

“WE KNOCKED DOWN THE DAMN WALL”: ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

by

Nancy L. Acevedo

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Project Approved:

Johnny Nhan, Ph.D.
Department of Criminal Justice
(Supervising Professor)

Jeff Ferrell, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology

Michael Katovich, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology

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INTRODUCTION

On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, decided to go to a nearby convenience store to purchase candy and a beverage. On his way back to the house he was staying at in a local gated community, Martin was on the phone with his girlfriend and completely unaware of the events that were about to transpire. George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch captain, noticed Martin and called 911 to report suspicious activity that he believed was potentially related to recent criminal activity in the area. The 911 operator instructed Zimmerman to stop following Martin and to wait for the police to arrive. Zimmerman failed to do so. Instead, he exited his vehicle and continued to pursue Martin on foot. By time the police had arrive, George Zimmerman, a 29-year-old multi-racial Hispanic American had fatally shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old black male.

It was not until 45 days later that second-degree murder charges were filed against Zimmerman, suggesting deficient motivation on the part of the criminal justice system. This story went seemingly unnoticed until it started to gain attention on social media websites. In the beginning, it was an isolated act of violence that no one cared about and then suddenly it caught fire and became a national headline. This anomaly may be indicative of a change in the nature of media. On one hand, this solitary act of violence was nothing out of the ordinary amidst the rise in gun violence in America. On the other hand, this tragedy touched the public and forced society to reevaluate and internally examine itself for persistent social ills. The lack of justice and action on the part of law enforcement led to a digital mobilization via social media platforms and brought to light the potential power of this budding information outlet.

As social media becomes a more prevalent form of communication in society, its influence continues to reach beyond anything predicted. Up until the widespread use of the Internet in the late 1990s, mainstream news sources such as newspapers, magazines, and traditional media such as television news stations had nearly exclusive control of an unchallenged supply of information. A new account is emerging with the growing popularity and usage of social media websites such as Twitter (Smith 2011). This open access has given the public a platform from which to voice their opinions. Competing narratives now readily available, each side is dedicated to becoming the dominant voice in society. But we are now beyond the point of no return. Some scholars argue that media is being radically democratized and new voices are speaking up every day. Society has transformed from mere consumers of information to producers of news (Stassen, 2010). With the emergence of a new information outlet, social media and mainstream media, two interconnected yet potentially contradicting narratives, are creating the boundaries of their interplay and forging a new future of media and news. The friction between traditional media and social media represents the beginning stages of an evolution. Right now, there is a seeming rift between mainstream media and social media but this separation is temporary as the two continue to transition towards convergence.

This paper explores the relationship between mainstream media and social media using two sources of data: Twitter and newspaper archives. The news media spectrum is expanding and creating new paradigms to explore. One focus of debate is whether social media can co-exist with traditional media. There is also divide among professionals between who can embrace and incorporate social media sources as legitimate news outlet and who will fight this alteration to the perceptions of journalism's existence. First, a

review of existing literature will shed light on current research and understanding of this phenomenon. Second, an explanation of the methodology used in this research discusses the pros and cons of qualitative versus quantitative research techniques. Third, an analysis of newspaper articles will illustrate the reporting trends of mainstream media new sources. Next, this will then be compared with the reported numbers of social media posts in an attempt to better understand the relationship. Finally, this empirical data will be supplemented with expert opinion via in depth interviews concerning these topics.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Evolution of Traditional Media

Two dichotomous trends demarcate contemporary news based on conflicts between traditional media and online sources. Traditional media has been shifting towards sensationalist pieces driven by commercial pressures. Alternatively, Internet social media is driven by a compilation of the collective voice due to the open nature principles of the Internet. (Barlow, 2012). Despite the collective nature of the emergence, the multitudes of opinions being expressed are not always in unison. Along with any sudden growth in public attention comes a division of perspectives. The increase in coverage has led the public now have an increased awareness of what the media decides are newsworthy, high profile stories. However, this newfound awareness is not accompanied by the necessary contextual knowledge needed to shape an informed opinion surrounding the issues at hand.

Limited by the boundaries of mainstream media coverage, the public holds fast to socially constructed ideas on the state of society, especially in terms of the criminal justice system. As crime coverage becomes more prominent in today's news reporting,

the public has become much more invested in the judicial process. Media coverage of events such as celebrity trials, along with other crime related stories, has a direct effect on public opinion and beliefs about the criminal justice system. By influencing societal consensus on crime, media has an indirect influence over criminal justice public policy (Surette, 2010).

