

# **Social Media as a News Platform**

**GUANJUN LIU**

**Bachelor's Thesis  
April 2014  
Media Degree Programme**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Since the birth of social media, we've seen a dramatic transformation of how news is produced and consumed and how we interact with it. The main drivers are the rapid development of technology and a boom in the number of social media users. For example the Pope interacts with his followers on Twitter; the newly elected Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, opened his Facebook profile to the public, and 2013 Russian meteor explosion went viral on YouTube with millions of hits. Thus it is conceivable that the statement "social media will overtake mainstream media" is not a view held by the minority.

Despite the rapid uptake of social media, my research survey indicates that a large proportion of people still have a high rate of trust in mainstream media and professional journalists, even though overwhelming majority of my respondents are more likely to access news online than using traditional mediums such as print and broadcast media.

Top ranking social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have only been in existence for less than a decade, so it is inevitable that there will be a flurry of issues that will need to be tackled in respect of these sites being used as trusted news platforms. For most users, the challenge of using these sites is how they can filter or select what is of interest or relevance through the 'din' of large amounts of bite-sized information delivered by various social media.

Mainstream media and professional journalists will not suddenly lose their existential value, neither will they simply be weeded out by social media; rather the convergence of social media with mainstream mediums will be the norm.

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## INTRODUCTION

The core aim of this paper is to investigate how social media is used for news consumption and the possible impact these new mediums might have on an audience's perspective.

This paper contains four chapters:

The first chapter sets out how social media has changed the processes of news production, reporting and its distribution. The readers, reviewers, receivers defined as being traditional are not a specific group of people at the end of the news production chain any more: in the internet age they are now new sources, citizen journalists and commentators. The changes and its impact is discussed and presented from the social media users' angle.

The second chapter aims to further analyze the immature and problematic issues of that social media activities can raise within the realm of news reporting. Every coin has two sides, and there are, for social media, compelling downsides. Will user-generated content meet the core values and standards of news? Are uncontrolled flows of information ideally and comprehensively beneficial to readers? Is the information generated within social networks trustworthy at all? Answers to these questions will be discussed in this chapter along with illustrations of the current social affairs it brings with.

The third chapter summarizes the key findings of the survey conducted online by myself.

The fourth chapter offers conclusion and solutions closely connected to the questions listed above.

Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are the specific representatives of social media discussed and analyzed in this paper.

The methodology used in compiling this paper consists of a social survey, literature quotations, interviews and case studies. The survey was firstly published online in English in order to gain a better understanding of an individual's reaction to social media. The research was conducted by using google documents online questionnaire at the beginning of April 2011. It was translated into three other languages—Italian, Chinese Mandarin and Spanish and collected responses in 2012. There were 330 valid respondents from 35 countries over

the world. The majority of respondents are from Italy (28%), China (23%), Finland (18%) and the UK (6%).

This online survey only garnered a limited number of respondents, and as such the results under-represent the social media habits of people who are not actively online. An international comparison between Italy, China, Finland and the UK is provided as an individual part of this paper in the third chapter.

The survey can be found at the following links:

English:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/viewform?formkey=dFISOWp5SzBvV19CSHZhQlhFVI8OTGc6MQ>

Italian: <http://www.sojump.com/jq/2571214.aspx>

Chinese: <http://www.sojump.com/jq/2558857.aspx>

Spanish: <http://www.sojump.com/jq/2583000.aspx>

## 1 USERS' ROLES TRANSFORMATION

In May 2008 a massive earthquake with a magnitude of 8.0 (Chinese official figure) struck the Sichuan province in China, which resulted in many heavy casualties and devastated a wide area.

The event was reported as the earthquake happened by people texting from their cell phones and uploading photos and videos to QQ, China's largest instant messenger service.

The very first news reports were not released by the Xinhua news agency, China's official press agency, nor by the BBC or the US Geological Survey. Instead the BBC got notice of the quake from Twitter, and Twitter announced the quake several minutes before the US Geological Survey made any announcements on its own website. In contrast, 36 years ago, it took Chinese government about three months to admit a quake of that magnitude had happened (Tangshan, Hebei province, 7.8 magnitude, 28 July 1976).

As mainstream media invests an enormous amount of time, energy and expertise in attempting to be the unparalleled owners of breaking news, new media platforms such as twitter directly challenge these efforts. The fact is on countless occasions over the past few years, significant world events have been reported first and somewhat primitively from social media platforms.

The following are six examples of news stories that broke via social networks:

**Protesters killed in Bahrain**

**March 2013**

**YouTube**

**Osama Bin Laden death**

**May 2011**

**Twitter**

**Announcement of the Royal**

**wedding Nov. 2010**

**Twitter**

**Whitney Houston's death**

**February 2012**

**Twitter**

**New Iranian president**

**Hassan Rohani welcomes**

**Facebook**

**July 2013**

**Egyptian uprising**

**January 2011**

**Facebook**

There are only four periods in the last 500 years where media has changed enough to qualify as being a global ‘revolution’, concluded Clay Shirky (2009) in his speech entitled ‘how social media can make history’.

The first is the printing press, followed by the telegraph and telephone, which are defined as being “two-way communication, conversational media”. About 150 years later recorded media emerged that can record and encode all images, sound and film. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century recording mediums and satellite distribution allowed both recorded and live images and sound to be distributed globally through radio and television networks. (*Ibid.*)

As the 20th century gave the way to the 21st, social media has become one of the top news sources. Highlighted by rise of Facebook, founded in 2004, designed originally to help students to get to know each other within universities; YouTube, created in 2005, enabled its users to upload, view and share videos; Twitter, launched in 2006, provided users with a microblogging service. Social networks have dramatically been optimized by an ever increasing number of users as means of accessing news and world events.

According to the report released by Pew in May 2013, 72 per cent of online adults (as in adults that have regular access to the Internet) are social media users. My own social survey findings suggest that one fifth of the respondents use social networks primarily for news updates.

