

Social Media - Chances and challenges for international broadcasting

by Peter Limbourg, Director General of Deutsche Welle

Social media are playing an increasingly important role especially in the coverage of events and developments in crisis regions. A current example is provided by the Ukraine crisis. From the very beginning, it has been accompanied by a war of information. Social networking sites spread news fast, but are also flooded by propaganda and disinformation. Fact-checking and spotting fake pictures and videos are sometimes so difficult that even renowned media outlets make mistakes and have to remove the images afterwards.



Peter Limbourg, Director General, Deutsche Welle (DW):

Following the completion of a law degree and a journalism traineeship, Peter Limbourg worked as a reporter in Leipzig. In 1990 he became the Europe and NATO correspondent for DFA and SAT.1 in Brussels. He then held diverse senior positions with private German media organizations in Bonn and Berlin, such as that of a news anchor at SAT.1 and Senior Vice President of ProSiebenSat.1 TV. Since October 1, 2013, Peter Limbourg has been Director General of Deutsche Welle.

In a 1995 article¹ in Newsweek, Clifford Stoll made various predictions about the influence of the Internet on future society, including that on journalism: “Lacking editors, reviewers or critics, the Internet has become a wasteland of unfiltered data. You don’t know what to ignore and what’s worth reading,” he wrote. Certainly many of his assumptions have been proven to be wrong, yet the challenges brought on by the Internet to professional journalism are greater than ever before.

International broadcasters used to be the only media outlets that distributed news and information beyond national borders. They have been doing so for more than 80 years now, first via shortwave radio, and since the mid-1980s via satellite television as well.

It was the Internet and social media that ushered in a new era in the history of international mass communication and made information and commentaries available in real-time and almost everywhere around the globe. News gathering and dissemination are no longer monopolized by professional journalists and media organizations. And expensive equipment is no longer required to break news and to bring stories to a wider or even a global audience.

As was shown during the Arab revolutions, the Maidan demonstrations in Kyiv and the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, citizens in the social media age have a strong interest in participation in political decision-making processes and in actively influencing public discourse. They open up new channels

of communication on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Google+. They create their own stories, produce images, audio and video messages, and share content, links and ideas with friends as well as people from other parts of the world whom they have never met before.

Social media has offered international broadcasters unprecedented chances to reach out to more audiences abroad and also new target groups, like young people and women. They create new research tools for journalists as well as provide alternative information sources to news agencies and the possibility to explore new programming formats.

In fact, the rapid development of information and communication technologies over the

past 20 years has prompted an evolution in international broadcasting that goes beyond what's happened in other media.

Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany's international broadcaster, reflects this transformation. Starting as a shortwave radio station in the 1950s, it expanded in the early 1990s to include satellite television, and has been offering online content since 1994. It was also among the first international broadcasters to embrace mobile devices and social media as new distribution platforms and to incorporate user-generated-content into its programming. Today, DW has become a multi-lingual and multimedia information provider targeting decision makers, opinion leaders and those who actively stand up for human rights, freedom of speech and civil society.

The direct and two-way communication enabled by social media strengthens the bond between the broadcaster and its audience as well as the connection among viewers, listeners and users by creating a kind of common identity. Facebook communities and Twitter followers have replaced listeners' clubs in the digital era. When moderators and reporters interact with users on social media sites and chat about topics that were just broadcast on television or published online, this lends a human touch to professional journalism. It's no longer so that only the professionals have the privilege to access exclusive information and to interpret events.

Yet amid the social-media euphoria, international broadcasters should also be aware that the challenges they face are immense. Many complexities arise in practice. While information exchange happens almost in real-time, crossing all media platforms and beyond national boundaries, some questions remain: how to verify user-generated-content, how to make a difference by providing relevant and adequate information, and finally, how to grow audiences through reliable and balanced reporting.

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Verification software and tools are emerging as the demand for credible sources and quality content from social media grows. Apart from that, broadcasters have to build their own expertise in the long run and professionalize their correspondents, editors and stringers, especially those who are specialized in different cultures, countries and the respective languages, in dealing with social media content.

DW Akademie, Deutsche Welle's international center for media development, media consulting and journalism training, began including social media in its cross-media traineeship almost at the same time as DW started its activities on Twitter and Facebook in 2007/2008. Today, different courses are provided on topics like research on social media, multimedia storytelling and digital safety. The open online workshop "Digital Safety for Journalists" offered by DW Akademie in conjunction with Reporters Without Borders last December, gave answers to questions journalists are increasingly asking themselves: How careful do they have to be online? What dangers lurk behind Google, Facebook and WhatsApp? What can their mobile phones reveal about them? And above all, what can they do to minimize their risks and maximize their safety?

In view of the oversupply of unfiltered information on the Internet and social media, the call for quality journalism is indeed getting louder. As a public service international broadcaster, Deutsche Welle aims to offer not only reliable news, but also analyses and background information, and to explain the context of stories - especially when it comes to complex issues. Journalistic standards like truthfulness, accuracy, impartiality, accountability and double checking also apply to DW's social media activities.

A further challenge for international broadcasters is still restrictions on the free exchange of information. On the technical side of things, news and information have never been so easily accessible as they are nowadays. Meanwhile, though, many countries are trying to suppress the unfettered flow of information and people's freedom to form their own opinion through censorship, intimidation and persecution.

The percentage of the global population living in countries with a free press is at the

lowest level in more than a decade, according to the findings of Freedom of the Press 2013: A Global Survey of Media Independence, released by the US-based Freedom House. The report found that less than 14 percent of the world's population live in societies "where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures."²

Censorship and propaganda are profoundly unacceptable attempts to rob citizens of their civil rights. To counteract this, we rely on openness, tolerance, diversity and respect - all values professional journalism should be based on. That's why Deutsche Welle created The Bobs - Best in Online Activism in 2004 to support the open exchange of ideas and freedom of expression in digital media. Submissions to the contest reflect the wide range of opportunities the blogosphere and other online outlets offer to promote freedom of expression and transparency.

Ultimately, the Internet has not become a wasteland of unfiltered data, as Clifford Stoll predicted 20 years ago, but a wonderful platform for information and participation. International broadcasters can only stand out by convincing audiences and users through accurate, verified and pluralistic information, which has always been fundamental to professional journalism and will continue to be so in the future.

I'm convinced that the opportunities offered by new media platforms are much greater than the risks, and that we are only at the beginning of another new era of journalism. As media professionals, we'll continue to play a significant role in shaping the digital world in such a way that it provides reliable information - and ultimately freedom and prosperity - to as many people as possible around the world. ●

¹ "Why the Web Won't Be Nirvana", *Newsweek*, February 27, 1995, <http://www.newsweek.com/clifford-stoll-why-web-wont-be-nirvana-185306>

² "Freedom of the Press 2013", Freedom House, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2013#.U_WbStKKDcs