

The Evolution of Social Media and Its Impact on Journalism

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Abstract

In the early years of social networking, users sent personal messages to one another, or a small group of family and friends based on the concept of “six degrees of separation” of connecting with friends, family and people you knew. This one-to-one communication method was a chief reason why social media was considered different from print or broadcast media, which had the power to broadcast a message to a mass audience. In July 2006, Twitter launched, introducing a newsfeed that could be seen by anyone and everyone. Twitter also allowed members to choose who to follow based on their content – somewhat like the way consumers choose to subscribe to a particular magazine or tune into a particular program. A few months later, Facebook introduced its own newsfeed, and other sites soon followed suit. Thus, the news feed gave the average user the power to attract an audience. This meant that social media could become a purveyor of news and information, much like broadcast and print media. Thus, the traditional paradigm of social media as a place for private conversations has shifted dramatically. The question for today’s journalist is no longer how or why social media impacted journalism, but how can journalists embrace social media to practice the latest and perhaps most effective way to practice journalism in the 21st Century? This paper shows educators how to give aspiring journalists and journalists in transition the skills they’ll need to compete in this new marketplace.

Keywords: social media, thought leadership, personal brand, journalism, communications, news, content

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Social media:

Forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)

-- *Merriam-Webster*

In the 1990s, Instant Messengers such as ICQ, MSN, AIM and Yahoo! Messenger¹, were among the first wave of social media, allowing its users to create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content.²

In 1997, *Six Degrees* became the first social networking site by combining “personal profiles, instant messaging, friends lists and the ability to search other members’ friends lists.”³ At its peak, the site had one million users.⁴ It was based on the theory that “everyone is six or fewer steps away, by way of introduction, from any other person in the world, so that a chain of "a friend of a friend" statements can be made to connect any two people in a maximum of six steps.”⁵

Though it lasted only four years, *Six Degrees* became a predecessor for Friendster, MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn and many other social networking sites based on the concept of “social circles,” or connecting with people who held some connection to your friends, family and colleagues.

Indeed, Facebook, which launched in 2004, has said it believes that everyone in the world is connected to “every other person by an average of three and a half people.”⁶ The concept is similar for LinkedIn, which identifies the second- and third-degree connections of each member.

LinkedIn, launched in 2003, is one of the many social networks that were able to build a global membership base by encouraging members to continue building their network by connecting with people beyond their immediate friends or family. LinkedIn, which reached 500 million members in the first half of 2017, sought to set

¹ Matt Petronzio, “A Brief History of Instant Messaging,” October 25, 2012, *Mashable*, <http://mashable.com/2012/10/25/instant-messaging-history/#Hw2UJ4p.nPqP>, last accessed on July 16, 2017.

² “The Post Social Media Era and the Evolution of Social Networking,” <http://meshedsociety.com/the-post-social-media-era-and-the-evolution-of-social-networking/>, accessed July 7, 2017.

³ Sam Plymale, Eastern Michigan University Public Relations Student Society of American (PRSSA), May 26, 2012, <https://emuprssa.com/2012/05/26/a-forefather-of-social-media-andrew-weinreich-and-sixdegrees-com/>, accessed on July 11, 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Oxford Math Center website, <http://www.oxfordmathcenter.com/drupal7/node/655>, accessed on July 11, 2017

⁶ Smriti Bhagat, Moira Burke, Carlos Diuk, Ismail Onur Filiz, Sergey Edunov, February 4, 2016, “Three and a half degrees of Separation,” <https://research.fb.com/three-and-a-half-degrees-of-separation/>, accessed July 11, 2017.

itself apart from Facebook by calling itself a professional network, where members connected with like-minded professionals for business opportunities and jobs.

