THIS JUST IN:

BREAKING NEWS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE NEWSPAPER ORGANIZATIONS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN CORNER OF NEW YORK STATE

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By

Chris Chapman

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

Thesis or Project Director

Faculty Mentor

Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
Abstract

Social media is the newest form of technology to tempt journalists. What is it? How can it be used to bring their information to the consumers? This thesis examines the ability of eight papers in the southwestern corner of New York state to break news on social media like Facebook and Twitter. The study, conducted by a survey of the journalists working for those papers, takes a look at the policies that govern social media within their organization. Through the lens of the agenda-setting theory, the data shows that the rural region of New York state has yet to find a comprehensive policy at any of the newspapers.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The Situation

1.1 Importance of the Study

The information gathered in this study will offer a better understanding of how the media organizations in the region view social media and make use of social media. This type of study falls under the qualitative grounded theory method as the information can be synthesized into a theory grounded in responses from those that have made decisions regarding the usage of social media in a rural region with small metropolitan pockets.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

News media outlets are seeing their readers move more and more to the digital side of consumption. One of the largest areas to have picked up news consumer volume has been social media platforms. Facebook and Twitter lead the industry in usage by these organizations, and newspapers are one of the largest to make the move (Edmonds, 2011).

For close to two decades, newspapers have been concerned with falling ad revenue as the move to digital has taken communication to a new level. The newest step is a revolution that is still in its very infancy. Facebook and Twitter, both being less than 10 years old, are changing the speed with which news and information moves from event to information consumer.

The proliferation of mobile devices has exponentially increased the audience that news organizations can reach with information. One of the largest areas of demand on these devices, through the means of social media platforms, is breaking news and information. Consumers want to know what the traffic situation is an area is as they drive down the road. Consumers want to know that emergency vehicles have an area closed as crews battle a fire. Consumers also are looking for the breaking news of celebrity-status people passing way, or getting arrested. Consumers are also looking for the news in their neighborhood. Why is that fire truck down the street? What did the mayor do to find herself in
legal trouble? As journalists do their due diligence, hitting the streets, talking to sources, making the connections, they are now faced with a new challenge. Should a journalist break the news in their paper or should it hit the digital ether and nearly instantaneously find its way onto the screens of consumers?

1.3 Definition of Terms Used

1.3.1 Consumer, Information Consumer

In the digital age, those who read, hear, view news and information have been given this name by many news organizations. No longer do these people simply read the news or watch the news, or listen to the news. These people consume the information presented for synthesis into thoughts and opinions. According to the Pew Center, the term also refers to the way a person searches and finds news and information in a digital environment (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2011).

1.3.2 Twitter

A social media platform where users 'tweet,' or create messages of 140 characters or less, to be sent to 'followers,' those receiving messages form a user account, throughout the platform. Twitter broadcasts these messages in real time to computers and mobile devices around the globe, in an effort to bring together people of similar interests (Twitter, 2012).

Twitter does establish some general platform rules and best practices for non-journalistic users. Those general guides are not of importance to this study. The guides bring together rules on following and un-following accounts on the site, using automated systems for this process and limitations of the number of followers a personal account can have. The rules also establish the length of the messages (tweets) to 140 characters (Twitter, 2012).

1.3.3 Facebook

Founded in 2004, as a form of communication for college students, Facebook was launched by Mark Zuckernug and two Harvard schoolmates. The platform makes claim that its “mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2012).
1.4 Organization of Remaining Chapters

The information in this thesis is presented in five separate chapters. The second chapter establishes the theoretical considerations of social media platforms, and their use, in breaking news in news organizations throughout the United States. The chapter establishes the link between the use of platforms, mainly Twitter and Facebook and the Agenda-Setting Theory of Shaw and McCombs and Shaw and Martin. The second chapter also provides a review of the literature providing examples of social media breaking stories prior to the mainstream media and the same social media platforms erroneously reporting stories without fully vetting, or sourcing, the information presented. The literature presented also contains an attempt at the establishment of best practices. Chapter Three outlines the scope and methodology used in gathering relevant data from regional journalists for this study. Chapter Four is a discussion of the findings of the study, presenting the responses of regional journalists in light of the theoretical considerations established in the second chapter. Chapter Five contains limitations and strengths of the study, as well as considerations for future research and final thoughts on the research, acting as a conclusion.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

2.1 Newspapers in a world of Technology

Since the year 2000, newspapers have started to see a decrease in their daily circulation (Pew, 2011). Many questions abound as to why that decrease has happened, and what can be done to change the course of the American newspaper. No solution has been found as of yet, but the Internet seems to be deemed one culprit of the downward spiral. The good news is that it also seems to have been named as the potential savior (Hill, 2010). The biggest problem facing the industry is the nagging question of 'How?'.

