous changes in society, economics, and technology? What impact have the many cutbacks and the dramatic growth of the internet had on US journalists' attitudes, and behaviors—and even on the definition of who is a journalist? To answer the questions raised above, in late 2013 we conducted a national online survey of 1080 US journalists. The survey is part of the American Journalist project, which conducted similar surveys of US journalists in 1982, 1992, and 2002. We found that US journalists use social media mainly to check on what other news organizations are doing and to look for breaking news events. A majority also use social media to find ideas for stories, keep in touch with their readers and viewers, and find additional information. Thus, journalists use social media predominantly as information-gathering tools and much less to interview sources or to validate information. Our findings also indicate that most journalists consider social media to have a positive impact on their work. Of particular value, it seems, was the fact that social media make journalism more accountable to the public. However, only about a third of the journalists also think that social media have a positive influence on the journalistic profession overall. One of the most common negative perceptions was that online journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed. Overall, then, it appears that most journalists do see the benefits of social media, but fewer are convinced that these new forms of digital communication will benefit journalistic professionalism.

KEYWORDS internet; journalism; journalists; professionalism; social media impact; social media use

Introduction

During the past decade, great changes have occurred in journalism and in the larger society, many of them due to rapid advances in computer technology and the rise of new forms of media, especially social media such as various blogs, Facebook, and Twitter.

The three books produced by the Indiana team—*The American Journalist* (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986), *The American Journalist in the 1990s* (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996), and *The American Journalist in the 21st Century* (Weaver et al. 2007)—have documented major changes over time in US journalism, including the dramatic growth in the size of the journalism workforce in the 1970s and 1980s, substantial increases in the proportions of women and college graduates, increases in racial and ethnic minority journalists, declines in job satisfaction and perceived autonomy, more conservative ideas about the ethics of reporting practices, changes in working conditions and required tasks, and changes in ideas about the roles that journalists should perform in society.

What has happened to American journalists in the decade since the early 2000s, a time of tumultuous changes in society, economics, and technology? What impact have the many cutbacks and the dramatic growth of the internet had on US journalists' characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors—and even on the definition of who is a journalist?

This 2013 survey addresses these and other questions. It asks many of the same questions included in the 1982, 1992, and 2002 studies so that trends can be tracked over time. But it also includes a series of new questions about the impact of the internet and social media on the practice of modern journalism, and how journalists use these new forms of communication in their work. This paper focuses on these questions.

Related Studies

In spite of all the growth in online news sources and in online news audiences, there has not been much research on those who produce online news (Deuze and Paulussen 2002; Hammond, Petersen, and Thomsen 2000; Neuberger 2002; Quandt et al. 2006). Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman's 1971 study, reported in their book, *The News People* (Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1976), provided a benchmark against which US journalists' backgrounds, demographics, attitudes, beliefs, and working conditions could be compared in 1982, 1992, and 2002. The three books by Weaver and Wilhoit and Indiana colleagues based on the later studies, *The American Journalist* (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986), *The American Journalist in the 1990s* (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996), and *The American Journalist in the 21st Century* (Weaver et al. 2007), have documented changes over time in US journalism, including dramatic growth and later shrinkage in the number of journalists; some increases in the proportions of women among younger journalists, college graduates, and minority journalists; changes in job satisfaction; declines in perceived autonomy; changes in income and ideas about the ethics of reporting practices; and changes in ideas about the roles that journalists should perform in society.

The overall picture from research on US journalists from the early 1970s to the early years of this new twenty-first century was one of "more stability than change" (Weaver et al. 2007, 239). But there were some changes worth noting.

In terms of demographics, the number of full-time US journalists decreased by nearly 5 percent, the average age increased from 36 to 41, there was slight growth in the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities from 8 percent to 9.5 percent, there was a decline in the percentage identifying with the Democratic political party and considering themselves left of center politically, and there was an increase in viewing cable television network news (Weaver et al. 2007, 28).