In the earlier versions of Facebook, LinkedIn and some other social networking sites, members communicated by sending messages to one another. This one-to-one communication method was a chief reason why social media was considered different from print or broadcast media, which had the power to broadcast a message to a mass audience. Thus, the early versions of social networking sites were not seen as a direct threat to media outlets. Indeed, online news sites and news aggregators were seen as bigger threats in the early years.⁷

In the early 2000s, social media, including Instant Messengers, began to shift from one-to-one communication to one-to-many. In 2000, an instant messaging system called Jabber⁸ launched, acting as a “single gateway for users to chat with friends and access their buddy lists on all of the big networks at the time: AIM, Yahoo and MSN.” Apple created iChat in 2002 and Skype was founded in 2003, allowing users to communicate with others through video, voice and instant messaging. Meebo began as an instant messaging service in 2005, and was eventually acquired in 2011 by Google.⁹

In July 2006, a new company named Twitter introduced a newsfeed that could be seen by anyone and everyone. Twitter allowed users to choose whether to share tweets with connections, by “protecting” them, or make them public to the world. The concept was similar to what Flickr, an online photo management and sharing application¹⁰ that was created in 2004 and acquired by Yahoo in 2005.¹¹ And unlike the “six degrees” concept of connecting with friends, family and people you know, Twitter allowed members to choose who to follow based on their content – somewhat like the way consumers chose to subscribe to a particular magazine or tune into a particular program.

Just a few months later in September 2006, Facebook introduced “an algorithmically generated and constantly refreshing summary of updates about the activities of one’s friends.”¹² Despite the fact that the news feed is now a standard part of nearly every

⁷ Jennifer Alejandro, “Journalism in the Age of Social Media,” Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper, University of Oxford, 2010, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Journalism%20in%20the%20Age%20of%20Social%20Media.pdf>, accessed July 16, 2017.

⁸ PC Encyclopedia, <http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/45544/jabber>, accessed July 19, 2017

⁹ Matt Petronzio, “A Brief History of Instant Messaging,” October 25, 2012, *Mashable*, <http://mashable.com/2012/10/25/instant-messaging-history/#Hw2UJ4p.nPqP>, last accessed on July 16, 2017

¹⁰ Flickr about page, <https://www.flickr.com/about>, accessed on July 16, 2017.

¹¹ Bobbie Johnson, “Facebook patents the ‘news feed’ - but was it really first?” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/feb/26/facebook-patent>, accessed July 16, 2017.

¹² Facebook, “Facebook gets a facelift,” Sept. 5, 2006, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/facebook-gets-a-facelift/2207967130/>, accessed July 12, 2017.

social networking site, many Facebook members initially protested the news feed, calling it "overwhelming" and "cluttered." And some went so far as to demand its removal, likening the news feed to a form of "stalking."¹³

Zuckerberg acknowledged those early users' concerns, but insisted that the news feed was here to stay. "We're not oblivious of the Facebook groups popping up about this (by the way, [our news feed product manager] is not the devil)," he said in Mashable. "And we agree, stalking isn't cool; but being able to know what's going on in your friends' lives is ... This is information people used to dig for on a daily basis, nicely reorganized and summarized so people can learn about the people they care about."¹⁴

Within a very short time, most other networks followed suit, allowing members the power to choose to make their news feed, or even certain posts, public or private. In 2007, Tumblr, a microblogging and social networking site for multimedia and short posts, launched, and the site now hosts more than 356 million blogs¹⁵ and has more than 725 million monthly unique visitors worldwide.¹⁶ Thus, the news feed, in its gave the average user the power to attract an audience. This meant that social media could become a purveyor of news and information, much like broadcast and print media.

"For instance the news about the death of Michael Jackson in 2009, Facebook and Twitter users broke the story ahead of any major news network, the moment the UCLA Medical Center made the death announcement official," Jennifer Alejandro wrote in her 2010 Reuters Institute paper. "Social network sites, search engines and news websites reported heavy traffic volumes in the hour the story broke and some websites even crashed. That single story showed how news is consumed and disseminated in social media, how far it can reach and how fast."¹⁷

By December 2009, global users were spending more than five and a half hours on social networking sites¹⁸. In the United States, time spent on social networking sites continues to rise with the heaviest users being Generation X, people ages 35 to 49. According to the 2016 Nielsen Social Media Report, Gen Xers spend "almost seven hours per week versus Millennials, who come in second, spending just over six hours per week."¹⁹

¹³ Samantha Murphy, "The Evolution of Facebook News Feed," *Mashable*, March 12, 2013, <http://mashable.com/2013/03/12/facebook-news-feed-evolution/#t2w.1X9UBPqD>, accessed July 16, 2017

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tumblr About Page. <https://www.tumblr.com/about>, accessed July 18, 2017.

¹⁶ Statista, "Combined desktop and mobile visits to Tumblr.com from November 2016 to May 2017 (in millions)," <https://www.statista.com/statistics/261925/unique-visitors-to-tumblrcom/>, accessed July 18, 2017.