Since the Columbus, Ohio Dispatch went online on July 1, 1980 (Shedden, 2010), and the first paper hit the World Wide Web in 1994 (Shedden, 2010), newspapers have been unsure as to how this new way to get the important information to their users. No one has found that “magic formula” (Hill, 2010) that will bring the advertisers streaming back to the newspapers. Some say that formula will never be found and that there is a shift underfoot that will change the entire way we think about newspapers, news dissemination and advertising campaigns (Garfield, 2009). The news is bleak, according to the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. In the 2010 report overview, trends in print are continuing:

For newspapers, which still provide the largest share of reportorial journalism in the United States, the metaphor that comes to mind is sand in an hourglass. The shrinking money left in print, which still provides 90 percent of the industry’s funds, is the amount of time left to invent new revenue models online. The industry must find a new model before that money runs out. (Pew, 2010)
There is one potential readership that newspapers seem to be unable to reach. According to the 2009 study conducted by Pew, “Young people in the age groups of 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 continue to have the lowest readership levels of daily newspapers (Pew, 2009).” In fact, Scarborough research, in a study conducted for that same Pew document, claimed that the 18 to 24 demographic held that only 31 percent said they had read a newspaper the day before, a drop of two percentage points over the 2008 study. The 25 to 34 demographic held the same decrease (Pew, 2009).

So the question remains, can social media be part of the equation to save newspapers? How can papers reach the younger generation of readers?

2.2 What is Social Media?

Before Facebook, or any other social media site, can be determined to be part of the solution for newspapers, it is important to understand what social media sites are and how they work.

According to Boyd, there are three specific criteria that must be met for a web-based service to be determined a social media site. It must “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and transverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (2007).

That gives us the very basic framework that is used to make a social media site. Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn all use these basic premises, but each site modifies what they are a bit to add more of a person touch to the users' experiences.

Social media ties together nodes, commonly thought of as individuals or organizations, by at least one association. These associations can be any one or all of “shared value, kinship, friendship, business transaction or other system (Tyson, 2009). A definition of the social system as defined by Sproull and Keiser (1991), in an attempt to better understand the nodal concept of the social system, tell us that the system is made up of “society, organization, group, or other social entity consisting of interdependent people, events and behaviors (Tyson, 2009).” Facebook took advantage of these nodes
to grow into what is considered by The Facebook Project as one of the two largest social media sites on the Internet. All this growth has happened after launching in February of 2004, just eight years ago (Ginger, 2007).

Twitter, the newer of the media studied in this research, has been on a similar path. While Facebook has amassed around 845 million monthly users (Facebook 2012) since their inception, Twitter touts over 100 million daily users. Twitter was publicly launched in the spring of 2007 with little fanfare and marketing. At the end of 2011, Twitter was considered to be the third-largest social media platform, behind only Facebook and YouTube (Twitter, 2012).

2.3 Breaking Stories with Social Media

Social media, to include Facebook, was debuted on a large-scale campaign in the 2008 presidential campaign of then-candidate Barack Obama. The usage was meant to reach a younger audience to get his more progressive message out to the younger generation of voters (Kushin, 2009).

According to Adams and Smith, the 2008 campaign saw both candidates, Obama and McCain, use different social media, to include Facebook, as a means to collect contributions, view video of campaign speeches and announce planks that made up the platform on which they were running for office (p. 2). Further information about the candidates' usage of the technology went out to those that had signed up for information on the candidate's social media pages. “Most individuals recognize that the letters sent were generic templates sent to all supporters,” the research said, “however, still it made voters feel connected with the candidate” (p. 2).

Proliferation of social media throughout the newsroom has given way to using the technology as a way to bring readers breaking news. A reporter on the ground with a smart phone can be all a news outlet needs to be able to get the scoop on a competitor. This method of breaking a story does have its pitfalls. Social media presents a potential problem in the accuracy of that information.
2.4 How Social Media Can Work v. How Social Media Does Work

When best practices are not established errors are made in breaking stories. This action leads to an age-old dilemma for editors and reporters. When do you break a story and how much information do you release?

The American Society of News Editors (ASNE) used a blend of policy and guidelines from newsrooms around the United States to create their version of best practices for the use of social media. The policies have not been met with complete acceptance since they were introduced in May 2011. Of the ten practices proposed, one has garnered a bit of controversy from national news leaders, both in print and online. According to the ANSE guidelines, “Break news on your website, not on Twitter” (Hohmann, 2011, p. 8).

The ASNE rationalizes that, in the journalistic world today, the temptation is strong to use Twitter and Facebook to break stories while reporters are still in the field in lieu of writing as per the organization's guidelines, and allowing the piece to work through the editorial process. The process not only ensures journalistic standard but also prevents the story from being in the ether of the Internet, where it can be picked up and worked by a rival agency. The scoop may belong to one organization but another may have the higher-quality story (Hohmann, 2011, p. 8).