In terms of education and training, the high degree of educational diversity of US journalists found in the 1971 study of Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976) eroded in the 1990s. In 2002, more journalists had graduated from college, and more had majored in journalism or communications at the undergraduate level. In 31 years, the proportion with at least a bachelor's degree from a four-year college jumped from 58 to 89 percent, and the proportion majoring in journalism or communication increased from 41 to 50 percent (Weaver et al. 2007, 31). In addition to these increases, there was also an increase in those who had participated in a continuing education program. But there were few differences between those who had majored in journalism–communication and other subjects.

In terms of working conditions, there was a downward trend for measures of perceived autonomy from 1971 to 2002, especially for deciding story emphasis, which dropped from 76 percent of reporters saying they had almost complete freedom to decide in 1971 to 42 percent in 2002. Likewise, perceived freedom to select stories dropped from 60 percent in 1971 and 1982 to 40 percent in 2002, another significant decline (Weaver et al. 2007, 72). The largest drops in perceived freedom were among journalists working for daily newspapers, wire services, and television.

The amount of perceived freedom of US journalists was positively correlated with job satisfaction. Those who were very satisfied with their jobs had higher average scores on autonomy measures. Although levels of job satisfaction increased a bit from 1992 to 2002, the percentage of journalists saying that they were very satisfied declined from nearly half (49 percent) in 1971 to about one-third (33 percent) in 2002 (Weaver et al. 2007, 107).

In terms of professional roles, there was a decline in the perceived importance of investigating government claims, analyzing complex problems, and discussing national policies from the early 1970s to the early years of this new century. Even though there has been a decline in the perceived importance of this investigative role in the past 30+ years, it is also true that investigating government claims and getting information to the public quickly have remained dominant roles in the minds of US journalists over the years—and investigating government was on the upswing from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, whereas getting information out quickly was on the decline (Weaver et al. 2007, 140).

In terms of reporting methods, there have been conflicting findings in the American Journalist studies from 1982 to 2002. (These questions were not asked by Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman in their 1971 study.) On the one hand, it could be argued that decreases in support of deceptive practices such as claiming to be someone else and getting employed to obtain inside information are an indication of increased professionalism or ethical standards; and decreases in support for paying for information and revealing the names of rape victims can also be seen as indicators of higher ethical standards and more sensitivity to the rights of others.

On the other hand, there have been increases in support of using confidential business, government, and personal documents without permission (especially business and government records), and a substantial majority (60 percent) of all journalists thought in 1992 and 2002 that using hidden microphones and cameras may be justified in the case of an important story (Weaver et al. 2007, 163).

Clearly, US journalists have made a distinction in the past between some deceptive practices, such as concealing one's identity and paying for information, and others such as using government and business documents, but the only substantial increases in support of these methods were for using confidential documents, both official and personal. But even in the case of documents, there were modest declines in support between 1992 and 2002, and no real increases in support for any of these questionable methods during that decade (Weaver et al. 2007, 163).

In terms of online journalists, the 2002 study of US journalists found that they were "more similar to, than different from, journalists working in more traditional print and broadcast news media, but there were some notable differences, mainly in work-related attitudes and behaviors" (Weaver et al. 2007, 224). Some of these differences included being more likely than traditional journalists to have had some graduate education and

to have earned a graduate degree, being more satisfied with their jobs, being less likely to perceive complete freedom to select stories to work on, being less likely to hear from news sources and much more likely to receive feedback regularly from audience members, being more likely to emphasize an interpretive role and slightly more likely to consider the adversarial or watchdog function extremely important, and being more likely to justify using controversial reporting methods than traditional journalists (Weaver et al. 2007, 223–224).

Job Satisfaction and Perceived Autonomy

During the last two decades, the work environment of journalists around the world has been transformed dramatically. News media ownership became more consolidated when a severe recession led to staff reductions and layoffs. Potential threats to professional autonomy emerged as news organizations became more market-driven and “civic journalism” challenged the traditional relationship among journalists, sources, and audience members.

Many of these changes can be traced to the influence of the internet on journalistic work and news organizations that have embraced online media to reach additional audiences with more targeted and frequently updated news. However, the specific demands of online news have also changed the way modern journalists work. While the internet and social media made it easier for journalists to research and report their stories, many of them are now expected to write a story, shoot still pictures or video, and then edit their own work for multiple media platforms. These are new professional obligations that might increase the risk of burnout, exhaustion, and stress among journalists (Deprez and Raeymaeckers 2012).