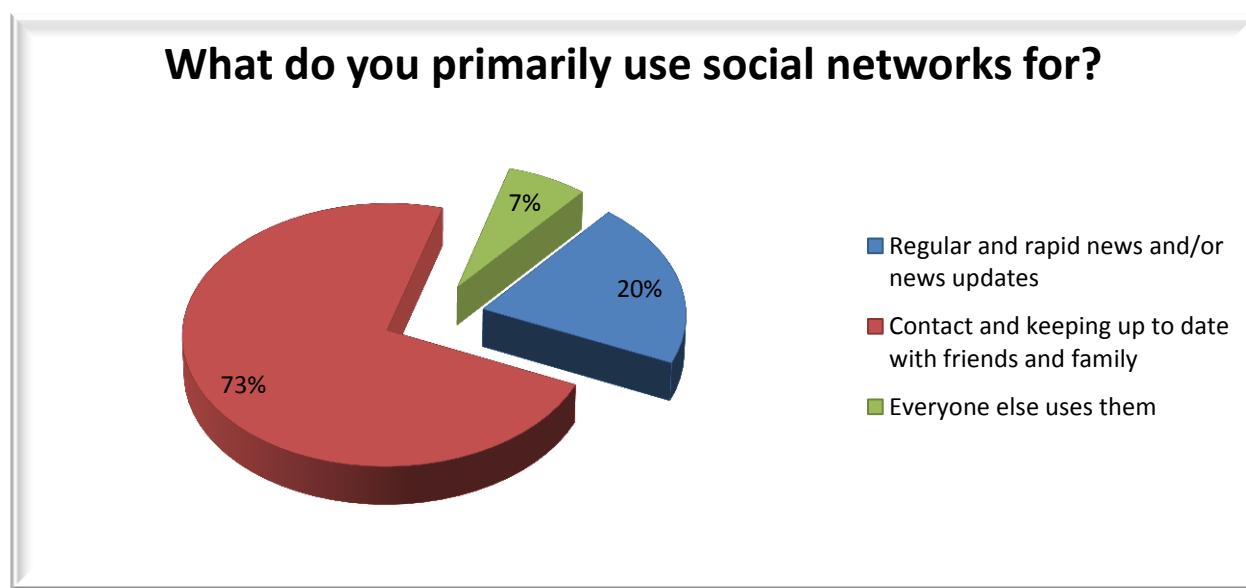


Figure1 n=330

## 1.1 User as a Resource

Social network users are no longer a specific cohort or demographic at the end of news production chain, but valuable sources of information.

In the past mainstream media editors and publishers would be the sole determinate of what news would be reported.

News and event about the wealthy and politically powerful are more likely to be sought by journalists, can just as easily get access to media as well. On the contrary, the ones who lack power are often ignored by journalists until their activities produce social or moral disorder news. There is a reversal where what would be completely ignored now has a voice or platform, and where gradually there is a change or ongoing and progressive role reversal. “Let the powerless be powerful, and let the sorrowful move on”, wrote Gengsen, a pseudonym for a user on Sina Corp’s micro-blog service Weibo.

In the digital era, the tables have turned so much that established news publishers, being the newspapers and TV broadcast news, are themselves becoming users of social media. Social media has lowered the thresholds of finding news resources, with the consequence that every social media user can potentially be a news source. Social media users were the sources of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, telling the world what was happening without being selected and edited by the traditional mainstream media. This event showed that the typical process of “news selection” by media outlets is bypassed allowing fresh and important news and information to appear online immediately, as events unfold. By information being ‘fresh’ or up to the minute, it is by definition news, even if the source is not an established news agency, publisher or broadcaster.

A recent example of this role reversal was the “Arab Spring”. An abundance of information, including photos and videos, was uploaded and tweeted, free for the whole world to see, rather than distributed by exclusively news or government based agencies.

Witness accounts through twitter and the live broadcast of the unrest in the Arab world brought us into the time of “the world is watching events unfold from the perspective of ordinary citizens, and in a more real-time fashion”. Being capable of uploading censored information and distributing links to this content throughout social networking sites has contributed to the success of many Arab Spring activists.

During the week before Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's downfall, the total rate of tweets from Egypt, expressing their demands for democracy and freedom in that country ballooned from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day. Videos featuring protests on a daily basis went viral that the top 23 videos received nearly 5.5 million views. (Taha, 2011.)

More recently reports over the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria drew immediate concerns from the international community. Many of the appalling photographs and videos showing these alleged attacks were uploaded on to social networking sites. Social media, in no doubt, played an important role of in aiding these revolutions, both for the activists, and by citizens of other countries who put pressure on their respective governments to take action against these appalling acts of violence.

Unlike the mainstream media, where journalists have more available information than they can use due to air time limitations or printing space, social networks offer "essentially a kind of an army of local journalists, who are produce enormous amounts of material for no reason other than to tell their entire stories (Surowieck, 2005)." These sites are essentially brilliant platforms or 'products' that carry no real cost to the end user.

The chart below shows that easy access to news is the primary driver why people used the internet and social media as a source for the news. It is important to note that almost a quarter of the respondents feel that the collaborative nature of news on the internet as their primary news source.

## What is your primary reason for using the Internet for the news?

■ It's free ■ It's easier to access the news I want to read ■ It's collaborative

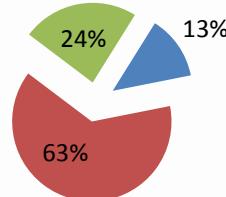


Figure2 n=330

### 1.2 User as a Reporter

"Suddenly you didn't necessarily have to be a journalist to do journalism". (Kelly 2009, 1.)

The rapid growth of social media users and the immense amount of user-generated news has drawn a large scope attention from the public and has coined several new words related to the phenomenon of ordinary people reporting the news. Terms like “citizen journalism/journalists”, “participatory journalism”, “mass journalism” and so on are used to describe these news sources. These are broadly defined by John Kelly as “non-journalists doing the things that only journalists used to do: witnessing, reporting, capturing, writing, disseminating” (*Ibid*).

During the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, mainstream media plunged itself into the news battle and played a dominating role in providing news coverage throughout the event.

Over a long period of time TV news reported ongoing news on the event and its causes. Many in-depth stories were told in newspapers and magazines for a very long time.

Three years later, on 26 December 2004, citizen journalists significantly replaced the role of the mainstream media by keeping the world updated on events before, during and after a massive Tsunami hit Indonesia and Thailand.

Tom Glocer, the then head of Reuters, wrote “for the first 24 hours the best and the only photos and videos came from tourists armed with telephones, digital cameras and camcorders. And if you didn’t have those pictures, you weren’t on the story.” (Kelly 2009, 14.)

Another example of citizen journalism’s expanding influence was the U.S. presidential elections in 2008 and 2012. The presidential campaigns drove a regiment of independent individuals to witness and reporting the entire process of political campaigning on social media and independent websites.

When it came to politics, critics argued that the real issues and policy were neglected in favour of substanceless horse-race coverage, insiderish examinations of campaign strategy and an infatuation with the candidate’s image. In 2007, a poll conducted by the Sacred Heart University of Connecticut found that fewer than 20 per cent of those surveyed believed ‘all or most’ US news media reporting.

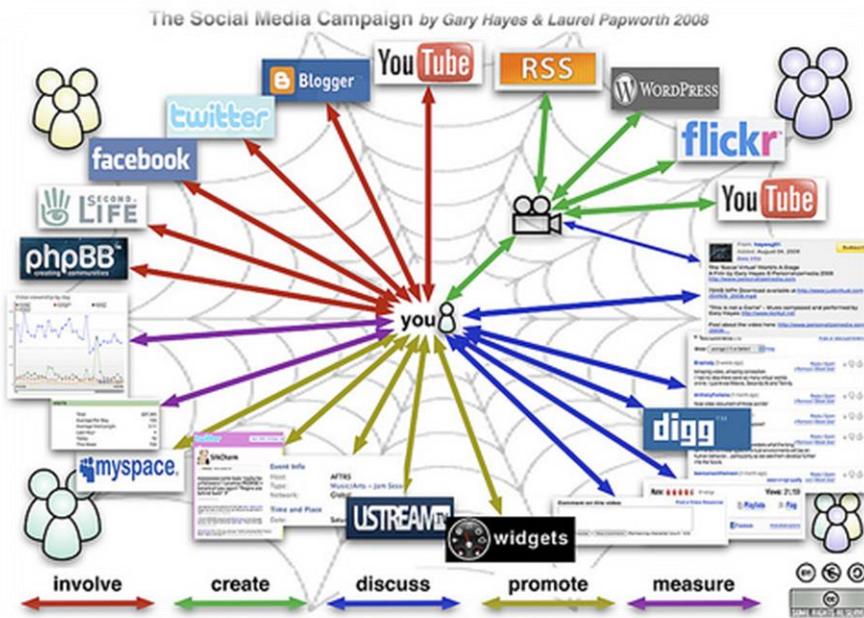
The Huffington Post, an online news aggregator and blog, promised its readers during the presidential campaigns that ‘our disparate mix of citizen reports won’t be part of the

mainstream pack covering the campaigns and will come at it from a wide range of different angles and perspectives, adding a new dimension to campaign journalism'. Social media is no longer the "exciting new frontier" for political campaigning. Social media is a normal and central form of communications with distinctly different properties than traditional mass media approaches (Kelly 2009, 39).