On the other hand, a story dealing with a meeting or scripted press conference may have merit to be pushed across Twitter, the ANSE publication said. Reporting on the story is not compromised by the information hitting the social media. Everyone has access to it at the same time. There really is no time advantage involved. In either case, the practice recommends that journalists using Twitter and Facebook always include a link to the story on the organization's website.

Below are policy statements from two news organizations that participated in the compilation of the ANSE publication:
**Denver Post:** “The default should be to break news on denverpost.com — not on a social network.

Once the story is live on the site, you should then post it on your social network and link to the story. There will be cases when we hold exclusive news for the paper, or when we will choose to push updates out on social media, but those decisions should be made in consultation with your editor.”

**POLITICO:** “Remember, your first priority is to report stories for Politico, not to drive Twitter traffic. … Don’t break a major story via Twitter until you can include a link back to the Politico story. We don’t want to give our exclusives away without being able to maximize our traffic from those stories. Also, you don’t want your Twitter feed to scoop a Politico story.” (p. 8)

*The Denver Post* clarifies its stance on the use of Twitter to break a story by saying a journalist should consult with an editor before anything goes out on a social media site prior to going on the website (Hohmann, 2011, p. 21).

Other outlets, such as the Roanoke Time/Roanoke.com, see the use of social media as being important to the work of a journalist. The organization's policy, as reported in the ANSE piece, makes the claim that “journalists who insist on avoiding them [social media] are likely to miss good opportunities and great stories” (Hohmann, 2011, p. 28). To that end, The Roanoke Times/Roanoke.com has established a protocol that requires journalists to independently verify their sourcing of a story through offline means and implores the process of multi-sourcing. That is to say,
face-to-face or telephone interviews should be used as well, to gain verified reports.

In the case of breaking stories, The Roanoke Time/Roanoke.com management sets forth a policy that allows for breaking a story only in cases where the reporter is asked, or the story has been approved for release, by an editor. If that is the case, the tweet is then re-tweeted through the official newspaper Twitter account, giving full credibility to the report (Hohmann, 2011, p. 29). Reporters had better have done their job correctly, and sources had better be properly vetted at that point.

Not everyone agrees with the practical application of the ANSE best practices of social media use. Scott Rosenberg responded to the ANSE proposal, via Twitter, by saying, “Don’t break news on Twitter. Wait to post to web & watch as other people break news on Twitter. [ASNE guidelines need work]” (Rosenberg, 2011). If a journalist waits for the story to hit the website before breaking it to followers on Twitter, the scoop, no matter how quickly the story can weave through the editorial process, has been lost to the outlet that did tweet the story.

Steve Buttry, director of community engagement for the Journal Register Company, sees room for improvement on the practices as well. The problem with the suggested practice, Buttry said, is that it comes from the old mindset of traditional print journalism (Grahan, 2011). Should a journalist get the information out before his organization has time to break it in an official capacity? The argument started when news websites had the opportunity to get the story out before that day's edition of the print product hit the streets. Buttry calls it the fear of “scooping ourselves” (Buttry, 2011). The concept is outdated. You have the information. You have scooped your competitors.

2.5 Examples of System Failure with Social Media

2.5.1 The death of Joe Paterno

On January 21, 2012, the most recent example of erroneous reports became a national story as an embattled college football legend was drawing near to death. A single tweet, broadcast to all of the followers of the State University of Pennsylvania's student-run Web site, Onward State, Twitter
account, reported:

Our sources can now confirm: Joseph Vincent Paterno has passed away tonight at the age of 85. t.co/KAgJKILM (Sonderman, 2012)

That tweet hit the screens of fans and followers around 8:45 p.m.

Under usual journalistic circumstances, the fact that that news was then picked up and carried on a national level would have been the dream of any college journalism student. Not in this case.

The tweet, generated by Onward State's managing editor, Devon Edwards, was wrong. Paterno was very-much alive. The former coach succumbed to complications of lung cancer the following day.

As the news flowed from outlet to outlet, nearly every organization ran the story without verifying the information. The firestorm that ensued resulted in Edwards stepping down and CBS, among other news outlets, issuing apologies to their viewers and online followers for the error.

### 2.5.2 The mission to kill Osama bin Laden

As U.S. military helicopters flew into position deep in Pakistan, night had fallen and people all around were sound asleep, with the exception of a young man over three miles away. Sohaib “Really Virtual” Athar was awakened by the sounds of chopper blades and explosions. As the night went on, Athar tweeted what he was hearing. He had no idea that he was the one that would break the news of the raid that would take the life of Osama bin Laden. His series of tweets told of the military helicopter that was downed. He told of the noises that echoed throughout the night. His tweets scooped the world's media (Jennings, 2011).