Research Questions

Given these dramatic changes in the working environment of US and other journalists, what do they think about the impact of social media on their work and how do they use it in their day-to-day reporting and editing?

Methods

To answer the questions raised above, in the fall of 2013 we conducted a national online survey of 1080 full-time US journalists, similar to those conducted in 1971, 1982, 1992, and 2002. The survey asked many of the questions included in the previous studies so that trends could be tracked over time. However, it also included a series of new questions about the use and impact of the internet and social media in the practice of modern journalism. In addition to the regular closed-ended questions, the 2013 survey also included open-ended questions to allow journalists to explain some of the quantitative findings in their own words.

Sampling

The 2013 study employs the same basic sampling methods used in the previous studies that include journalists from all the print and broadcast traditional news media. The sample of traditional US journalists is based on a multi-stage sampling

procedure, which first draws a representative sample of media organizations in the United States and then, in a second step, samples of journalists from within each of the selected organizations. The sample of online journalists was created by identifying online journalists within a representative selection of traditional media organizations and by obtaining lists of journalists from online-only media organizations and news websites.

The findings presented in this paper are based on 1080 completed interviews conducted from August 7 to December 20, 2013, with full-time journalists working for a wide variety of daily and weekly newspaper, radio and television stations, wire services, newsmagazines, and online news media throughout the United States. All 3500 journalists originally selected for our sample were invited via email to participate in our online survey. They also received four follow-up reminders via email and one personal "nudge" call by telephone. The response rate for the final sample of 1080 respondents was 32.6 percent, and the maximum sampling error at the 95 percent level of confidence is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire included a total of 86 questions and focused mostly on journalists' (1) job satisfaction, (2) perceived levels of freedom in their jobs, (3) role perceptions, (4) reporting practices, (5) use of social media in their work, (6) perceived impact of social media on their work, (7) additional training sought, and (8) demographics. The new questions regarding the use of social media and their perceived impact were partially adopted from recent studies by Gulyas (2013) and Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013), and these are the focus of this paper.

Use of Social Media in Journalism

How journalists use social media in their jobs was assessed with a series of questions that measured the perceived importance of social media in journalists' work, the frequency of use of different types of social media, and the way social media were used. Perceived importance of social media was measured by asking journalists how important (1 = not important at all; 5 = extremely important) they thought social media are for reporting or producing their stories. The frequency of social media use in their work was assessed by asking journalists how often they use social media such as blogs written by private citizens or other journalists, social networking sites such as Twitter, or audio-visual sharing sites such as YouTube. Finally, in order to get a better understanding of how journalists use social media in their work, respondents were asked whether they regularly use social media to do things such as checking for breaking news, finding new ideas for stories, or keeping in touch with their audiences.¹

Perceived Impact of Social Media on Own Work and Profession

The survey also included a series of questions that probed how journalists thought about the impact of social media on their work and the profession overall. After asking journalists first how they would rate the impact of social media on their work (1 = very negative; 5 = very positive), they were then asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed

(1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) with the following eight statements: (1) Using social media allows me to promote myself and my work much better; (2) Because of social media, I am more engaged with my audience; (3) Because of social media, I communicate better with people relevant to my work; (4) Social media have improved my productivity; (5) Social media have decreased my daily workload; (6) Using social media enhances my credibility as a journalist; (7) Social media allow me to be faster in reporting news stories; (8) Social media allow me to cover more news stories.²

Similarly, after being asked about how they would rate the impact of social media on the journalistic profession overall, respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following five statements: (1) Social media are undermining traditional journalistic values; (2) Social media threaten the quality of journalism; (3) Social media make journalism more accountable to the public; (4) User-generated content threatens the integrity of journalism; (5) Online journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed.³

Demographics

Gender, age, race, religion, political party affiliation, political leaning, income, and marital status were measured for both descriptive and statistical control purposes.⁴