Tabloid Justice and Sensational Media

A more sensationalist focus has replaced reporting and taken over the media. There has been a shift from educational to entertainment driven media coverage, especially concerning the coverage of criminal cases. This tabloidization of mainstream press is dominating the public discourse and overshadowing the impartial facts. The media coverage contrasts with the public's idyllic conception, leading to a lack of faith in the system. Fox, Van Sickel, and Steigher (2007) explain "tabloid justice" with examples that the media is no longer an objective news source but a drama fueled scandal. When the amusement factor of a story is valued more than the facts, misinformation becomes rampant. Social media has the ability to facilitate bias based on the fact that it easily allows anyone to communicate with other similarly minded individuals (Jewitt, 2009).

People are able to follow blogs and newspapers based solely on said platform's political viewpoints. While the public may be more aware, their understanding is based on half-truths and propaganda perpetuated by biased sides. The higher the levels of public awareness get, the "higher levels of public misinformation about the workings of the system and a corresponding drop in the public's faith in American justice" (Fox, Van Sickel, Steiger, 2007). A look at the evolution of media from the penny press, through the rise of yellow journalism to the twentieth century tabloid and into the rise of tabloid

television shows that this trend has been long in the making (Kooistra, and Mahoney JR., 1999). An examination of the linkage between politics and profit and the connection between education and entertainment shows that as these relationships grow and the power dynamic shifts, the media and corresponding public perceptions of crime continue to evolve.

Socially Constructed Perceptions

The social construction of reality can be described as the public reaction towards image, meaning, and representation, especially within the sphere of deviance, crime, and control. It is “a belief that our reality is composed entirely of the information we gather from social interactions, rather than from any objective, empirical, or socially transcendent knowledge or insight” (Fox, Van Sickle, Steiger, 2007). A developed understanding of the cross study of criminology, sociology, criminal justice, social history, and media is necessary to grasp the concept of social constructionism. At the intersection of all of these fields, cultural criminology is bred. Cultural criminology analyzes criminals, crime, the criminal justice system, and the law through the lens of a symbolic environment of symbolism, implication, and depiction. “Put most succinctly, media produce and circulate meanings (representations, codes, narratives, images) and audiences, located elsewhere, variously receive and interpret them, with consequences for how social actors construct the reality in which they live” (Yar, 2012). This explains the significance of the culturally constructed reality of legality and illegality. Crime and deviance are a subculture within society. They create collective implications of media constructs of deviance, crime, and control. The socially constructed realities within which

the American public forms their opinions of the American legal system is being systematically restructured as media coverage molds to adapt to the social climate.

The Democratization of Media

In the context of social construction, when taken to its extremes, it can produce tabloid justice. Tabloid justice and the mass media affect public attitudes towards crime and the criminal justice system. In the age of media overload, news sources must decide which events, cases, and incidents to cover as well a methodology for determining the newsworthiness of a piece of information. Major news stations are owned by larger corporations; and for the majority of corporations, profits are the bottom line. We are slowly seeing an evolution to a less democratic approach to media coverage and this is explained with mass media agenda setting (Fox, Van Sickel, and Steiger). A lack of democracy in media and the shift in purpose have had a negative impact on American's perceptions of the justice system. Put simply, "the mainstream press, in effect, tells us 'what to think about' (Fox, Van Sickel, and Steiger, 2007). In the growing age of social media, the medium by which the public dialogue is carried out is continually changing. "Social media have the ability to instantaneously spread messages to the masses, unrestricted by time or space" (Harlow, 2012). There is vast research on the impact of media representation on public perception. But as new forms of media are constantly emerging, specifically social media, the research is struggling to keep up. The democratization of media has dramatically increased and enabled the augmentation of the Internet.

The Internet Counter-Culture

Alternatively, another counter movement has emerged that interrupts the traditional paradigm of news outlets and perspectives. An unstoppable development comes with the never-ending reaches of the Internet. Internet privacy advocate and Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder John Barlow leaves no room for doubt of the power of the Internet in the “Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace.” There is a constant “great and gathering conversation” whose reach is limitless as it continues to “grow itself through our collective actions” (Barlow, 2012). Now that everyone can participate in the interchange, the conversation is only going to get louder until words inspire actions and actions inspire social change.