Meanwhile, as the raid unfolded on the television screens of the Situation Room, deep in the White House, news of the kill found its way to a former high-ranking defense department official Keith Urbahn. Urbahn is the former chief of staff to former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. At 10:25
p.m., Urbahn sent out the following tweet:

So I'm told by a reputable person they have killed Osama Bin Laden.
Hot damn. (Jennings, 2011)

The tweet was received by many in the journalism business. It set the wheels in motion to cover the story. Urbahn's message, though without complete confirmation, scooped President Barack Obama's address to the nation by an hour (Stelter, 2011). Quick posting on Twitter, and sourcing in response, by journalists covering the White House had anonymous reports coming out of the Pentagon as to what was unfolding. According to a New York Times report, by 11 p.m., there were more than 12 Facebook posts per second being written containing the words “bin Laden” and the New York Post and Huffington Post websites had already announced that the raid was successful. Osama bin Laden was dead (Stelter, 2011).

As social media broke the story and more and more evidence backed up the story, the President of the United States had been scooped by the global media on his own story. According to Alexia Tsotsis, technology writer for the Huffington Post, and other tech websites, the original tweet by Urbahn was “re-tweeted hundreds of times and Twitter itself experienced traffic spikes of 4,000 tweets per second” (Jennings, 2011).

As can be seen in these examples, the power of social media to bring information to readers is very strong, if done correctly. If the information is released without due diligence on the part of the journalist the information can start a chain reaction of incorrect information flooding the public stream. Had Edwards contacted a few key people around Paterno to confirm his death, he may still be the editor of Onward State and other news organizations would not have had the proverbial egg on their face in having to correct the information. Urbahn's tweet, though not confirmed, set the wheels in
motion for news media, globally, to confirm the story. Even without the confirmation of the best source, a presidential address, news agencies were able to take their time and perform due diligence to have enough of a confirmation to report on their respective websites.

2.6 Philosophical Foundation

As a journalist, the researcher, still early in the stages of a career, holds to the belief that, in the truest sense of American journalism tradition, truth and service to the information consumer holds as the highest goal of the profession, as well as the goal of communication professionals. A journalist's ability to truthfully bring a story to those who hold the information as important rests on the ability to ethically use all the current tools available to bring that information.

As communication is quickened by an increasingly rapid growth of technology, it is the role of the journalist to be able to weed through the technology that is useful and those forms that are not. It is also important, from an industry standpoint, to understand when a technology is no longer useful and is retired, as it were. It is the role of the communication scholar to aid in wading through the continuous wave of technology, assisting those like the journalist in knowing how to properly employ strategies that will make the most of the technology at hand.

The role of the journalist as the gatekeeper, as described by Lewin (1943), is starting to wear thinner and thinner as technology brings information to the consumer in a quicker manner, with less filters. The role of the journalist telling people what they “need” to know is coming to an end. Pushing the information through the filter is no longer valid. The consumer will find the information they deem as important. That information no longer needs to pass through the filters. Social media, like Twitter, allow that to happen.

2.7 Theoretical Foundation

2.7.1 Agenda Setting Theory

One of the biggest dilemmas to face the news editor is what information is important enough to
break on social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. Surely, the story about the middle school student winning a class spelling bee is not Twitter material, but it may be perfect for Facebook. It is the job of the editor to act as a gatekeeper, an agenda-setter of information that is worthy of the community's conversation. It is the job of the journalist to bring the story to the consumer in a manner that fills the consumer's need. If there is an accident on Main Street that has traffic rerouted for three blocks, the journalist in the field needs to be the one to tell the consumer. Technology, marching ever forward, has given the journalist the ability to do that.

Walter Lippmann (1922) introduced the idea that the media created the mental pictures of the world. It is the media that creates the perception of all things in a person's world. Those pictures, according to Lippmann, were flawed, however. The reality that the media presented to the public was never a true, complete image of the reality believed to be formed. According to Lippmann, it was not reality that was being seen through the media's presentation but a reflection of reality.

It was not until 1972 that more of the idea was developed. McCombs and Shaw (1972) built onto Lippmann's theory to show that what the media was projecting as reality was not simply the factor. What drove the perception was related to what stories the media covered. McCombs and Shaw (1972) developed the theory that the media selects what stories are worthy of attention on a larger level after a study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to determine if stories accepted by editors shaped the way readers in the area think about the topics presented.

McCombs and Shaw were not finished with their ideas on media's influence over what is important and what is not. In 1977, the two conducted a study to further investigate how media were able to use agenda-setting principles. The two replicated the original findings and took the study further by looking at the level of civic engagement in voters as the media coverage of political campaigns increased. The two found that not only did the story influence consumers, but the medium on which the message was carried, latent political leanings and the level the consumer needed to be directed were all
factors in what level the media influenced the perception of their consumers (McCombs 1977).