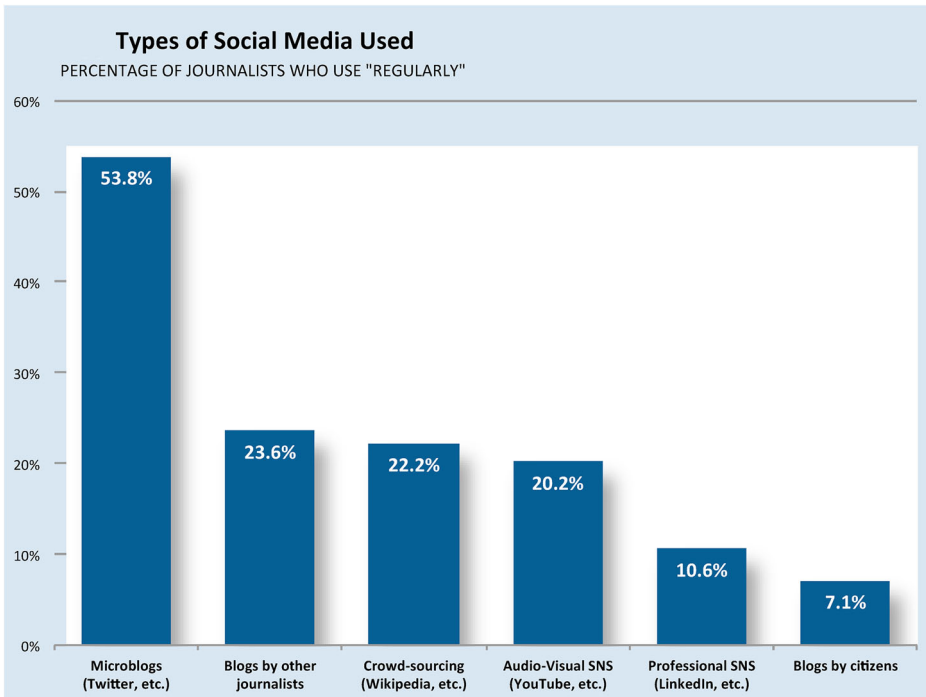


FIGURE 1 Types of social media used (percentage of journalists who use “regularly”). SNS, social networking sites

Findings

Journalists' Use of Social Media

Because social media have become an important part of daily journalism, we included a number of questions in the 2013 survey that probed journalists' use of social media in their work and their perceptions of how social media have affected their work and the profession overall. These questions were not asked in any of the previous surveys and therefore cannot be compared across time. However, we can analyze the use and perceived effects of social media by journalists working for different types of media (e.g., daily newspapers, television, and radio) and by different demographic backgrounds (e.g., male and female).

Because the internet has dramatically changed the way journalists do their work, it is not surprising that 40 percent of US journalists said that social media are very important to their work. Women were a bit more likely to say this (45 percent) than men (37 percent). Television journalists were most likely (59 percent) and magazine journalists least likely to say so (24 percent). About one-third of all journalists (35 percent) said they spent between 30 and 60 minutes every day on social networking sites in their work as a journalist, with no difference between men and women. Radio journalists were most likely to say this (43 percent) and television and online journalists least likely to say so (29 and 27.5 percent, respectively), mainly because these two types of journalists were more likely than others to use social media for two to three hours a day.