In the relational sphere between the criminal justice system, the media, and the public, the entire flow of influence is being restructured. We are in the time of a culture class where the crosscurrents of fundamental culture change show us that “truth” is merely a social construct. Everyone is now able to readily present his/her own narrative because “technology is shifting the balance of power between big media and regular people” (Lasica). The old current started within the criminal justice system, flowed to mainstream media, and then led to a social discussion. This course allowed the community conversation to be controlled because the information supply was controlled by the source and the media outlets controlled the delivery. Improving technology has allowed everyone to join the public discourse. The larger social discussion creates societal pressure on mainstream media to focus on topics of the public’s choosing and once the public outcry reaches a tipping point, the criminal system is forced to respond. The public has taken the power to control the tone and outcome of the conversation. With

this shift in power, there must also be a shift in research. We must delve into the ramifications that this transfer of influence will have on the definitions of news and the future of information flow.

In numerous incidents, social media has proven its ability to beat traditional media with breaking news (Jewitt, 2009). Through mass communication and connectedness, news has the ability to travel faster and further than ever before. According to research, “social media is transforming the way in which people receive and share information” (Stassen, 2010) because now news organizations and independent sources are “literally reaching out to your audience and delivering news updates through different channels on the Internet—known as social media” (Stassen, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The interpretations established here draw on data collected from social media and newspapers as well as qualitative interviews with various professionals in the journalism field. Data was collected via a Twitter analytics provider. In order to narrow down the scope of the research, analysis was focused a six month time period. The study began at February 26, 2012, the date of Trayvon Martin’s death and carried through August 26, 2012. Two separate hashtags were tracked, one specified for Trayvon Martin and the other for George Zimmerman. This allowed the data to more accurately reflect varying viewpoints as well as provide the possibility for comparison between the two sides to determine which topic was receiving more attention on social media sites such as Twitter. Dates that had unusual growth in the number of tweets were recorded for further investigation. These peaks were analyzed for content to ascertain if the subject matter was news orientated or social commentary.

In addition to statistics on social media, the figures on news reporting via traditional sources of news were also observed. Using an electronic database of public records, the number of newspaper articles concerning both Trayvon Martin and/or George Zimmerman were tallied and coded into various categories. These categorizations allowed for the data to show what main points about the case were being focused on and what coverage trends were emerging.

To supplement the quantitative data, four journalism experts were interviewed. In the interest of ethical research, those interviewed will remain anonymous. Quotes from the interview are cited with a corresponding interview number. The interviews centered around ideas and opinions on the emerging role of social media in journalism. The goal of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of what is happening as the field of journalism shifts and expands to cover this new frontier.

The quantitative data encouraged validity based on verifiable statistics. It also enhanced the ability to generalize the data on a larger scale than the scope of the research permitted. However, the data collected failed to give explanations as to why the numbers existed a certain way. Therefore, qualitative interviews afforded the opportunity to explore the topic in more depth and detail (Loftland & Loftland, 1984). Due to time and resource constraints, only a small number of interviews were attained. Effort was made to gain insight from a large news network but their policies prevented any employees from participating in the research. Other limitations preventing more interviews included scheduling conflicts as well many outreach phone calls and emails that went unanswered.

Due to the restrictions on time and resources, the research is exploratory in nature. Given adequate time and funding, many more interviews would be conducted. More time

would be spent trying to gain access to the institutions that avoid participating in such research. A wider range in quantitative data would also be collected in order to better support the claims of the professionals interviewed. There are multiple outlets of social media including blogs, websites, and social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube that are not covered in depth in this research. With more time, more attention would have been focused on these sources to how they further contribute to the changing world on journalism.

DATA ANALYSIS

An examination of approximately 300 newspaper articles demonstrates a perceptible pattern in the contextual nature of some of the mainstream media coverage of Trayvon Martin's death. In Table 1, data collected from the LexisNexis research database is compiled. All of the articles have been coded into several categories based on the content and tone of the article.

Table 1: Mainstream Media Article Topics July 27 to March 16, 2012

Nature of Article	Martin		Zimmerman		Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Pro-martin	15	8.3	3	2.6	18	5.6
Pro-Zimmerman	4	2.2	9	7.8	13	4.1
Anti-Martin	5	2.8	4	3.5	9	2.8
Anti-Zimmerman	18	10.0	38	33.0	56	17.6
Neutral/ Factual	30	16.7	35	30.4	65	20.4
Racial	8	4.4	2	1.7	10	3.1
Stand-your-ground law	13	7.2	6	5.2	19	6.0
Marches/Demonstrations	71	39.4	5	4.5	76	23.8
Law enforcement	0	0	4	4.4	4	1.25
Other	31	17.2	18	15.7	49	15.4

Note. Data collected from Lexis Nexis Academic database. Word count total for Zimmerman N=68,059, Mean=591.8. Word count total for Martin N=88,570, Mean=492.1.