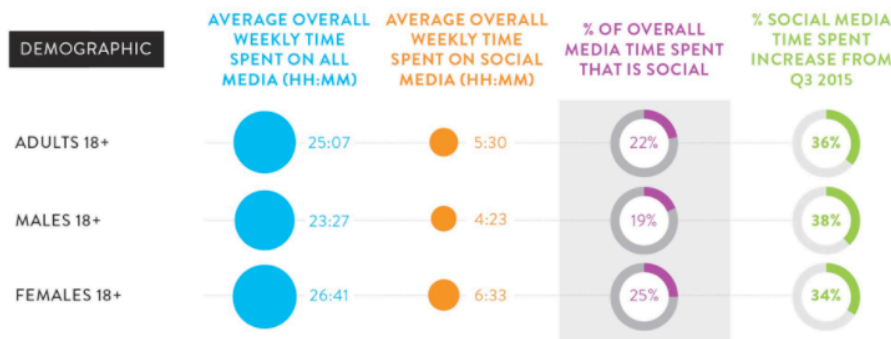
¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sean Casey, "Nielsen Social, 2016 Social Media Report," January 17, 2017, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2017/2016-nielsen-social-media-report.html>, accessed on July 16, 2017.

THE PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL MEDIA TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Source: Nielsen NPOWER/National Panel; RADAR; Nielsen Netview; Nielsen VideoCensus and Nielsen Electronic Mobile Measurement

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With huge advances in technology, including the ease and affordability of using SmartPhones and other mobile devices, social networking sites evolved from a text-centric platform to one that featured a wide array of visual content, which is more than 40 times more likely to get shared on social media than other types of content.²⁰

Meanwhile, blogging platforms continued to evolve, incorporating the social aspect into their sites. In 2012, two co-founders of Twitter launched Medium, an online publishing platform. Like Twitter, Medium encouraged users to post content and develop a following based on content. Different from Twitter, users didn't have to worry about a 140-word character limit. Medium, to some observers, is considered social journalism because it consists of a "hybrid of professional journalism, contributor and reader content."²¹

Also in 2012, Twitter acquired Vine, a social network that allowed members to post six-second videos. Vine's videos were done by amateurs who often engaged others through slapstick humor, but it was based on the Twitter concept of connection based on content that could be seen by anyone and everyone.

Vine was so popular with teenagers and 20-somethings that many young people were able to develop a huge following of fans from all over the world. Some of these "Vine Famous" people went onto television stardom; some earned money and gifts through

²⁰ Liis Hainla, "21 Social Media Marketing Statistics You Need to Know in 2017," Updated June 28, 2017,

<https://www.dreamgrow.com/21-social-media-marketing-statistics/>, accessed July 16, 2017.

²¹ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_journalism, accessed July 19, 2017.

endorsements. Though Vine was considered a hit among young people, Twitter essentially shut it down in 2016.²² Many of those who attained fame on Vine continue to create content and attract an audience on other social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

YouTube, which launched in 2005. The open-access model has allowed many people to share content with the masses, thereby becoming “YouTube famous.” YouTube is considered the second biggest social networking site after Facebook,²³ garnering about 30 million visitors per day. An estimated eight out of ten people between the ages of 18 to 49 watch YouTube each month.²⁴ Indeed, YouTube and other video streaming sites have become so popular that it is predicted that half of viewers under 32 will not subscribe to pay-TV service by 2025.²⁵

Instagram, created in 2010 and bought for \$1 billion²⁶ by Facebook in 2012, also allows its 700 million members to publicly showcase their work to the public, and grow the number of followers based on their content. The site, however, also allows members to remain private, and even engage in one-to-one communication through Direct Messages. Many people once famous on Vine can now be found on Instagram, which features videos up to 60 seconds long.

Video is arguably the king of content at the moment, and mobile video in particular is expected to account for 75 percent of the total mobile data traffic by 2020. One social networking site that is taking full advantage of this trend is SnapChat, which has more than 166 million daily active users.²⁷ Recent data shows that SnapChat members were watching 10 billion videos per day, up from 8 billion in just two months.²⁸

In addition, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites now allow and even encourage members to post “live” video, meaning that a user can record video in real time, and broadcast it to one or many. Even journalists are using the “live” aspect of these social networking sites to share news and information. Instant Messengers continue to rise in popularity as well. Facebook, which launched its own Instant Messenger system in 2011, is one of the biggest Instant Messengers in the

²² Chris Foxx, “Twitter axes Vine video service,” BBC News, October 27, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-37788052>, accessed July 12, 2017.