### 1.3 User as a Group Member

The possibility of getting at the kind of collective, distributive intelligence that is out there. The social network is the medium in history that has native support for groups and conversations at the same time. The new model rooted from social media is bottom-up (or edges in), networked, peer-to-peer with everything from one-to-one to many-to-many. (Surowiecki, 2005.)

Title: Involve, Create, Discuss, Promote, Measure - the Social Media Campaign



Picture from [www.personalizemedia.com](http://www.personalizemedia.com)

Since 2009, traffic to news sites from social network platforms has increased to 57 per cent. The users, apart from acting as sources and citizen journalists, are free to follow, like, share filter, discuss and leave comments on every piece of news at real time. Social media have broken the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information.

We've seen a variety of news stories containing strong social interests over the past few years ordinary citizens broke on social media first, and resulted in massive social repercussion. December 2012, a New York City Police officer Mr. Lawrence DePrimo paid a

pair of boots for a homeless man on the street and that scene was captured by a passer-by. The passer-by report this through social media, which soon afterward ricocheted around the social network sites. One of the key features of social media, when it comes to news, is it allows everyone to express his/her ideas, opinions and emotions without any restrictions. My survey results indicate that nearly 60 per cent of respondents feel that their voices are heard by more people by using social media.

### **Do you feel social networking has made your voice 'heard' by more people than before?**

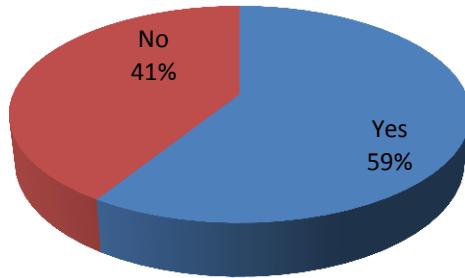


Figure3 n=330

Each post, blog and comment may not in itself be exactly what you're looking for, but collectively the judgement of those people posting, liking and sharing are, more often than not going to give you something that is of interest and a valuable picture of what's going on.

## 2 ISSUES OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEWS PLATFORM

“Free flow information can be used for good, but it can also be used for ill.” This was how British Prime Minister David Cameron justified his proposal to restrict access to messaging services and social networks during the London Riots of 2011.

In September 2013 a judicial interpretation (or law) was issued by China's High court to stop the spread of irresponsible or untrue rumours on the internet. The penalty for which is three years in jail if found guilty of posting untrue posts to a wide audience.

This poses the question as to whether social media is a completely trustworthy source of news?

Can social media replace traditional media organizations for news production? The downsides to using social media as a news platform will be discussed in this chapter.

### 2.1 Lack of Reliability

Facts are the lifeblood of news reports, however social media can manufacture, gossip or disseminate inaccurate information or misleading information. The lowered bar for participation on every level on social media might mean that more individuals make errors (Glaser, 2004).

Some 50 per cent of news consumers have received breaking news via social media, only to find out later that it was erroneously reported or completely untrue. Interest is sparked in the content and not about how it is presented.

The prevailing concept is that speed trumps credibility amongst social media users, particularly when disasters and emergencies are reported. Facebook and Twitter have been used to issue warnings of potential impending disasters, allowing this information to be spread and shared by friends and associates before and during a crisis. It is used to raise funds for disaster relief as well as provide valuable information to relief agencies and persons affected by the disaster. However, this can only be an effective tool in the absence of incorrect or malicious information. Ultimately people need to be able to trust the news in order to act upon it.

In the wake of the tsunami caused by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake close to Japan, on 7 April 2011, jaw-dropping images and video clips went viral on social media. These images showed the devastation this disaster caused.

Scores of people were monitoring various social media feeds for updates on the disaster, however false news and lies soon started appear about the event. For example rumours were stated that the Fukushima nuclear reactors went into meltdown, killing eighty percent of the Japan's population and fifty percent of the population living on the West Coast of the United States and Canada (Fraser, 2011). Another example is when requests for help were retweeted repeatedly after victims had been rescued.

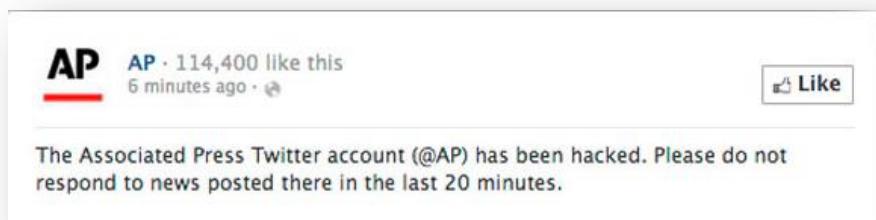
On 13 August 2013, Japanese Twitter almost collapsed as Twitter users started retweeting a false warning that a 7.8 earthquake had occurred in the city of Nara; this was later found to be a mistake made by officials.

We have observed how useful social media can be in an emergency; however misinformation and rumours can equally have detrimental effects. The time-honoured road-safety slogan 'Speed Kills' should also apply to the chaotic world of Internet and social media.

Where individuals or organizations intentionally provide inaccurate information should be of concern, whether it is an innocent prank or part of a terrorist attack (Congressional Research Service..., 2011). Herbert J. Gans (2005) said that "sources see themselves as people with a chance to provide information that promotes their interests, to publicize their ideas, or in some cases, just to get their names and faces into the news".

Some examples of misinformation are: the falsely reported death of Justin Bieber, who is still very much alive, or Penn State's Joe Paterno, a legendary football coach, who was reported to have died more than 12 hours before he actually did or, lastly, the recent false report that there were 'Explosions in White House, Obama Injured', reported on a hacked Associated Press Twitter account.





Screenshot from Twitter 1

Reliable data is dependable, trustworthy, unfailing, sure, authentic, genuine and reputable. Social media users who cannot maintain quality and reliability will fail.

Richard Sambrook, the former director of the BBC's Global News Division said that news today still has to be accurate and fair, but it is as important for the readers, listeners and viewers to see how the news is produced, where the information comes from, and how it works. The emergence of news is as important, as the delivering of the news itself. (Bunz, 2009.)