First separated by the key character of the article, Martin or Zimmerman focused, the articles are then categorized by the major concepts discussed. In total, the word count for Martin focused articles surpassed the word count for Zimmerman focused articles by over 20,000 words. However, the average word count per article was greater for

Zimmerman than Martin by almost 100 words. A large majority, 10% of Martin focused articles and 33% of Zimmerman focused articles, consisted of an anti-Zimmerman zone. This is drastic in comparison to the 2.8% and 3.5% of articles that were written with an anti-Martin tone. The differences between the amounts of positive slants were less distinguishable. For articles centered on Martin, 8.3% of the articles had a pro-Martin slant while only 2.2% had a pro-Zimmerman slant. Inversely, of the articles centered on Zimmerman, 2.6% are angled pro-Martin and 7.8% are angled pro-Zimmerman. A large percentage, 16.7%-30.4% depending on the key character, of the articles were considered neutral and based on factual reporting as opposed to being influenced by bias.

In conjunction with having distinctive positions on the issue, the articles also demonstrate several persistent themes. Two commonly discussed topics surrounding this case are the issue of race and the controversy of the stand-your-ground law. One newspaper columnist argues that one “reason this shooting has garnered so much attention nationally is because it has the element of race, which imbues everything in this country with more gravity” (Saunders, 2012). However, the data shows that only 3.13% of all the articles analyzed discusses race as a major theme. Other experts, such as Manuel Pastor, a professor of American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California, explain that the issue of race should not be the focus of the case or the coverage. Pastor contended, “It’s easy to label this as an act of white racism, but it’s really an act of stereotyping, which many groups are capable of and it is occurring in the context of extraordinarily permissive law” (Gamboa, 2012).

Receiving slightly more attention with 5.96% of the total coverage is the divisive stand-your-ground law. Even Zimmerman’s defense attorney, Mark O’Mara,

acknowledged the controversy surrounding the law. During a press conference, O'Mara stated "That statute has some troublesome portions to it, and we're now going to have some conversations and discussions about it as a state. But right now it is the law of Florida, and it is the law that is going to have an impact on this case" (Lee, 2012). The greatest recurring topic, with 76 articles and 23.8% total coverage, was the reports concerning marches and demonstrations. Also included in this category are vigils, protests and other various forms of collective social presence or action. Many of these articles cited social networking sites as sources.

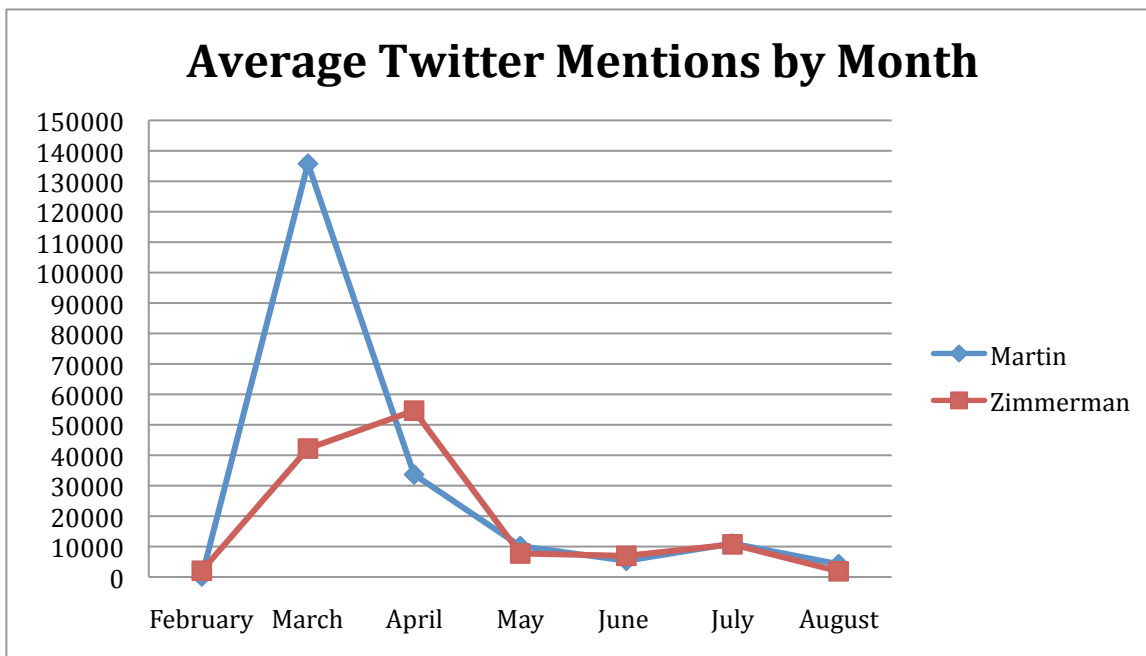
Some experts argue that social media gave the Trayvon Martin case the national attention that it now holds. Kelly McBride, a journalist at the non-profit journalism school, Poynter Institute, lays out the timeline of the coverage of the Trayvon Martin case in an article published just weeks prior to George Zimmerman's arrest. McBride follows the path of the story from a press conference, to blogging, to an online petition, to headline national news. Table 2 and corresponding Graph 2.1 show the fluctuations in average Twitter mentions by month. The overwhelming peak of the Twitter conversation happens in March and substantially drops off in April, the month that George Zimmerman is arrested and mainstream media news coverage began to pick up. This correlation speaks to the influence that social media has over mainstream media and in turn, the public discourse.