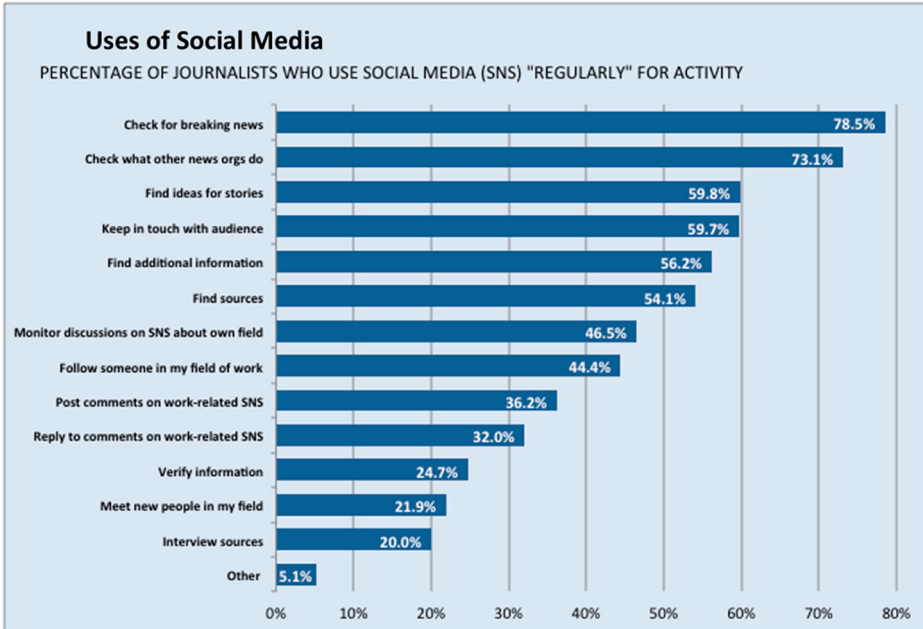


FIGURE 2

Uses of social media (percentage of journalists who use social media "regularly" for activity). SNS, social networking sites

More than half of all journalists (53.8 percent) said they regularly use microblogs such as Twitter for gathering information and reporting. As Figure 1 illustrates, other types of social media were used less frequently, including the blogs of other journalists (23.6 percent), crowd-sourced sites such as Wikipedia (22.2 percent), audio-visual sites such as YouTube (20.2 percent), and professional sites such as LinkedIn (10.6 percent). Least likely to be used were blogs by citizens (7.1 percent). There was not much difference between men and women on these measures, nor between the various types of journalists, except that television and online journalists were more likely to use audio-visual sharing sites such as YouTube more often than others, and magazine journalists were more likely to use crowd-sourcing sites such as Wikipedia.

As indicated in Figure 2, most journalists use social media to gather information for their news stories. About three-fourths of the journalists, for example, said they used social media to check what other news organizations do or whether there might be any breaking news. More than half of them also used social media to find new ideas for their stories, to gather additional information, and to find sources. Almost 6 in 10 journalists also said that they keep in touch with their audiences through social media. Other possible uses of social media, such as interviewing sources, verifying information, or posting comments on work-related social networking sites were much less common. Overall then, social media were used predominantly as information-gathering tools by journalists, and much less often as a tool to interview sources or to verify information.

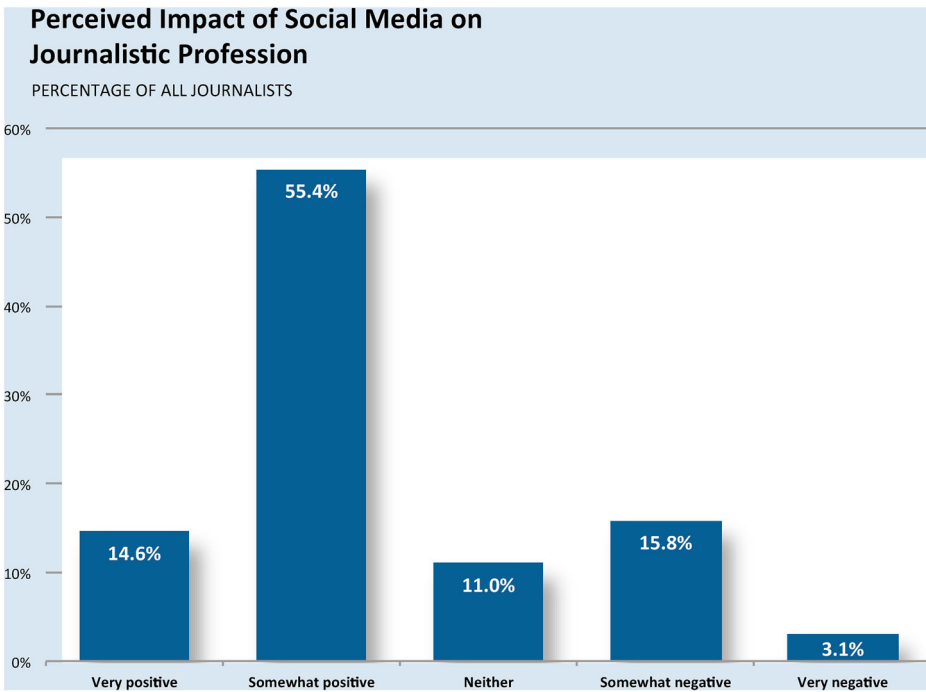


FIGURE 3
Perceived impact of social media on journalistic profession (percentage of all journalists)

