

“Journalists and Social Media” Video Transcript

Kenya Vaughn

Reporter, *The St. Louis American*

Social media is what introduced me to Ferguson because . . . the first information I got about Michael Brown was that Saturday, I was just scrolling through Instagram and there was a picture of a man who had a cardboard box that he had turned into a sign that said, “The Ferguson Police Department just executed my unarmed son.” And it was like, I was like, “Ferguson, Ferguson? Like, down the street Ferguson?” That’s how I was made aware and this happened a mile from my house and I had no clue until I got on Instagram, so that’s how I found out about it.

Yamiche Alcindor

Reporter, *USA Today* (2011–2015)

Social media was everything in Ferguson. So I was creating social media, I was getting news from social media. If I wasn’t in Ferguson and went home for a day and half to grab clothes from Brooklyn, I was watching livestreams, I was looking at people’s Twitter feeds to know what was going on. Even when I was in Ferguson, I was always on Twitter looking to see what’s going on, where are people protesting. I mean, I want to say 90% of the information, even from the police department, which was—to me was interesting was because the police were live tweeting in some ways.

I followed #MichaelBrown, #FergusonAction, #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter. And then I followed a lot of police departments and a lot of police unions on Twitter as well. So those were kind of how I followed them. I was using those same hashtags so that people could find my work and people, you know, looked for #MichaelBrown and they also found my work.

Koran Addo

Reporter, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Social media, I mean it’s absolutely useful, it’s absolutely a tool, but you can’t rely on it, you can’t trust it 100%. It was very useful in finding out where people were and getting some sense of what was going on, but you can’t take what people are posting on social media as a fact. You have to actually go out there and go through the normal reporting process, talk to multiple people, verify what they’re saying, does it hold up to scrutiny? Can I independently verify it? So yeah, absolutely social media was a great tool, but it’s just part, it’s just one tool. You still have to, you know, your classic reporter training still has to be the main focus of your job.

Yamiche Alcindor

Reporter, *USA Today* (2011–2015)

I think when it comes to individuals, I think, the same way with sourcing people, named or unnamed, you start relying on people and trusting people and building relationships so that if I see something on your Twitter feed, I know that you’re someone who’s always in Ferguson. I know you’re not someone who’s in another state who just tries to act like they’re in Ferguson but you’re someone who’ve I’ve seen on the ground, I’ve interviewed before, I’ve talked to.

I know that you're someone who, you know, even if I know you're biased, even if I know that you're either a protester or a police supporter or a Darren Wilson supporter, I at least know that you're a real person that I've met. And I think the other thing is just asking other people what happened. So a great example was when the officers were shot in Ferguson, the first thing I did was go on and start figuring out who's tweeting about and started calling people and say, "Were you there? What can you tell me?" And some of the first people I talked to were my regular people that I've talked to, protesters that I've talked to for the last eight months. You can say I know this person, I know that what they're telling me is true. So I think that that's really the way you verify information.

Wesley Lowery

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

I can send a tweet in real time and 15 different websites are going to be grabbing my tweets and writing headlines based off things I said. Not always grabbing the full contexts, not necessarily referring back to the story I write later that fills in some gaps, they're going to say, "Look at these three tweets. Clearly, Ferguson PD did this thing today!" or, "The protesters did this thing today." I think that everything becomes caricatured, everything becomes blown up larger than it is.

The standard that most news organizations I've worked at and certainly at *The Post* is that Twitter is very often used—1) as a source of live coverage in a way that very often, things that make your Twitter feed would not make your story. A lot of excerpts, things that might have made the cutting-room floor. Things that are happening in real time, details that matter because you are on the ground but don't necessarily matter page 1 story tomorrow. It's one of the reasons pictures are, in my mind, almost always preferable to be accompanied by something live. I'm going to describe this thing and I'm going to let you see it and I'm going to provide you that context.

A lot of these news organizations, *The Post* not excluded from that, are still figuring out, especially in a highly volatile situation, how do you really do this, what does this really look like? Because you're asking people and reporters under a lot of stress in real time in a quickly unpredictable situation to provide live updates. Sometimes you provide a little human wiggle room around that. You know, I said that it was this street, but in reality it was kind of this other corner. I try, for one, to always go back and correct—I don't like deleting tweets—but I try to correct myself later. I say, "Hey guys, remember earlier I said I was on Smith Street, I'm really on Johnson," I try to say that and most people are pretty forgiving about that. But unlike an article on the site or on the paper, a small misspelling or grammatical error, you're not going to run a correction, you're not necessarily going to take a tweet down because I left a comma out somewhere.

It's a much more raw and real-time correspondence. Especially on a site like Twitter and social media, the emotional dispatches are the ones that go viral. Why does that compelling human interest piece that makes you cry, make you cry? Why is that the one you share with everyone? Because of the emotional human element to it.

Student Notes

Student Notes (continued)