Table 2: Average Twitter Mentions by Month

Average Tweets	Martin	Zimmerman
February*	169.0	2064.4
March	135771.7	42194.4
April	33680.0	54656.1
May	10157.2	7728.2
June	5332.4	6955.93
July	11011.0	10724.7
August*	4225.7	1871.8

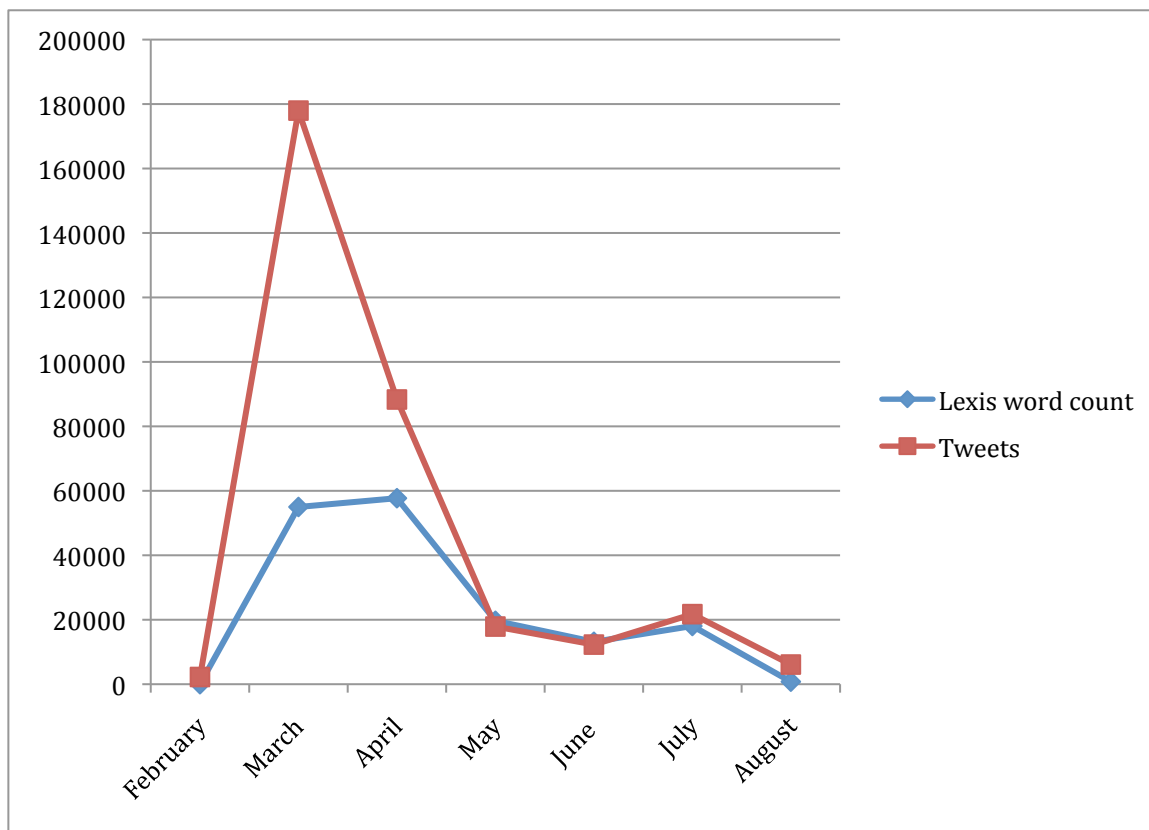
*Denotes truncated months

Graph 2.1 Average Twitter Mentions by Month



While many experts argue that social media has undue influence over mainstream media, this influence does not only flow in one direction. Social media has not only changed the world of mainstream media, but it has infiltrated it as well. Mainstream media follows social media and social media reciprocates. This ebb and flow conversation makes it nearly impossible to distinguish where one begins and the other ends. Graph 3 overlays the numbers of tweets per month with the word count in mainstream news articles. With a large spike in tweets at the beginning of the coverage, the two sets of data emulate one another, further demonstrating that social media and mainstream media can no longer be separated. They are now both a part of the journalism field.