## 2.2 Lack of professionalism

Information alone is not news, neither is journalism. Professional news production needs discipline, analysis, explanation and context. Objectivity has always been crucial for the news. The rush to be first to report a story often comes with pitfalls (Laird, 2012) and “the danger in the rush to do regular updates is that we will make a really serious mistake (Thurman and Walters, 2012)”. There is little time for online journalists to undertake factual verification. “We would rather be right than fast (Thompson, 2012).”

We are seeing a myriad of “untrained people trying to commit acts of journalism [...] are like the metaphorical infinite number of monkeys banging away on an infinite number of typewriters (Keen, 2008)”. Because the story chosen from social networking are largely defined by “serendipitous encounters and idiosyncratic choices of lay people, as well as their inability to access better-positioned sources (Kelly, 2009)”. User-generated content is more likely to be softer and more focused on personal and community life, more rooted in commentary, and less concerned with day-to-day hard news such as politics and crime. (Ibid.)

So-called citizen journalists and social media users are not able to rely on the sources such as press release, official statements, news conferences and the like. They are more likely to

be denied access by official sources such as politicians, influential businessmen, academics, analysts and working professionals/experts. They are hampered by their lack of journalistic know-how: how to choose reliable sources, how to write a report, how to organize an interview, how to verify uncertainties and the like. Moreover, they generally work as an individual without the support of a well-organised operation, nor would they have the funding to undertake an in-depth investigation.

My survey revealed that only slightly more than 20 per cent of the respondents would place the most trust in online sources, compared with nearly 40 per cent trusting professional journalists and official reports more.

### **When comes to social issues, including domestic and international incidents, what sources you are more likely to trust most?**



Figure4 n=330

Sometimes limitations impede the ability to report the whole story. Twitter, for example, restricts messages or tweets to 140 characters per message. Facebook limits posts to 420 characters.

This limited space means that users can't be expected to provide all of the basic elements of a news story, for example when, where, what, who, why and how. Let alone the core parameters of news: timeliness, significance, saliency, accessibility and relevance.

Today, the criteria that defines superb news coverage not only contains the basic aspects of where, when, what, who and why, but also how. People are interested in every aspect of an incident; the stories behind news itself.

A tweet about the Osama Bin Laden raid was inadvertently posted by his neighbour, Sohaib Athar, who complained about the noise next door on Twitter. He unknowingly had tweeted about one of the biggest news stories of the decade. The first tweets sent by Sohaib Athar under the handle @ReallyVirtual, an IT consultant living in Abbottabad, the Pakistani city where the raid occurred. He tweeted “Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event)”, “Go away helicopter – before I take out my giant swatter”, and “huge windows shaking bang”.



**Sohaib Athar** @ReallyVirtual

1 May 11

A huge window shaking bang here in Abbottabad Cantt. I hope its not the start of something nasty :-S

[Expand](#)



**Sohaib Athar** @ReallyVirtual

1 May 11

Go away helicopter - before I take out my giant swatter :-/

[Expand](#)



**Sohaib Athar** @ReallyVirtual

1 May 11

Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event).

[Expand](#)

Screenshot from Twitter 2

They were believed to be first accounts about the raid came to the general public, however Athar didn't realise that Bin Laden had been killed until several hours later. He tweeted “Oh. My. God. Just woke up after a long lazy sleep to the news that Bin Laden was killed in the attack I was tweeting last night.” His followers didn't have a clue that the attack was being made on the Al Qaeda leader at the time. It was several hours later before an official announcement was made by the U.S. Administration, which was broadcast on TV news globally.

Breaking news today can be broken via social media, but in the Raid example above the tweets could not provide us with accurate details, or the full story. User-generated content can potentially be valuable news and generate global interest, yet, can be incomplete or vague, which is not what the audience would like to consume.

### 2.3 Discipline, Morality and Law Enforcement

In 2012, the British police arrested a teenager on "suspicion of malicious communications" after he sent "an offensive message" via Twitter to the British Olympic diver Tom Daley.

Not every case similar to this one has undergone a police investigation. At the London 2012 Olympics, the South Korean fencer, Shin A-Lam, broke down in tears after she was eliminated due to a time keeper fault, which was dubbed as the biggest controversy of the 2012 Olympics.

Outraged Korean netizens used social media to vent their anger, citing that it was “poor and biased judgement”. Barbara Csar, the umpire of the match, and Heideman, Shen A-Lam’s opponent, were easily found on Facebook. Soon their profiles were full of messages rebuking or abusing them for what happened. When their Facebook accounts were blocked from public view to prevent further ‘attacks’, netizens started to post comments on Heideman’s boyfriend’s profile. Their personal information, including phone numbers, email addresses, home addresses, education background, etc. were revealed throughout social media platforms.

The lack of a moderator before comments and posts are published contributes to the risk that some individuals can abuse these platforms to deliberately post material that is false or unsuitable for general consumption.

For example there is a large number bloody, brutal, violent photos and videos from the ongoing Syrian civil war that has been uploaded onto various social media platforms; Neo-Nazi groups are able to promote their ideologies and news of their activities on social media sites; even a few individuals have broadcast their suicide live to an unseen audience, captured to be viewed by a wider audience when word get round of the terrible event. Even though this content might be a record of truth or fact, the content crosses a line in terms decency and possibly ethics.

Nearly 70 percent of the respondents to my survey expressed concern and annoyance over disturbing images and videos that are distributed on social media sites. 70 per cent of the respondents were against completely free and unregulated social media, meaning that the majority of people believe that there should be some moderation or accountability for content posted on these sites.

## Do you think there is too much disturbing, false and/or offensive content on social networking sites?



Figure 5 n=330

All of the large social media sites claim to have strict policies on the uploading of offensive content. For instance, the terms were extracted from Facebook's terms and conditions of use:

- Facebook has a strict policy against the sharing of pornographic content
- Facebook does not tolerate bullying, harassment or hate speech
- Sharing any graphic content for sadistic pleasure is strictly prohibited

With a touch of irony, only 10 per cent of the respondents to my survey claimed that they were very well versed about the terms and conditions imposed by the social networking sites, almost a quarter of the respondents said they were not familiar with any of the terms and conditions at all.

## How well acquainted are you with the terms and conditions imposed by the social networking sites you use (or have used)?

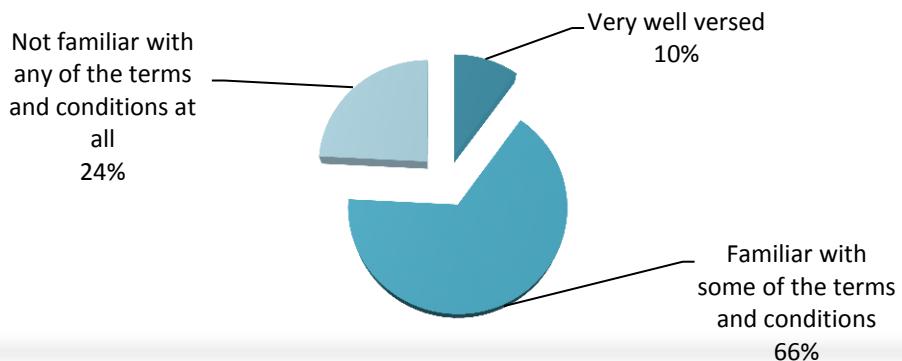


Figure 6 n=330

Not every single case can be put through an investigative and legal process. Once uploaded content is found to be in breach of the site's terms of use the publisher will first be asked to

remove the content, otherwise the operator could just delete the disturbing content or even block the relevant accounts. However, by this time the offending material may have been viewed by many people, and possibly the content has been copied and is stored elsewhere. Further, by asking the offending party to remove the content. They have in effect been given a warning, and can choose to publish the information elsewhere after removing it from one site. This means that even though offensive might have been removed or blocked there is no guarantee that it will completely vanish.

