

# Evolving Journalistic Guidelines

## 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](#)

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**Joyce Evans**

@JoyceEvansFox29

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# Introduction



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



# Literature Review

- ➔ 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
- ✓ 90% include guidelines for appropriate use of professional accounts

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%



# RQ3: Components of SM Policy

- 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



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