Graph 3



The Trayvon Martin case is just one famous example of the shift in journalism that social media has brought about. A series of interviews with journalism professionals brings to the light the major themes of this shift and what it means for the field of journalism and its changing relationship with community dialogue.

Gate Keeping

The rise in use of social media has affected journalism in several fundamental ways. The opportunity to share information is no longer limited to the professionals of the field. One journalism professional, the founding director of a major university's school of journalism, explains the reality of what this shift means for journalism.

“The way news has always worked is that you have a medium that is controlled by a few people. And those people, like if it's a newspaper, everything goes through editors. Whatever journalists says is the news, is the news. Until social media. One of the things that has happened is that no longer do you have to go through these few editors. Now everybody is a publisher. It's not controlled. No one can say 'we won't cover that.' Everybody can tweet. Everybody can blog. Everyone has their own website. Now news can have a life of its own. The gatekeepers have gone away. Gate keeping theory is a huge thing in journalism. How you decide what actually goes into print or whatever. But now the gatekeepers are dead. With the Internet, we opened up all the gates. And now, with social media, we knocked down the damn wall.” (Interview 1)

This expert's explanation supports the viewpoint that there has been a fundamental shift in the way news is received and delivered and how social reality is shaped. While the media once were the primary source of information and had more control on public perceptions, now almost everyone can be the media and contribute to

the exchange. In the past, the public was mere consumers of news. But now with social media, people have the ability to participate in the production of news. This change influences the way that news is created, shared, and experienced.

Open Narrative

With the widespread use of the Internet and social media, the public is now able to join the conversation of information sharing. However, there are still some limitations that prevent consumer-generated news from reaching the level of mainstream media. As one social media and journalism expert describes:

“The average Joe still does not have the distribution that a news organization does. The average Joe still does not have the resources that a news organization does and that’s always been sort of a barrier. The average Joe has maybe a couple hundred followers on twitter, while they be able to produce something awesome and insightful, they don’t have the means to print 12,000 copies of it and distribute it all over the city or broadcast it to every household with a TV connected to cable like Channel 5 does. It’s always going to be an issue. The average Joe, right now, can’t truly compete on his own” (Interview 4).

Acknowledgements of the restrictions that still limit social media are common. One seasoned journalist clarifies that despite these limitations, social media has come a long way in recent years.

“Everybody can have a voice but you have to be literate, you have to have a computer. There are still limitations. So for all practical purposes, no, not really everyone [can contribute]. But so many more than used to... There’s a whole lot more journalism going on now. It’s just not necessarily by journalists. It used to be that the definition of a

journalist was someone who worked for an established news medium but now a journalist is whoever you say it is” (Interview 1).

A determining factor in the future of the relationship between social media and mainstream media is how professionals of the field react to the change. The influence of social media is still being explored but a drastic change has already taken place. Based on interviews, the trend of acceptance and recognition seems to be most prominent. However, one career journalist warns that the impact of such open exchange of ideas is not all positive.

“It’s always great to have a public forum but it’s not always a great idea to have everyone be of equal status within a public forum. It’s no more than if someone average voter were creating foreign policy instead of some senator...The whole idea of a citizen journalist makes about as much sense as a citizen neurosurgeon...You know on any given news issues, there are going to be people who are more knowledgeable or more informed than others. And another difference from professional journalists is that they are trained to get their points across articulately. So what this results in is, that when so many gates are open that used to not exist, now anyone can speak and it’s created a lot of noise. It’s made it difficult for anyone to get through the noise to get to the sources that are really going to do them some good” (Interview 2).

While some may argue that this cluster of emerging voices is negative, the proof positive is already out there. Not only is social media opening up the narrative of public discourse, but now the public also has a say in what the mainstream media is covering. By creating an outlet through which to tell an alternative account, social media is attempting to force mainstream to cover the stories that public is demonstrating interest

and involvement in. One social media skeptic nonchalantly states, “It’s called social media for a reason. They’re just trying to start a conversation and see what happens.” There are many arguments to be made that the conversation has not only already been started, but it well underway and there is no longer any way to stop it. Social media’s influence can reach further and faster than any news network in the past. Such a collective has formed that their presence can no longer be ignored. A journalism expert, and supporter of the emergence of social media explicates one of the ways in which social media has changed the relationship between the public and journalism.