**2.7.2 Determinants of Agenda-Setting Effects**

Media consumers are not going to blindly accept everything a news agency creates for their consumption. Since McCombs and Shaw conducted their research, and certainly since Lippmann established the idea, others have found there are factors that contribute to the level at which the media consumer will allow their perception to be swayed through media coverage. In 2006, Wanta and Ghanem conducted research to show that not always was credibility and reliance in a media outlet enough to sway perception, but also the level of exposure a story receives. The more often a story is placed in front of a consumer the more likely that topic is to become important to the consumer.

The need for orientation on an issue plays into the level at which the consumer allows the media to set the agenda. Zucker (1978) found that the less obtrusive an issue is on the life of the consumer the more likely the media is to give direction of the stance on the issue. That is to say, the less emotion that is brought into the issue by the consumer, the more the media is needed to give direction as to how to feel on said issue. Weaver (1977) found the same effect to be in play.

Shaw and Martin (1992) built onto the theory to take into account the ability for the community to recognize and affect the agenda being set. The theory establishes the ability for social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, to create a community consensus that better reflects the larger communal voice.

In the digital age, the question has become, to what level are the media able to still set the agenda? Are the media still the group that shapes public perception? Chaffee and Metzger (2001) said that the question was changing, and indeed it has. Early in the 21st Century they predicted, “the key problem for agenda-setting theory will change form what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about” (p.375). They were correct. As they started to look into behaviors on blogs, engagement with others on what was important was increasing. That increase, according to other researchers, has produced the blog journalism filling sites today.
2.8 Rationale Summary

The information that comes to light has to be selected by a gatekeeper, the editor in this case. When major regional news breaks, or that accident blocks traffic, for larger areas, the decision has to be made as to how important it is to the readers. What is the agenda of an editor that pushes the information to the consumer through Twitter? That would be the agenda of getting the information to the people that need to have it, to make their lives easier.

While studies into the social political usage and implications of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media have been conducted, the implications of news and information dissemination in newspaper organizations is still in its infancy. As news becomes more and more interactive and the demand becomes more and more immediate, this study of the news implications of social media usage creates a basis for breaking news for the organization that is new to the technology.

The question remains, how does a story receive the go-ahead to break on social media sites? In rural areas, where technology does not take a foothold as quickly as it would in a larger metropolitan area, how does a journalist find the ability to post information that may be of high importance to consumers in the community.

2.9 Research Question

Social media has become a key in breaking news stories. This study examined the usage of those social media sources to answer the following questions:

**RQ1**: What policies do regional rural newspapers in the study area employ in the usage of social media for breaking a story?

**RQ2**: How does the newspaper qualify a story to run on social media networks?
Chapter Three: Scope and Methodology

3.1 Scope of the Study

This study grew out of the emerging use and discussion of Social Media platforms to break stories to news consumers by journalists. As a general rule, technology grows at a quicker pace in the larger metropolitan centers of the world. The researcher, residing in a rural metropolitan area, situated in the southwestern corner of New York state, saw the market as a different demographic than those areas that are more widely known for social media. To intentionally limit the scope of this study, participants were journalists that work in the area outlined. Since newsroom population is of all ages, this study records age as a demographical qualifier. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, based on the available time and willingness of the journalist to answer a 10-question survey.

This study operates on a newsroom journalist population of 30. The sample size of the study is a total of 12 journalists from that population that took the time to answer the survey. These figures represent the eight newspaper outlets in the two-county area of southwestern New York state.

3.2 Methodology of the Study

This study was conducted, as mentioned above, through a 10-question online survey. Journalists who volunteered to complete the survey were asked two demographic questions to establish their time in the industry and time in their current position, as a measure of longevity and level of overall experience within the industry. Technology, such as social media platforms, are widely accepted, in theory, as the domain of a younger generation. These demographics were used to offer an insight into the validity of that claim.

In no way are the respondents identified, and in no way are their respective publications be identified though the data collection survey. Anonymity is key in a close geographic area, such as that of the study territory. Should a respondent divulge a proprietary piece of information, or a trade secret of the organization to which they belong, the respondent could face repercussions, thus jeopardizing
trust in the data collection. Anonymity also serves as a protection for the researcher in this study, as he also serves in the role of editor at one of the target publications of the study. Ethically, the researcher would be irresponsible to not separate the respondent from their respective publication. The anonymity involved in the study ensures complete privacy of the respondent, as well as their organization. No trade or organizational secrets will be disclosed through participation in the study.

Since social media is a recent phenomena, and a new tool for journalists, no standardized questions into the usage of the platforms exist. For the purpose of this study, the researcher created eight open-ended questions to determine, through the words of the journalists, in an ethnographic survey, how the paper readership views the paper, how the journalists determine stories to go out on social media, if it is their call. If it is not in their scope of responsibility, who makes that decision? The remainder of the questions establish policy and the view of the future from the journalists' point of view (See Appendix A.).

