A Survey of Social Media Policies in U.S. Television Newsrooms

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Introduction

- Use of social media by journalists raises new ethical and professional dilemmas

  - “The ongoing social media hype puts pressure on journalists to be active in social media 24/7. In this process professional values and journalistic norms are put to the test...” (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013).

- News outlets implementing policies that address what is and what is not permitted on social media

- SPJ revised Code of Ethics to address contemporary issues
Introduction

Juliana @producerjulz · 10h
Sometimes you just gotta be thankful that some drunk dude drivers into a house...no one was hurt, but I needed news #producerproblems

Joyce Evans @JoyceEvansFox29
Thought "Breaking Bad" was hot last Sunday? @FOX29philly See who's breakin' bad in SW Philly leavin' 6 people SHOT - Tonite at Ten!
Fired after responding to viewer comments on station’s Facebook page. News director said she repeatedly violated procedures for responding to SM comments.
Purpose

- Investigate whether local TV newsrooms have social media policies, where such policies come from, and how they address emerging issues related to five areas:
  - Personal vs. Professional SM Activity
  - SM Sourcing and Content
  - Audience Complaints on SM
  - Use of SM While Reporting in the Field
  - Ownership of SM Accounts
The Newsroom: Infrastructure, Identity, and Process

- Policies convey to staff and the public that standards and accountability are important to a news organization.
- Policies only effective if there is a culture of open and frank discussion about the guidelines.
- Some newsroom SM policies are loaded with internal contradictions and ambiguity (“use common sense”).
- Policy has not caught up with practice.
Research Questions

- **RQ1**: What is the prevalence of social media policies in local television newsrooms?

- **RQ2**: How are social media policies applied in local television newsrooms?

- **RQ3**: What components/guidelines are included in the social media policies of local television newsrooms?
Methodology

- Nationwide web-based survey of news directors at local affiliates (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX)
- August and September 2014
- 526 news directors
- 24.9% response rate (N=131)
RQ1: Prevalence of SM Policies

- 95% have a SM policy
  - Written: 78%
  - Unwritten: 17%
  - No Policy: 5%

- A third implemented prior to 2012
RQ2: Development & Application of Policy

- Policy developed with recommendations from:
  - Station owner/corporate: 73%
  - Newsroom management: 72%
  - Professional organizations: 32%
  - Newsroom staff: 30%
  - Other (*consultants): 10%
RQ2: Development & Application of Policy

- How is newsroom staff made aware of policy?
  - Periodic emails: 77%
  - Informed when hired: 72%
  - Periodic meetings: 44%
  - Other: 8%

- Three-fourths have consulted policy to resolve an issue

- A fourth have suspended or dismissed a staff member for policy violation
RQ3: Components of SM Policy

Professional & Personal Activity

- Personal opinions: 95%
- Advocating on behalf of issue: 83%
- Sharing details of personal life: 71%
- Sharing political affiliation: 70%
- Sharing religious beliefs: 51%
- “Friending”/following sources: 51%
Professional & Personal Activity

Separate professional and personal accounts:

- 28% require separate accounts
- 50% recommend, but do not require separate accounts

“If you wouldn’t put it on-air, on a fullscreen, don’t put it on social media.”
RQ3: Components of SM Policy

- Sources & Contents

  ✓ Facebook: A third have no guidelines for “friending” sources. 41% said it is allowed.

  ✓ Twitter: About a quarter have no guidelines for following sources. 77% said it is allowed.

  ✓ Content: A third of policies have no guidelines for verifying user-generated content, and policies are split on asking for permission.
RQ3: Components of SM Policy

- Responding to Audience Complaints on Station’s SM Pages

  Depends on type of complaint 44%
  Staff other than reporters 33%
  Reporters allowed to respond 19%
  No policy 4%
RQ3: Components of SM Policy

- **Reporting**
  - Majority of policies (63%) advise reporters to break news on SM first vs. website first (19%).

- **Ownership**
  - Majority of stations (66%) own the professional SM accounts of on-air talent.
Conclusions

- Digital natives & SM for journalistic purposes: “We have found our young employees have the biggest problem and occasionally will make inappropriate comments on social media.”

- Unwritten policies leave newsrooms vulnerable

- Lack of face-to-face communication and staff input

- Majority of policies distinguish what is appropriate to share

- Policy has not caught up with practice: sourcing and content
Future Research

- Reporters’ perceptions of SM policies
- Content analysis of policies
- Case studies of how guidelines are applied
Evolving Journalistic Guidelines:

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