²³ Dreamgrow website, “Top 15 most popular social networking sites,” <https://i1.wp.com/www.dreamgrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/top-most-popular-social-networking-sites-graph.jpg?ssl=1>, last accessed July 19, 2017.

²⁴ FortuneLords, “36 Mind Blowing YouTube Facts, Figures and Statistics – 2017,” **last Update – March 23rd, 2017**, <https://fortunelords.com/youtube-statistics/>, accessed July 15, 2017.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Salman Aslam, “Instagram by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts,” June 21, 2017, Omnicore, <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/>, last accessed July 15, 2017.

²⁷ CSD, Social Media Statistics, <https://chrisniderdesign.com/blog/resources/social-media-statistics/>, accessed July 18, 2017.

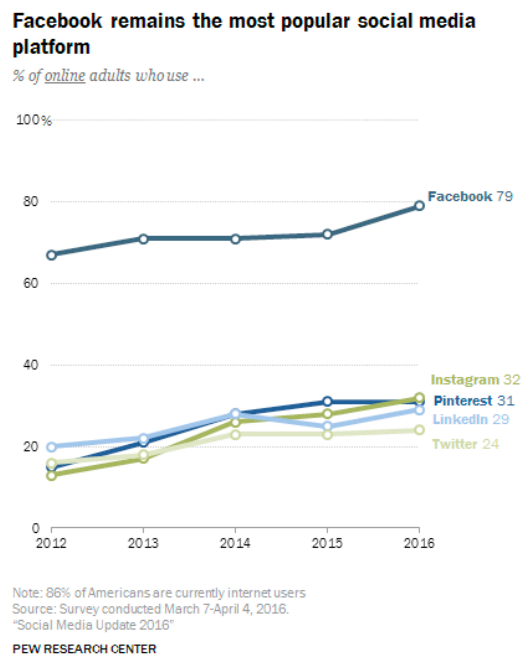
²⁸ Paul Roberts, “8 Social Media Statistics for 2017,” *Our Social Times*, <http://oursocialtimes.com/7-social-media-statistics-for-2017/>, accessed July 18, 2017.

world with more than one billion members.²⁹ WhatsApp is the other big Instant Messenger with an equally large membership.³⁰

Thus, the traditional paradigm of social networking sites and Instant Messengers as places for the exchange of messages through private conversations among friends, family and people you know has shifted dramatically. Indeed, social media has become just as powerful as broadcast and print media in many respects, relaying real-time images, video and other forms of news to a global audience.

As a result, social networking sites have become a key source of information for many consumers. In the United States, the majority of Twitter and Facebook members rely on “each platform serves as a source for news about events and issues outside the realm of friends and family,” according to a Pew Research Center survey of 2,000 people in March 2015. That share, the Pew study found, has increased substantially from 2013, when about half of users (52 percent of Twitter users, 47 percent of Facebook users) said they got news from the social platforms.³¹

The Pew survey also found that the rise of users getting news from their news feeds “cuts across nearly every demographic group.”