Perceived Effects of Social Media

Another goal of this study was to establish a baseline for how journalists see the effects of social media on their profession. Overall, our findings indicate that a clear majority (71.5 percent) of journalists thought that social media had a “very” or “somewhat” positive effect on their work, while only about 7.1 percent said that the effect was negative. Similarly, Figure 3 shows that about 70 percent of the journalists thought that social media had a somewhat or very positive effect on the journalistic profession overall, while only about one-fifth thought the effect of social media was somewhat or very negative.

When asked specifically what effects they thought social media might have on their work, Figure 4 shows that most journalists indicated that self-promotion, better engagement with their audiences, and faster reporting were the three most beneficial aspects. Significantly fewer thought that social media might enhance their credibility, allow them to cover more news, or improve their productivity. Almost no journalists said that social media had decreased their workload.

In spite of the overall positive perceived effect of social media on the journalistic profession, about three-quarters (75.5 percent) of the journalists thought that “online journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed.” Almost half also thought that social media “threatens the quality of journalism” (48.4 percent) and that “user-generated content threatens the integrity of journalism” (46.8 percent). On the other hand, a similar percentage of journalists

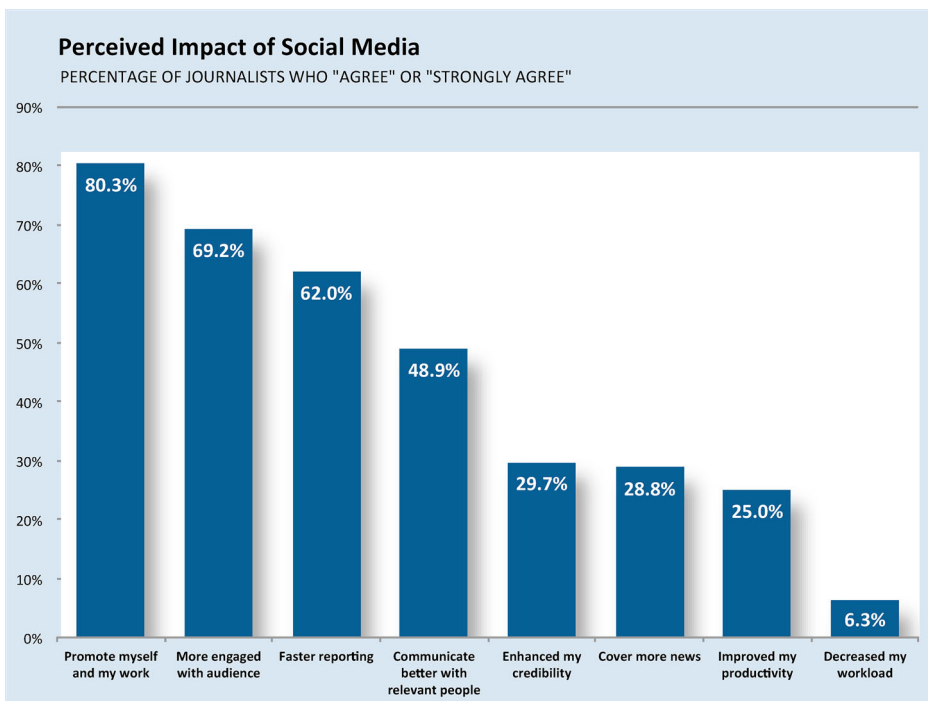


FIGURE 4

Perceived impact of social media (percentage of journalists who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

also believed that social media “makes journalism more accountable to the public” (48.1 percent).

Thus, the use of social media as a networking and promotional tool in US journalism seems clear, although it might not always yield desired effects. Whereas a majority of US journalists (62 percent) agreed that social media allow them to produce faster reporting, speed of news coverage does not imply that journalists can cover more news (only 29 percent agreed) or that they are more productive (one-fourth agreed).

