A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO WORKING WITH SOCIAL SOURCES

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the most powerful images from a news event are captured by eyewitnesses. The proliferation of smartphones and the popularity of social networks means that before a professional camera crew can arrive at the scene, there will almost always be footage of events already uploaded to the likes of Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Vine and Whatsapp, or streams appearing via Periscope or Facebook Live. Other bystanders might also have footage on their phones, which they have not posted online.

If you work for a news organisation, it is likely you are interested in using some of these images. But how do you navigate the legal and ethical hurdles? This guide answers ten key questions you will face working with status updates on social networks and other online platforms as well as eyewitness media – photographs or videos captured by unofficial sources.

HOW SHOULD I CONTACT A SOCIAL SOURCE?

While much of this guide will focus on eyewitness media, many times as a journalist you will want to contact someone via the social web who can help you with your reporting. The main consideration is that some users will be shocked that a journalist is interested in talking to them, and might be uneasy about talking with you.

In many cases they will have probably just witnessed something traumatic, may still be in danger, or find themselves in an unexpectedly difficult and worrying situation. You will inevitably be under pressure during a breaking news event, but always consider the feelings and circumstances of the person you are trying to reach. Journalists can often cause eyewitnesses to shut down and stop all contact by tactless approaches.

1 **Ask about their wellbeing. Remember their emotional health is as important as their physical safety.**

2 **Explain how you found them and how you were able to contact them (don't take for granted that they know how privacy works on different social sites).**

3 **Make it clear which news organisation you work for.**

4 **Explain how you hope the information they are able to share with you will make the story stronger.**

5 **Give them your organisational email address or newsroom phone number so they can ensure they're talking to who you say you are.**

Building trust is incredibly important when talking to sources via the social web. People communicating online tend to be more apprehensive; you will often need to take more time than you would during a face-to-face interview or phone call. Jumping straight in and asking for a quote is much less likely to be successful.

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It is also important to consider the ethical implications of using information or quotes from someone who has been posting on the social web. While certain spaces on some platforms are public, research shows[1] that users, while knowing the comments are public, think of these spaces as private zones where they can interact with other people about the same subject. This is especially true of chatrooms and message boards. For this reason, it is more appropriate to contact someone you find in one of these spaces to get a new quote rather than simply lifting text from the online source. Jumping into chatroom conversations will rarely end in success; chatroom users are not always welcoming of new members. The best approach is to contact the chatroom administrator to see if they can post on your behalf.

Previous friendships or university affiliations can sometimes give a journalist access to information that isn't fully public. Every newsroom should have ethical policies about using information gleaned through these types of social relationships.

[1]James M Hudson and Amy Bruckman, (2004) "Go Away": Participant Objections to Being Studied and the Ethics of Chatroom Research, The Information Society, (20) pp.127-139 http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/papers/journal/hudson-bruckman-tis04.pdf

'Private' messaging spaces like closed Facebook or Whatsapp groups can cause other ethical dilemmas. In these spaces, it is not appropriate to lift material or quote conversations, even when being careful not to name names. It can be easy to forget that these spaces are private and groups can have thousands of members. If a Facebook group is 'closed', the information cannot be lifted.

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to newsgathering on social platforms. Each news event is different. Do you want to use photographs from the Facebook page of a victim of a crime, or someone who perpetrated a crime? Do you want to publish the final message posted before an adult died in a plane crash, or before their child did? If a teenager commits suicide and her best friend provides you with screenshots of their last Snapchat messages, is it appropriate to use these?

Each case will be different, and will require editorial judgment. We would recommend that newsrooms create times to work through different ethical scenarios as a team, so that all staff members understand the main legal and ethical issues involved.

KEY POINTS

It takes time to earn trust when contacting sources via the social web. Where possible, try to move the conversation on to an organisational email address. Although online spaces can technically be public, not all users think that way. Be respectful of the information you get from these spaces, and where possible contact the source directly to ask them for a specific quote.

There are no hard and fast rules about using information and materials sourced from the social web. Each case is different. It is therefore important that newsrooms have team discussions using different scenarios to test ethical guidance and policy.