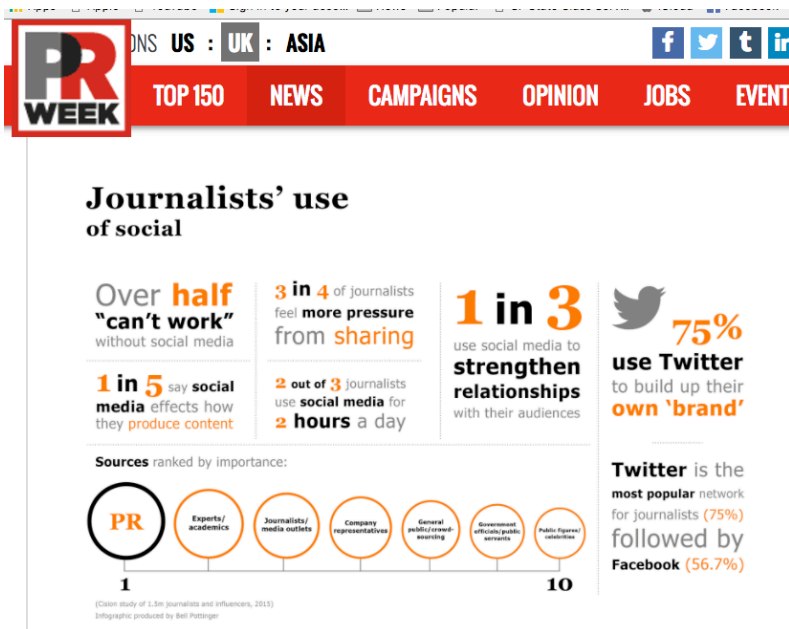
²⁹ Statista, “Most popular mobile messaging apps worldwide as of January 2017, based on number of monthly active users (in millions),” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/258749/most-popular-global-mobile-messenger-apps/>, last accessed July 15, 2017

³⁰ Josh Constine, “Facebook now has 2 billion monthly users... and responsibility,” June 27, 2017, Tech Crunch, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/06/27/facebook-2-billion-users/>, accessed July 13, 2017

³¹ Pew Research Center, <http://www.journalism.org/2015/07/14/the-evolving-role-of-news-on-twitter-and-facebook/>

Indeed, journalists themselves are among the biggest consumers of information on social media. A Cision survey found that more than half of the 1.5 million journalists and influencers interviewed said they could not work without social media.³²

In the United Kingdom, a study from Canterbury Christ Church University and Cision found that social media is now an “everyday tool for the media with 96 percent of UK journalists using it on a daily basis.”³³ The survey also found that 42 percent of UK journalists say that they would not be able to carry out their work without social media.”



“... All big news organisations are plunging into the world of social media, looking at its extraordinary newsgathering potential; its potential as a new tool to engage the audience; and as a way of distributing our news,” Kevin Bakhurst of the BBC said back 2011, during a speech given to the International Broadcasting Convention in Amsterdam.³⁴

The fact that an increasing number of people are turning to social media for news, information, entertainment, products and services is perhaps the biggest reason that ad revenues are also going up.

“It isn’t surprising that Facebook dominated ad revenue in 2016, taking in 67.9 per cent of social media advertising spend,” Paul Rogers wrote in Our Social Times. “It was a rosy picture all round, with social media ad spend doubling worldwide over the past two years – rising from \$16 billion in 2014 to \$31 billion in 2016. Instagram is

³² Cision website, <http://www.prweek.com/article/1354357/infographic-journalists-rely-twitter-pr-sources-pqZ4mwllX4PlyFKL.99>, accessed July 11, 2017.

³³ <http://www.coastcommunications.co.uk/coastlines/journalists-rely-on-social-media-study-finds>

³⁴ Kevin Bakhurst, “How has social media changed the way newsrooms work?”, September 9, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/09/ibc_in_amsterdam.html, accessed July 12, 2017.

on track to generate \$1.53 billion in mobile ad revenue worldwide in 2016. That's an impressive year-on-year increase of 144 per cent.

Perhaps most significantly, though, it was predicted that digital ad spend in the U.S. would have surpassed television spend for the first time ever by the end of 2016.³⁵

As journalists and other consumers use social media to gather information, others are using social media to disseminate news, taking the place of the traditional journalist or news outlet as the gatekeeper.

On June 13, 2009, millions of people in Iran protested on the streets and on Twitter after learning that incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won more than 66 percent of the vote against popular opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. As the Iranian government moved to suppress the protests, both on- and offline, Twitter delivered information in real time:

*Woman says ppl knocking on her door 2 AM saying
they were intelligence agents, took her daughter*

*Ashora platoons now moving from valiasr toward
National Tv staion. mousavi's supporters are already
there. my father is out there!*

we hear Idead in shiraz, livefire used in other cities RT

Credit: Lev Grossman, Time.com

Less than a week after the Iranian protests, Journalist Lev Grossman surmised that Twitter's ability to broadcast the news far and wide made Twitter "practically ideal for a mass protest movement, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control."³⁶ The same might be true of e-mail and Facebook, but those media aren't public. They don't broadcast, as Twitter does.³⁷

Grossman also called Twitter the "medium of the moment."