“Now social media has entered a whole new dynamic because once anything is being talked about by a million people, you can’t say, ‘that’s not news.’... You can’t ignore it...you’ve got to deal with it. No longer do a few people decide what is news or what gets published...[Social media] has democratized all media” (Interview 1).

Social media has leveled the playing field. Just as Reagan once referred to the gun as the “great equalizer,” social media is the great equalizer of modern times. It gives the small people a chance to compete with the larger people, or in this case the larger industry of mainstream media. A journalist and social media expert describes this equalization of power,

“Before, institutional media got to decide when it was interesting and now it can become interesting and institutional media can follow it. And that’s what is so interesting about the Trayvon Martin thing. At some point, institutional media may have deemed it newsworthy and covered it anyway. But they also may have never done so. But that’s not who get’s to decide anymore” (Interview 4)

The gates are open and more people than ever are now joining the conversation and influencing the existing dialogue. A burning issue remains as to how trustworthy this excess in contribution is exactly. The legitimacy of social media based information is still controversial but now that it has been determined these gates cannot be closed, all that is left to do is face the current situation and learn how to progress.

Validity

While the opening up of the public conversation has many positive consequences, something to be wary of is the potential for half-truths. One social media expert explains,

“Great content can spread further but so can misinformation. That’s something that journalists are now starting to take an active role in is correcting misinformation. And that wasn’t often the case before because misinformation wasn’t so public. Misinformation wasn’t so viral in nature. If you look at the coverage of the shooting in Newtown, how there was misinformation that got out and most of that started in mainstream media. It started on a cable network or something like that. But then someone tweeted something they hear on CNN and they might have tweeted it accurately based on what they heard but then that information can quickly change and continue to proliferate around the social web” (Interview 4).

Some professionals echo this sentiment, such as one adjunct journalism professor and career journalist, declaring that they would never consider using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube to be legitimate sources of news “because they are unedited and they answer to no one. There’s no filter...People’s facts go unchecked and, real or not, they travel quickly.” Now that more people have the opportunity to more

actively participate in the news, the chance of rumors or opinions being taken as hard news increases. As one school of journalism director explained his response to this shift,

“I think it’s a good thing. A lot of people in my field do not feel that it’s a good thing. What it means is that if you’re a news consumer, you have to make the decision to trust it. Now anything can be on the Internet. It may be true. It may not be true. There’s legitimate news and there’s rumors. People have got to figure out which they’re going to believe...People aren’t distinguishing between what is fact and what is conjecture. Newspapers verify their facts and even attribute their facts to sources. Now you lose that will social media. It’s like playing telephone. Once it goes down four people, the story changes” (Interview 1).

This personal responsibility ideology is common amongst journalism professional. One reporter at one of the largest newspaper in the nation confidently stated, “Readers are smart enough to discern what is a legit news sources and what you need to take with a grain of salt” (Interview 3). Another professional, the director of social media at a major university, expanded on the issues of validity in this rising news forum.

“It’s on the consumer to figure out whether to trust it. The news consumer has to be the educated party there to decide if they can trust if that video is real or trust if the photo is real or trust if that the tweet is accurate or whatever it may be. You can’t rely on institutional trust as before. If you are a frequent reader of the New York Times and you trust that organization, they much anything that goes in their newspaper or on their twitter account, you trust without question. News organizations sort of have that institutional

trust. The best ones do. But the individual doesn't have that. So it's going to be on the user to determine how viable that consumer-generated news is" (Interview 4).

There is a general consensus that the validity of social media based information is questionable but many specialists agree that social media has a collective conscious that helps to hold the journalism institution more accountable. So while they do not believe that social media has sufficient internal validity, they believe it has a great potential for keeping journalism in check. In reference to the public's ability to participate in the journalistic conversation via commenting directly on articles published online, the director of a school of journalism expressed,

"Well that's a good conversation. One of the weak parts of the traditional media is that we did not have a very good feedback loop. Because if you felt something was bullshit, you called and maybe you got somebody and maybe you didn't. But now anything can go online and comment. It has this automatic verification, which helps to keep the public conversation a little bit more honest because now everybody can comment on everything. And journalist pay attention to that" (Interview 1).