3.3 Validity

Qualitative research relies on the ability to produce work that is defensible through careful and accurate collection that maintains the credibility and integrity demanded for future consideration. To maintain that integrity, it is imperative that the sample size only be reflective of organizations that have similar geographic and demographic placement as those in the sample. To fit that category, the organizations would have to be small markets in geographically rural areas of the country.

Should the methods and design of this study be deemed useful for the demographic information, the design above has been established to be easily adapted to other regions, in larger newspaper organizations' markets with minimal change.

3.4 Interpretive Validity

Accurately understanding and portraying the participant's viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, and experiences to stress and burnout in the post-downsized work environment is of great concern to this
study. In an effort to increase interpretive validity, phenomenological words were carefully chosen to accurately present the inner world of each participant. Aligned with the aim of qualitative research, the researcher looked through the eyes of each participant to gain a profound understanding of the cognitive construction at the heart of the matter.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Preservation of the integrity of the study can only be assured through full and complete adherence to stringent ethical standards. Those standards will help to ease the participant and allow them to give better and full answers to the questions in the survey as mentioned by Hoyle, Harris & Judd (2002) indicate. Each participant will give full authorization for usage of statements pertaining to the study.
Chapter Four: The Study

4.1 Introduction

This study started by contacting journalists by way of telephone and email to prepare them for the survey that would be coming their way. The 10-question instrument (Appendix A) was sent via SurveyMonkey.com, to allow the responders the ability to simply answer the questions on the screen. There would be no need to download and send back a document in attachment through email or through postage.

The online survey was held open for two weeks to allow enough time for journalists to be able to complete it despite looming deadlines and heavy story assignments. The researcher also traveled to each newsroom in the two-county region to meet with reporters who would agree to do so. The same questions were asked and answers recorded on digital recorder as well as in written notes. No identifying characteristics were collected to ensure anonymity of all respondents.

4.2 Data Analysis

As is mentioned above, the study area contains a population of 30 full- and part-time journalists through-out the two-county area, spread among eight newspapers, two of which publish daily, five are weeklies and one has been a long-established monthly paper. Only full- and part-time journalists were included in the population since their craft carries more of a professional weight in the region than those that are freelance or stringers – those who are paid on a per-story basis and are not direct employees of the newspaper.

Once the survey was closed and interviews conducted, a total of 18 respondents were willing to offer the requested information, for a 60 percent response percentage. At 60 percent, a valid assumption can be made of the research at hand. Those who did not answer voiced the inability was due to “heavy workloads” and time constraints of outside influences away from the job (Chapman, 2012).
4.3 Results

The first two questions were asked to determine the demographic of the respondents and an attempt to glimpse into the composition of the newsrooms in the study region. The first question asked the amount of time the journalist had been in the position held within the organization. Respondents to the question created a bell curve of experience in the position held. Three journalists answered that they had been in the position less than a year, three for 10 or more years, and 12 respondents said they have been in the position they were in at the time of the survey for between three and five years.

The second question asked how long the journalist has been in the career field. Of those responding, six reported that they had been in the field for between three and five years while 12 reported they had been in the field for 10 or more years.

The remainder of the questions were open ended to allow for more of a response from the respondents. Question three asked for the average age of the newsroom and level of experience to determine the general age and experience of full newsrooms from the point of view of the respondent. The results of the question show the average age of a reporter in the newsrooms of the study area to be 29, with four years of experience in the field. Some of the respondents reported that the average field experience was “moderate,” and two pointed out that many reporters in the area moved to editor roles after just a couple years in the field.

The next question left the demographic level to delve into the study focus. When asked when the organization for which these journalists worked, the responses ranged from the outlet not being active with social media, to the paper being new, to just 2 years ago, and four years ago. One respondent said the organization did not enter the social media age until that person and a couple others were hired. It was that person, along with those peers, who pushed management and ownership into utilization of the platform.

Next, the respondents were asked what policies govern content, in general, that is uploaded to
social media platforms. Responses again varied from lack of use to the decision being that of the journalist. Some said it was “the call of the managing editor, as to what is deemed tweetable.” Others responded that posting is discouraged unless the post is mostly a link back to the official website of the newspaper. One respondent said:

All content that is added to social media must have direct relevance to the company, whether it be a new article that was written, a reader's poll, or announcing an upcoming promotion. It is not used to share personal views or opinions or content from other organizations, websites, etc.

Another respondent said the decision to post on social media is the call of the journalist, so long as the posts are to an official Twitter or Facebook page identifying the journalist as being on the job for that newspaper.

Following up on the policy, the next question asked the respondents of the policies that dictate the speed at which a post goes up on a social media platform. Responses brought to light the inability of the journalists in most of the organizations in the study area to truly break news on social media, at least with any true speed. The most expedient policy was that the posting time is determined “by how fast a reporter can write it, and if the reporter has a desire to post breaking news on the web/social media.” Several others said their newspaper's website is tied in to social media to post a story as soon as it is posted on the website. Others said the posting is tied to publication of the print product, and one other said the posting to social media decisions are based on the person that is “in charge” of updating the website and social media sites for that day.