"It's free, highly mobile, very personal and very quick. It's also built to spread, and fast. Twitterers like to append notes called hashtags — #theylooklikethis — to their tweets, so that they can be grouped and searched for by topic; especially interesting or urgent tweets tend to get picked up and retransmitted by other Twitterers, a practice known as retweeting, or just RT. And Twitter is promiscuous by nature: tweets go out

³⁵ Paul Rogers, "8 Social Media Statistics for 2017," *Our Social Times*, <http://oursocialtimes.com/7-social-media-statistics-for-2017/>, accessed July 18, 2017.

³⁶ Lev Grossman, Time magazine in partnership with CNN, "Iran's Protests: Why Twitter Is the Medium of the Movement," June 17, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html>, accessed July 14, 2017.

³⁷ Ibid.

over two networks, the Internet and SMS, the network that cell phones use for text messages, and they can be received and read on practically anything with a screen and a network connection.

Thus, citizens have become journalists, giving rise to the term, “citizen journalism” or “participatory journalism.”

“The Internet gave average people the ability to transmit information globally,” veteran journalist Tony Rogers wrote in an August 30, 2016 blog post for ThoughtCo.com.³⁸ “That was a power once reserved for only the very largest media corporations and news agencies.”

Citizen journalists, however, are not the only ones changing the game for traditional journalists.

During the 2016 presidential election in the United States, President Donald Trump, who was then a candidate, often took his message straight to Twitterverse, bypassing news conferences, press releases and other traditional methods that politicians communicated with the traditional news media.

“When we look back on the role that sites like Twitter, Facebook (and Instagram and Snapchat and all the others) have played in our national political discourse this election season, it would be easy to spend most of our time examining Donald Trump’s effect on these media, particularly Twitter. It’s been well-documented; Trump may very well have the most combative online presence of any candidate for president in modern history,” Sam Sanders wrote in a piece³⁹ for NPR. “But underneath that glaring and obvious conclusion, there’s a deeper story about how the very DNA of social media platforms and the way people use them has trickled up through our political discourse and affected all of us, almost forcing us to wallow in the divisive waters of our online conversation.”

As a result, social media should be seen both a complement and competition to broadcast and print media.

“The late 1990s saw the first blogs and web forums; 2004 gave birth to podcasting, where users could create online radio programs; 2005 saw the founding of YouTube, an online video host; and, 2006 saw the worldwide release of Facebook and Twitter, two of the most popular websites today, wrote Emory Paine in an Honors Theses for Salem State University.⁴⁰ “In the eyes of traditional journalism, these social media

³⁸ Tony Rogers, “What is Citizen Journalism,” Thoughtco.com, August 30, 2016, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-citizen-journalism-2073663>, accessed July 12, 2017.

³⁹ Sam Sanders, “Did Social Media Ruin Election 2016?”, November 8, 2016, NPR, <http://www.npr.org/2016/11/08/500686320/did-social-media-ruin-election-2016>, accessed on July 12, 2017.

⁴⁰ Emory Paine, “The Next Step: Social Media and the Evolution of Journalism,” Salem State University Digital Commons at Salem State University, May 2015, http://digitalcommons.salemstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=honors_theses, accessed on July 12, 2017.

directly challenged not only their profession, but the very definition of journalism itself.”

Paine also noted a decline in revenues that seem to correlate with the rise of social media in the mid-2000s.

The decline in ad revenues in 2004, Paine wrote, “correspond greatly to the introduction of various social media into the journalistic sphere – web forums and blogs in the early internet age, and Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and more in the year 2004 and beyond.”

So, what does this mean for today’s journalist?

“Often, the introduction of new technology into the media sphere has caused disruption, chaos, and bells tolling the end times of journalism,” Paine wrote. “And, each time, the news survived. Indeed, by swiftly converging with the new mediums and incorporating their values into journalism, the news did more than survive – it evolved. Social media represents the next occurrence of this cycle.”

This book shows focuses on the next big occurrence: Social media journalism, also known as Social Journalism. Though the terms are relatively new and the definitions can vary, social media journalism or social journalism can be defined as the ability to use social media and technology to report, gather, disseminate and promote news and information for the purposes of this book, which offers a step-by-step guide on how to gain the skills needed to work as either an independent journalist or earn one of the hundreds of new jobs being created by major news outlets.