## **2.4 Lack of Audience and Trust**

Despite there being a seemingly unlimited number of online news sources, most people still tend to use a limited number of sources. Social Media audience sizes are limited to those user who have 'opted in' to receive the news from these sources, thus a publisher would not be broadcasting to the world, rather to a rigid and specific audience. Some new websites or social networking accounts might draw in a wide audience, but usually only during a specific event such as a Tsunami, earthquake, air crash, etc. As time passes they could lose their entire audience as their interest shifts to other, more recent events. For example 53 per cent of US Twitter users tend to be a member for less than a year (Baer, 2012).

Probably the biggest issue in relation to citizen journalism is gaining the trust of audiences and maintaining credibility (Quinn and Lamble 2007, 49). The Digital News Report 2013, published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, showed that UK online news reported by national broadcasters is the most trusted news source (79%), followed by national newspapers (60%). In contrast, Facebook (8%) and Twitter (10%) are the least trusted. Over 70 per cent respondents in all countries surveyed in this report tend to access news from sites that they know and trust (In urban Brazil this figure is up to 90%). Traditional brands continue to attract the largest online audiences and we find that trust in news brands is uniquely valued by young and old.

Increasing concerns over privacy might halt or hinder people in publishing and distributing news and comment on the internet after Edward Snowden released documents as evidence that US intelligence agencies were able to view every electronic transaction a US Internet user conducted through social media systems.

Research published in 2012 illustrated that only 24 per cent of Americans are not concerned about their privacy on Facebook compared with the 27% who are very concerned, 29% who are somewhat concerned and 20% who are slightly concerned.

Respondents to my survey were asked if they were concerned about their privacy on social media network sites, 46 per cent were very concerned, 43 per cent were concerned sometimes, whilst only 11 per cent of were unconcerned.

**Have you ever been concerned about any personal and/or confidential information being collected and used by social networking sites?**

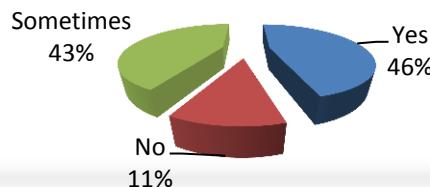


Figure 7 n=330

## 2.5 The Danger of Social Media Crowds

October 2010 China, an undergraduate music student stabbed a young lady six times after he accidentally hit her with his car and saw she was copying down his car's number plate.

This cold-blooded murder provoked public outrage and went viral on social networking sites. The student, a suspect at the time, confessed to his crime and showed remorse for the murder in an attempt to escape the death penalty.

However, a crop of netizens demanded that the murderer must die online; their hatred for the killer lead to the personal details of his family members being revealed online. This case ended with the murderer being executed but left a host of experts and lawyers expressing their concerns and fears over how external factors may have interfered heavily on the final verdict.

We've seen countless examples of where scores of social media users easily follow a cause. One of the fundamental characteristics of a network is that, once you are linked into a

network, the network will shape your views and your interaction with everybody else, claimed by James Surowieck (2005).

Research suggests that anger spreads faster and more broadly than joy, after scientists analysed sentiment on the Chinese Twitter-like microblogging service Sina Corp's Weibo.

With only 47 per cent of Twitter users actually sending tweets (Social Habit Research, 2012), it is fair to assume that most social media user, 'listen only'. The results of my own survey found that over 40 per cent respondents were more likely to share others' messages rather than leave their own remarks.

Sweden's Annika Bergström found in 2006 that just 24 per cent of respondents thought that the ability to comment was "important" or "very important". (Bergström 2006, 72.)

Groups can be remarkably intelligent, James Surowieck (2005) added, but the problem is that groups are only smart when the people in them are as independent as possible. An ant metaphor was used by Surowieck:

*"[...]occasionally, ants go astray, and what happens is that, if army ants are wandering around and they get lost, they start to follow a simple rule -- just do what the ant in front of you does. And what happens is that the ants eventually end up in a circle. And there's this famous example of one that was 1,200 feet long and lasted for two days, and the ants just kept marching around and around in a circle until they died. [...]That's the thing we have to fear -- is that we're just going to keep marching around and around until we die."*

### 3 Summary and Key Findings of the Survey

The total effective respondents were 330, the ages range from 19 to 60 years of age, 50.6 per cent of whom are males (167) while 49.4 per cent are females (163), from 35 countries.

The majority of respondents are from Italy, China, Finland, UK and Spain. It got only one respondent from some countries.

The core purpose of the survey was not to collect as many responses as possible, but rather to gain understanding of how social media users consume news online.

Figure Nationalities and numbers of respondents

Country	Sample(s)	Country	Sample(s)
Australia	1	Japan	1
Austria	4	Latvia	1
Brazil	1	Lithuania	3
Bulgaria	1	Malta	1
Canada	1	Malaysia	1
Chile	1	Mexico	1
China	77	Namibia	1
Croatia	1	Poland	5
Cyprus	1	Russia	3
Estonia	1	Slovakia	2
Ethiopia	1	South Korea	1
France	8	Spain	17
Finland	58	Tanzania	2
Germany	9	Thailand	1
Ghana	1	The Netherlands	1
Greece	3	The UK	21
Italy	92	U.S.	4
Indonesia	1	No specified	2

Apart from the findings revealed in the context above, the survey also finds that:

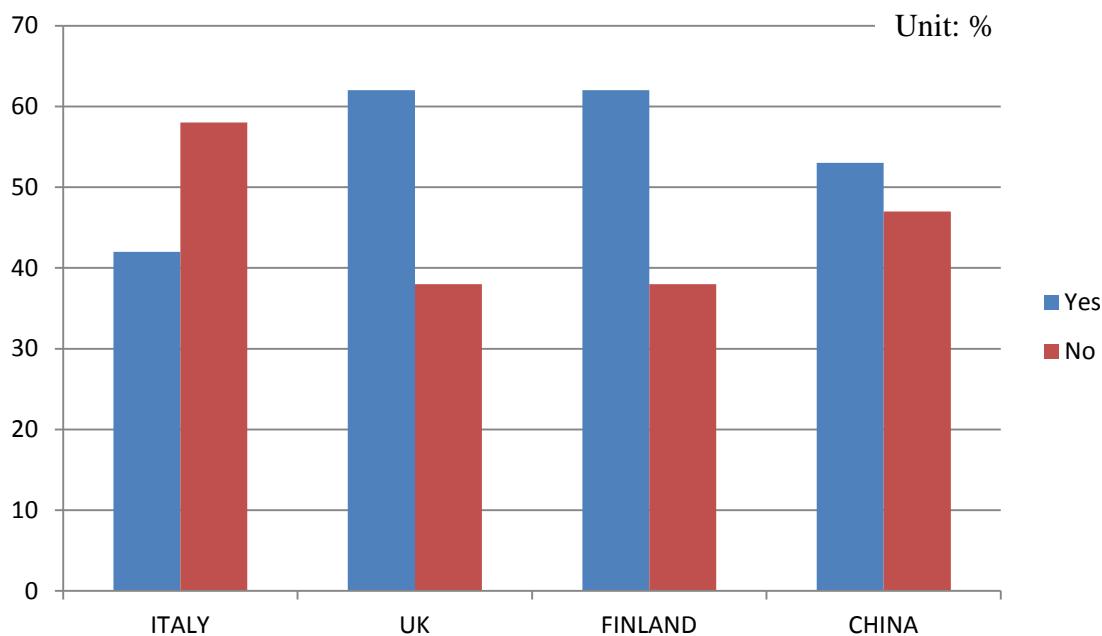
- Nearly 70 per cent of respondents would choose to access news online rather than traditional/print media (31%).
- 54 per cent of them believed they were acknowledged to verify the validity of news online while 46 per cent of whom were not.
- 59 per cent of respondents would actively leave their own remarks on social media.
- 23.9 percent of respondents concluded that social media had made them more social, 13.3 percent of them believed it had made them less social, and most of them no change (62.8%).

- Every four in five respondents were happy with their user experiences on social media.
- Slightly over half of respondents delightedly capitalized social networking on keeping contacts with friends and family.

Focussing on the responses from Italy, China, Finland and the UK shows that:

### **Social Media as a Communication Tool**

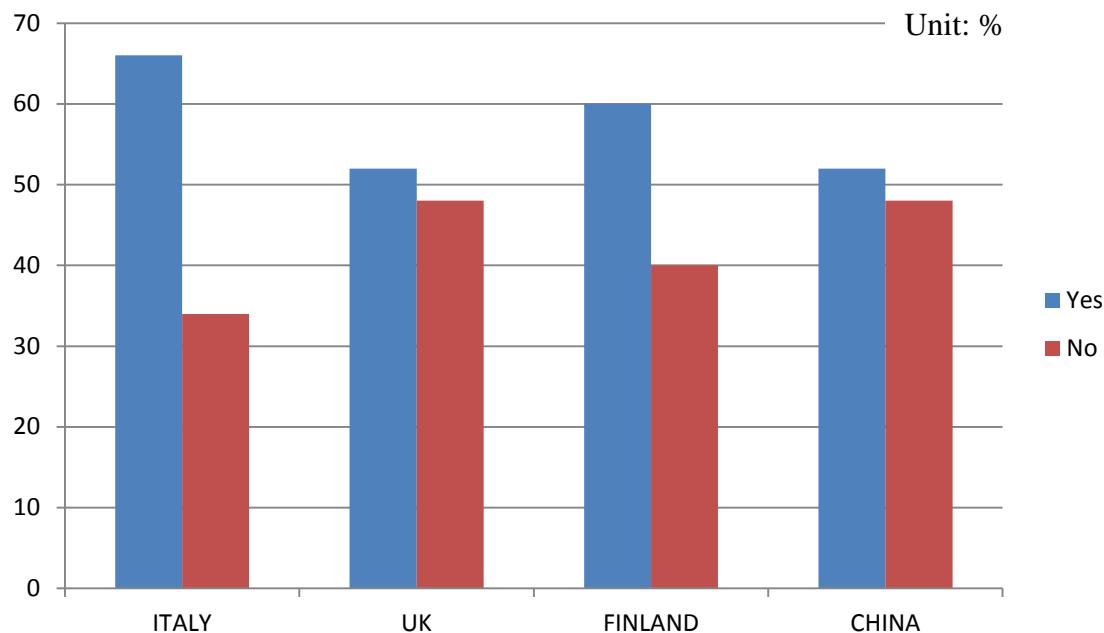
Even though most respondents chose “keeping up to date with family and friends” as their primary reason for using social media, social media is still not the preferred communication tool. Over three-fifths respondents, from the UK and Finland respectively, expressed their preference of communicating with family and friends via social networks, while this figure in Italy is only slightly over 40 per cent. For China there is not much difference between these two groups of respondents.



Has social networking become your preferred method of keeping in contact with friends and family?

### **Our Own Voices**

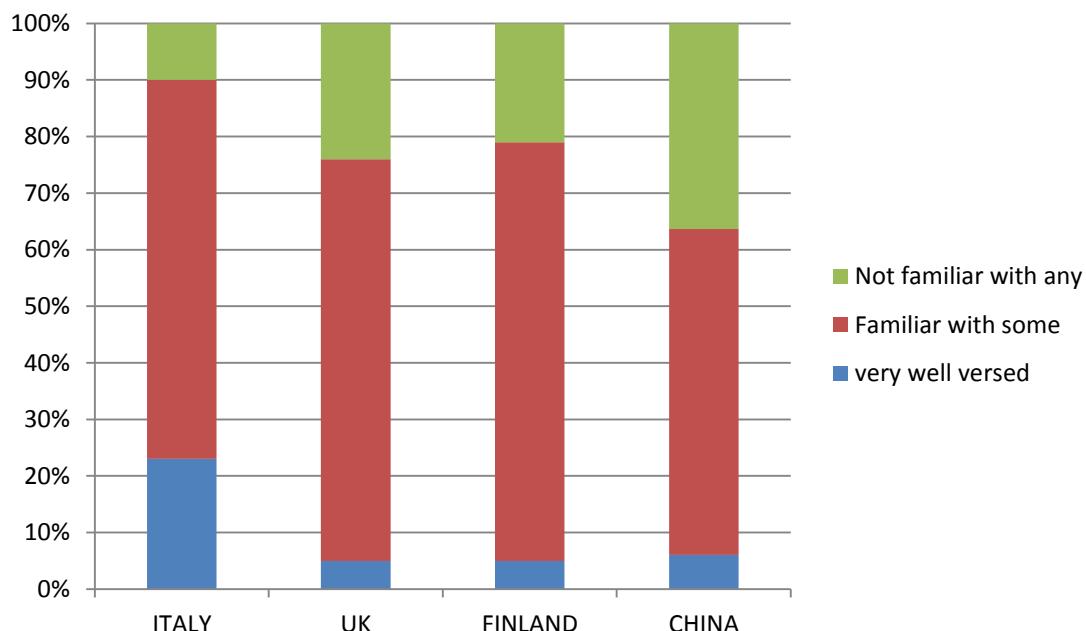
Overall most people regarded social media had made their voices heard by more people than ever before. However, this difference is tiny among respondents from the UK and China.



Do you feel social networking has made your voice heard by more people than before?