All of these questions were summed up by a couple of questions that were about the perception of the newspaper by the readership area. A general question of how the readers describe the newspaper
resulted in comments that cover the range of possible feelings. Three respondents said their paper is viewed well by the readership. One said that their paper is known as a “community organ” that is vital to the survival of the community. It is the place to go to find out what is happening within the borders of the community. Another respondent said readers view the paper as “community oriented with a positive emphasis on local issues, events and people.” Other respondents said the community does not have an impression either way on the paper. The majority viewed the public perception of their paper as being filled with nothing but bad news and having a lack of concern for the community that they cover. One, working for a paper named the *Times-Herald*, said the paper is “affectionately known as the *Times-Horrible.* (Chapman, 2012)"

While opinions of the use of social media to break news stories ran the gamut, several respondent said the readership carries a love-hate relationship with the paper, in that complaints will always filter to the editors, despite the coverage, and any perceived bias, of the reporter that covered the story. Those same readers would be the public outcry if the paper were to decide to no longer print a product and become a web-based outlet.

Coupled with the above question, respondents were asked what demographic they felt needed to be bolstered by the newspaper. Many papers, as has been pointed out in this study, are finding it increasingly difficult to engage a younger generation. Of the 18 respondents, 16 responded that the younger generations needed to be better engaged and that the paper needs to build its online and social media presence. The two giving answers outside of that area said they actually had a problem getting older readership to even pick up the paper. One respondent said, “Every demographic [needs bolstered]. People read our paper for the obituaries.” the other said the paper needed to attract more readers in the 50 to 80 year-old demographics.

As a way to tie incentive to the questions, the next asked if there has been an impact on readership or revenue that can be tracked to the use of social media. The majority of comments show
that there has been an increase of readership and some increase of advertising. One respondent said, “Readership has increased...you can tell from analytics that more people are visiting the website. It also increases general awareness of the product and helps in attracting additional advertisers.” Others said they have seen an increase in readership because of the interaction that social media opens for the reader. One respondent said his organization has had growth in this factor. “Because we're not allowed to put too much on there (social media), not really. But Facebook users to interact with the Facebook, often comment and ask questions, post their own information on the page. It seems they feel more inclined to interact with the Facebook than the official website” (Chapman, 2012).

The final question asked the journalists to take a look into the future. What could they see their organizations doing in the future as far as social media? The researcher was asking for an answer on the possibility of increase, decrease or the use of social media staying the same. Of the 18 respondents, two said they did not see social media being implemented or expanded upon in the future of the organization. One respondent said the current ownership was not a proponent of the use of social media to report the news. The other negative respondent said the usage would stay the same due to the staffing situation of their organization and the age of the readership. Of the positive responses, one said the amount of usage would increase as soon as the summer following the study [summer of 2012]. The same respondent said the organization would also be branching out to include readers' stories on new social media platforms such as Storify. Another sees the importance in the organization's ability to embrace and increase the use of social media:

I think the use of social media is practically a requirement for any modern organization. I think unless the paper finds a way to jump on bored and make the website functional and allows us (and gives us time) to utilize social medias, there's no way we'll last, according to one respondent.
Another respondent said the rate of usage would probably stay the same, but the respondent's organization seems to understand the importance of multiple platforms:

Social media is becoming a key component in promoting the organization as well as the content and information it provides to the public. As a result, our company will continue to utilize this feature at about the same rate it currently is being used.

4.4 Discussion

An analysis of the data shows that, although diverse in age and experience, the population of journalists in the two-county region seems to be, for the most part, embracing social media as another way to engage readers, maybe even to bring new readers into the fold. The premise of the study, to look into the use of social media platforms as a way to break news in the region, seems to be stifled with the majority of management in the newspapers studied. Although the majority of the journalists in the region are technologically savvy to the point of being able to use the platforms for more, the use of social media is limited to a role of mirroring content on the website for many of these journalists.

4.4.1 RQ1: What policies do regional rural newspapers in the study area employ in the usage of social media for breaking a story?

Reviewing the data related to RQ1, it is apparent that there really are no hard policies in place for any of the newspaper organizations in the study region. The closest would be the respondent that said the decision of what goes on the social media sites belongs to the managing editor. This finding was in line with expectation as social media platforms' usage in breaking news is considered to be new in the journalistic world. As has been mentioned above, it wasn't until recently that an accredited
organization within the field made an attempt to pull together a list of best practices. As was shown, very few agree with ASNE on their attempt (Buttry, 2011).