Errors are possible in any news forum. While having the masses contribute to the stockpile of information may overwhelm, it also provides an organic authentication process that creates a constant free flow of information, corrections, and redirection. Secondary reporting and the use of secondary sources increase the importance of collective accountability in order to increase validity.

Secondary Reporting

In some of the articles analyzed in table 1, assorted social media websites were cited as sources. Such form of secondary reporting is not uncommon with the growing

use of social media websites. A breaking news reporter at one of the largest newspapers in the United States claims “the reasons reporters are writing about it is because a lot of people are engaged in it” (Interview 3). While some journalists believe that social media has completely altered the journalism field; one expert, the founding director of a major university’s school of journalism, does not agree.

“It has not changed what we were doing so much as expand what we are doing. We cannot neglect a story that has a great deal of attention. Sometimes we are reporting on the reporting instead of on the event...if it is trending on twitter, that becomes news in and of itself. Don’t look at the original event and say ‘would that have been newsworthy before twitter?’ The newsworthiness is that this topic is trending on Twitter” (Interview 1).

The determination of newsworthiness is no longer entirely in the hands of the journalism industry because the people now have the ability to directly interact with mass society via social media. One social media expert explains how this new communication tool has altered the news industry.

“People can share news by email, phone, text message. It doesn’t mean that just because just because it’s on facebook or twitter, it’s news. But just like any form of communication, it can be a valid source of news...Maybe an athlete, when they have big news to announce, might call up their favorite reporter at ESPN. Now they may just tweet that news and they might not talk to any reporters actually. And that tweet may be the basis of stories that are written about said announcement. So in that way, it’s a communication mechanism. Before they would have done it on the phone. Now they do it on twitter” (Interview 4).

The open acceptance of rise of social media demonstrated by this expert shows that the two narratives, one of the journalists and one of the people, do not need to be competing but can in fact be collaborative. Change is no longer coming. It has arrived. The next step is to embrace it and use it to give the people a platform on which to participate in the public dialogue.

The Relationship

With no more gates to direct the current, the flow of information is now collaborative. A symbiotic relationship has emerged and social media is an interconnected part of mainstream news. Citizens are no longer pure consumers of news but are participating in the process as co-producers. This mutually benefiting relationship demonstrates the integration between tradition and change. The director of social media at a major university's school of journalism explains.

“The two trends have helped each other in some ways. Journalists out in social media have brought some rigor and fact checking to that space and social media has made journalists' job better and better to share. And that is news, sharing information... The best news organizations out there that are engaging with people online can sort of help the community have a conversation with itself... It empowers people in a lot of ways” (Interview 4).

With such a dramatic influence on both ends of the spectrum, social media has made a permanent impact on journalism and information sharing. One news reporter states, “I don't really know how, at this point, the two can really be separated” (Interview 3). While some professionals may not agree with the changes of the field, they must accept the fact that these changes are only beginning. When questioned about views of

the general public being a new arm of the news, specifically in reference to videos, and describing a level of comfort with such change, one seasoned journalism expert explicates,

“I don’t really think about things like that. That’s like saying ‘Am I comfortable with dogs?’ Dogs are. Amateur videos are. I’m comfortable with some but not others. But what are you going to do? What are our options? There’s no way you can shut it down” (Interview 1).

This journalism expert highlights the reality of the situation. Social media is now a permanent fixture in the world of journalism. The future of the industry of shared information is dependent upon how professionals and the public react to this shift.

Conclusion

The emergence of social media came suddenly and forever altered the journalistic process. Through analysis, it is clear to see that social media and mainstream media are not two competing narratives, but simply two interlaced narratives that are continually being refined by and building off of one another. There has been a convergence of these two separate outlets and they are no longer mutually exclusive. This union is permanent and social media can no longer be viewed as separate from mainstream media. The indication of reciprocal influence will only grow stronger as the two continue to meld together. The people have always had a voice but now they have the means by which to spread it worldwide with the click of a button. The recent democratization that mainstream media has experience can never be undone. Now that people have an understanding of what it is like to be co-producers of shared information, pure consumerism will by no means be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

This research focused on the emerging relationship between mainstream media and social media. The fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin served as an example to demonstrate the shift from citizens being consumers of news to co-producers of news. This exploratory study examines journalistic themes through a sociological perspective, analyzing the shift in the way that shared information is produced, distributed, and interpreted. A multi-disciplinary approach, supported by quantitative and qualitative data show that mainstream media and social media are no longer two competing narratives. They have merged into a continual conversation between institutionalized media and the people, opening up the public discourse and changing the nature of news.