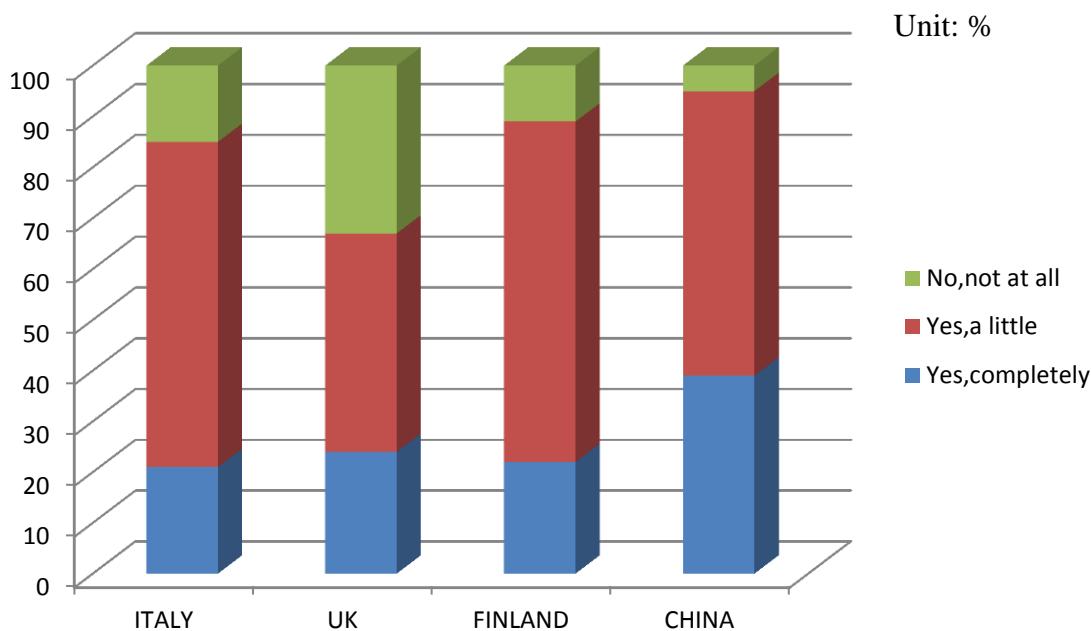
### Terms and Conditions

The result shows that 67 per cent of respondents agree that there is too much disturbing, false and offensive content on social networks. In contrast, nearly a quarter of people said they were not familiar with any terms and conditions of those sites at all. Surprisingly, nearly one-fifth of Italian respondents claimed they were very well versed of the terms and conditions. In other countries, this figure is only about 5 per cent.



## News Reading Habit Change

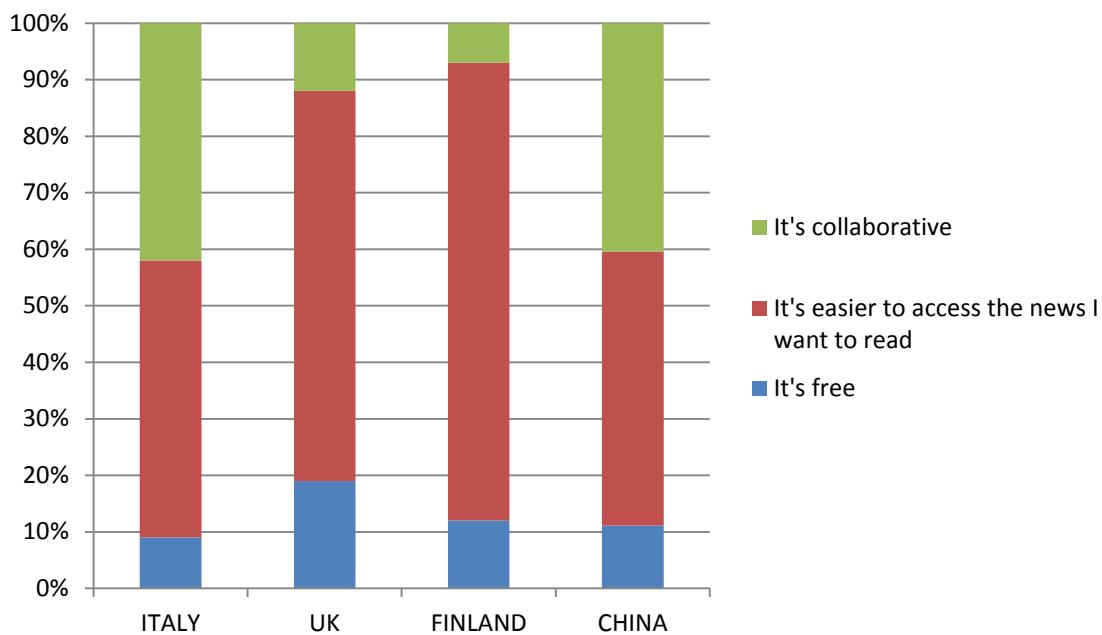
As mentioned above, one in fifth of respondents use social media primarily for regular and rapid news updates, however, among British respondents, more people (33%) said social media didn't change their habits of reading news than the ones told social media completely changed their news reading habits (24%). For Chinese respondents, nearly two-fifths people considered social media had completely changed their reading and viewing habits of local and world news.



Has your use of social networking changed your reading and viewing habits of local and world news?

## Why Read News Online

Among the respondents who preferred reading news online (69% overall), the vast majority of them use it because it easier to access the news they want. On the other hand, money matters—respondents from those four countries, a higher percentage of British (19%) user regarded free news as their top reason to read news online while least of Italian responses (9%).

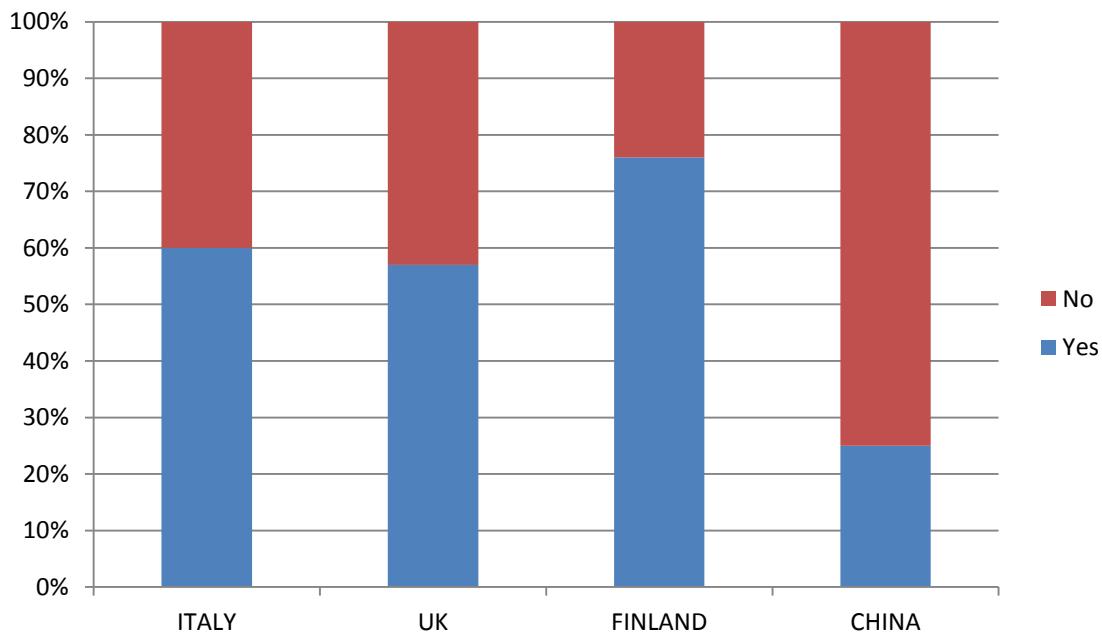


What is your primary reason for using the Internet for the news?