Conclusions

US journalists use social media mainly to check on what other news organizations are doing and to look for breaking news events. A majority also use social media to find ideas for stories, keep in touch with their readers and viewers, and find additional information. Thus, journalists use social media predominantly as information-gathering tools and much less to interview sources or to validate information.

Finally, our findings indicate that most journalists consider social media to have a positive impact on their work. Of particular value, it seems, was the perception that social media make journalism more accountable to the public. However, one of the most common negative perceptions was that online journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed. Overall then, it appears that most journalists do see the benefits of social media in their own work, but fewer are convinced that these new forms of digital communication benefit journalistic professionalism overall in the United States.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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NOTES

1. *Use of social media in job*: How important is social media for reporting or producing your stories? (coded as: 1 = not important at all; 2 = not very important; 3 = somewhat important; 4 = very important; 5 = extremely important). How often do you use the following types of social media in your work as a journalist? (1) Blogs authored by journalists or other professionals; (2) Blogs authored by regular citizens; (3) Microblogging sites, such as Twitter; (4) Professional social networking sites, such as LinkedIn; (5) Audio-visual sharing sites, such as YouTube, Flickr, or Tumblr; (6) Content communities and crowd-sourcing sites, such as Wikipedia (coded as: 1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = occasionally; 4 = regularly). How do you use social media in your daily work as a journalist? Please select all that apply. (1) Check for breaking news; (2) Check what other news organizations are reporting; (3) Monitor discussions on social media about my field of work; (4) Find new ideas for stories; (5) Interview sources; (6) Find sources I would otherwise not be aware of or have access to; (7) Verify information; (8) Find additional information; (9) Meet new people in my field of work; (10) Follow someone on social media I met in my field

- of work; (11) Keep in touch with my audience; (12) Post comments on work-related social media; (13) Reply to comments on work-related social media; (14) Other.
2. *Perceived impact of social media on own work:* Overall, how would you rate the impact of social media on your work as a journalist? (coded as: 1 = very negative; 2 = somewhat negative; 3 = neither negative nor positive; 4 = somewhat positive; 5 = very positive). Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of social media on your work as a journalist. (1) Using social media allows me to promote myself and my work much better; (2) Because of social media, I am more engaged with my audience; (3) Because of social media, I communicate better with people relevant to my work; (4) Social media has improved my productivity; (5) Social media has decreased my daily workload; (6) Using social media enhances my credibility as a journalist; (7) Social media allows me to be faster in reporting news stories; (8) Social media allows me to cover more news stories (coded as: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).
 3. *Perceived impact of social media on profession:* Overall, how would you rate the impact of social media on the journalistic profession? (coded as: 1 = very negative; 2 = somewhat negative; 3 = neither negative nor positive; 4 = somewhat positive; 5 = very positive). Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of social media on the journalistic profession in general. (1) Social media is undermining traditional journalistic values; (2) Social media threatens the quality of journalism; (3) Social media makes journalism more accountable to the public; (4) User-generated content threatens the integrity of journalism; (5) Online journalism has sacrificed accuracy for speed (coded as: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).
 4. *Sex:* Are you: Male; Female. *Age:* In what year were you born? *Race:* Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino? (yes; no). In which one of the following racial groups would you place yourself? White (Caucasian); Black or African-American; Asian or Asian-American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Pacific Islander; Other. *Religion:* In what religion, if any, were you brought up? Protestant/Lutheran; Evangelical Christian; Roman Catholic; Jewish; Muslim; Hindu; Buddhist; Other. *Marital status:* What is your marital status? Married; Widowed; Divorced; Separated; Unmarried, but living with partner; Single (never married); Other. *Political party affiliation:* In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent? Republican; Independent closer to Republican; Independent; Independent closer to Democrat; Democrat; No preference; Other. *Political leaning:* In general, would you describe your political views as: Very conservative; Conservative; Moderate; Liberal; Very liberal. *Income:* Finally, we'd like to ask you some financial information. Would you please tell us what your total personal income was, before taxes, from your work in journalism during 2012? Less than \$15,000; \$15,000 to less than \$20,000; \$20,000 to less than \$25,000 ... \$150,000 and over.

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