## Verification

One of the most headline-grabbing results of this survey is that only slightly more than half respondents (54%) have an idea how to verify the validity of a piece of news broke online.

There are huge differences in responses from the various countries. In China, three-fourths of respondents admitted they didn't know how to verify news from the Internet while Finland has the highest percentage of people well acknowledged they knew how to verify if a story is true.



Do you know how to verify the validity of a piece of information or a news story online?

## 4 CONCLUSIONS AND SOLUTIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions

One thing is, as lucid as day light, that news organisations don't own the news anymore. There is a transformation for the journalist from being the gatekeeper of information to sharing it in a public space (Sambrook, 2009). It is indisputable that the emergence of social media and its mushroom growth has fundamentally changed the way of news consumption and caused compelling impact on news industry.

News organizations may not always be the first to publish the news, but their agendas discussions continue to shape conversations around major news stories (Newman, 2011). Since social media maintains its booming momentum as an essential part of newsgathering and a platform where news can be spread and consumed and playing an increasingly important role for breaking news, social media will, in turn, help the traditional media, newspapers and news broadcasts, gain traction around the world.

The mainstream media has moved slowly to integrate some of these aspects into their products. British newspaper websites, for example, have put several generic formats in place to encourage contributions from the public: pools, message boards, have your says, comment on stories, Q&As, blogs, reader blogs, your media, your story... (Hermida and Thurman, 2008.) And professional journalists have also cling to social media to find news on a story:

News outlet	%of sample
Reporter	47%
Newspaper	39%
Editor	20%
TV	20%
Radio	20%
Online editor	5%
Producer	5%

Figure from Slideshare.com

We've had the Internet for almost 20 years now, and it's still changing as the media becomes more social (Shirky, 2009). A more participatory and social news environment, with a remarkable diversity and range of news sources is and will steadily to be the favourable tendency of news industry.

## 4.2 Solutions

For users: what are the effective ways of using social network as a platform to produce, report and share news?

I interviewed one of my friends, Chris Robison, a broadcast journalist from BBC South Today. He reiterated the importance and significance of accuracy and trust—factual news. He told me “only using social networking would be very lazy and poor quality”. Professionalism calls for talking with people in real life and that’s how they get factual information from. “We’d rather use original quotes and interviews than just Facebook comments which everyone else will have” he added, “It gets the ground moving, so to speak.” Get closer to the source and find the original source will help us to get closer to the facts and truth. (Robinson, 2013.)

“Not everyone can be qualified to name themselves a journalist” Robinson added. “Citizen journalism is just a phrase, many people call themselves journalists but they are not trained (especially legally) and don’t have the experience. They are unreliable. They can offer scope and valuable information, pictures and eyewitness reports but they are not journalists. It’s very easy for someone to call themselves a journalist but for them to prove it, then that’s a different matter....” We “should never trust anything presented as news on the Internet unless it originated with, or was confirmed by, a source that was known to be credible” (Campbell, 2012).

Most of international reputed news broadcasts and news agencies have also outlined guidelines for their professional journalists about how to draw upon social media to help monitor and report the news. The following tips are provided by AFP news agency to its journalists for using social media.

Abstracted from AFP guidelines for social media use:

- Avoid all vulgar or overtly opinionated comment. Refrain from reacting in the heat of the moment; take time to write a considered cool-headed post.
- Before Tweeting or posting comments, bear in mind that your words will be in the public domain and will be archived and referenced by search engines.
- Respect the user rules for each individual site.

- Recommending or re-tweeting links is an essential part of the social network experience and should be encouraged. However, it is important this process is done with care. A retweet or link is often considered a sympathetic recommendation.

When asked about trust and brand, Chris Robinson unhesitatingly responded that “the BBC can lose its reputation by broadcasting or printing something that's not true”. They were required to double source everything which was dubbed the basic rule of journalism—“is to check your facts and get a right to reply”. Otherwise, they would pay the price to lose their credibility and audience. “Broadcasters can make mistakes and look stupid by showing something that's not true, or bias” he said.

For social media users, under the circumstances that every user can potentially be a witness and source for social affairs, even without professional journalistic regulation and discipline, it is much better to upload something you really have seen or experienced on your own rather than receive the information from others. The most sustainable type of citizen media will be visual and moving images. Google appreciates this point because the company paid \$1.65 billion for YouTube in 2006, News Corp shelled out \$580 million for the company that owned MySpace, and Yahoo bought Flickr for \$30 million (Quinn and Stephen 2007, 53). We shouldn't just strive for being only first to post.

So before we rush to our social media message board, we'd better answer few questions first: How do I know this information? Is this information independently confirmed? Should it be first? Do I know the location of the news event? Check a map. Will this require follow-up messages to better explain? Do I know this story well enough to follow-up? (Accuracy and accountability..., 2011.)

Reliability is, literally, the extent to which we can rely on the source of the data, therefore, the data itself. Consistency is the main measure of reliability. So, in literary accounts, the reputation of the source is critical. (Pierce, 2008.)

For reporting a piece of news, by sharing, liking, compiling and commenting, it is far more than essential to double check what you are going to disseminate are as accurate as you possibly can ensure. We have to take into account how important confirming is to news and confirming is not just sharing something you heard on Facebook from a friend or brother-in-law,” Andy Carvin (2013) said. Everyone should bear in mind that social networks are

hosting sites which essentially give space to users to express themselves under their own responsibility.

Journalism is not a perfect science, and sometimes mistakes do happen.

And for social media user, it's better to corroborate the content. Are proper names spelled correctly? Does the link go to the right place? Is it shortened properly? Do they go to the right accounts? Do your posts have/need attribution for reported facts? Does your uploading need a hat tip for another Twitter account/news outlet who first alerted you to the info? Is a location included/necessary? Check to see if auto-correct changed the text intended. Check your shorthand and contractions to make sure they make sense (Accuracy and accountability..., 2011).

The public needs this wake-up call in order to become sceptical, active consumers instead of passive re-tweeters. This is more of an ethical issue than a legal one. When we re-tweet or share a link on social media, we have to be clear that why we want to share this message or does it need context? Is this tweet reporting heretofore unknown information?

If so, is this source reliable enough to throw your name behind? Is the original tweet written clearly enough to be passed on from me? Do I know this account? (*Ibid.*)

Social media is intrinsically wrapped up within the news cycle and persistently has a huge effect on the dissemination of information. Don't hate the game, train the players (Manescu, 2013). This transformation will carry on and its relationship to news should be analysed and better understood by its users. Otherwise, if we simply amount unregulated activities on social media to freedom of speech, cannot think and act independently, we will eventually keep marching around and around until we die like the ants.

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