While the majority of respondents, nearly 89 percent, say that their organization does use social media, the same amount said they do not see a very large increase in the usage of those social media platforms by their organizations in the future. A look at other areas of data shows that, at the majority of the newspapers in the study area, journalists report that their revenue and readership increased through the use of social media. If the journalists are noticing an increase in advertising in the newspaper, it is doubtful that the publisher and, therefore, the managing editor have not noticed the increase as well. It is interesting that, if a product is proven to be more profitable, development into more usage of the source of that increase is not being undertaken.

4.4.2 RQ2: How does the newspaper qualify a story to run on social media networks?

As with RQ1, the data holds that RQ2 would need to be qualified as having no true policy in place for the journalists in the field, working stories. Strategies for posting news, much less breaking news, do not exist in the western Southern Tier of New York state. Newspaper organizations have strategies that are all over the board, if they are using the platforms at all. Again, use of the ASNE guidelines would be a great place for these organizations to start in the creation of an implementation strategy for social media platforms. While many are using the sites to bolster content that is running concurrently on the website and in the printed pages, an overarching strategy does not exist.

The responses from those that are responsible for creation of the content show a bit of frustration, in tone, directed at the decision-making levels of management. The journalists see that their industry's future is directly based in the embracing of these social media. To embrace the platform, an organization needs to consider the direction of the industry, according to one respondent. Without that integration with the technology, the organization will run the risk of falling into irrelevancy and no longer existing.
Chapter Five: Summaries and Conclusions

5.1 Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to a small sample of a limited population. The sample size of 18 and population of 30 represent a small rural population as an exploratory pilot study. As a result, the results of the study cannot be applied to a larger geographic area with metropolitan areas. Those areas will present more-refined policies in relation to social media usage, not just in breaking news but in story postings to drive readership and advertising. The study is meant to be a preliminary look at how smaller areas, such as the study region, use new technology and platforms to bring consumers the news.

5.2 Further Study and Recommendations

As social media platforms become increasingly accepted among the journalistic community the role it plays in the way stories are covered, the speed at which those stories reach the consumer, and in what manner will open many new avenues for research into various aspects of the emerging media. As the standards of use for platforms like Twitter continue to evolve research into several areas have the potential to cross disciplines. Not only does the potential for study continue along the communication vein, but also along social and political science lines.

Breaking news in the rural areas of Chautauqua and Cattaraugus Counties, in the southwestern corner of New York state, is a different animal than breaking news in the major metropolitan area such as New York City, Los Angeles and Washington D.C.. Those areas will require more study as the technology continues to develop. With a newsroom staff of around 1,100, the New York Times (NYT Fact Sheet) has nearly 16 times more reporters than both the counties in the study at 73. In an organization that large, producing the content the New York Times is known for, the average age and experience of the newsroom staff would seem to be higher than at a smaller paper in a rural area, such as that of the study region. How would these factors play into, not only the use of platforms in breaking stories, but the very implementation of the technology into the organization.
A study into the implementation and integration of technology into news organizations, viewed from the upper management levels, would be a significant study. Decisions made by the Managing Editor, Executive Editor and even the Publisher are vital to the function of a news organization. The process and consideration of each new technology as it enters the market would be worth study to determine how communication is shifting within traditional newspaper organizations.

Lastly, the way that technology will be used by media consumers is driven by the technology that a region has readily at its disposal. One long-standing axiom of the study area is that it is a decade behind the rest of the county. On many levels it has been proven to be true. The region was about that far behind the rest of the country in widespread use of Facebook and is only now really entering the Twitter craze. Despite the two counties having an average age (both counties are around 36 years of age) younger than that of the country (37.2 years old), technology takes a while longer to catch on in the rural area.

5.3 Conclusions

As has been exhibited, rural area media outlets are struggling more so than their metropolitan cousins. Technology enhances the ability to bring information to consumers at a quicker pace but has no instruction manual on how to effectively use the medium to build a greater presence and educate the consumers of important information. It is no longer, what issues are important and why. Lippmann said, in 1922, that pictures painted by media are not complete nor accurate. McCombs and Shaw (1972) said media dictates our thoughts on issues. That is no longer.

Small-market areas develop at a slower rate than the large-market brothers. As groups, like ASNE, develop guides for potential best practices, the smaller siblings are the beneficiaries of the information. Yes, larger newspapers may have better ideas and can implement them at a quicker rate, but the smaller papers need a bit of help from time to time. Buttry (2011) exposed flaws in the ASNE guidelines but really offered little in the way if suggestions for overarching rules. Smaller newspapers,
squeaking out an existence in rural areas, need to take a look at these guides and implement until they are able to create best practices of their own.

The eight papers in the study area are all in the process of establishing policies to give reporters more guidance on how to post to social media, such as Twitter. Some are leaving it up to the reporters to create the rules as they go, which is hardly ever a good idea. Revenues are falling in print. Papers are decommissioning their presses daily. Technology has always been at the backbone of the industry, ever since the Gutenberg press made its debut in 1440. The industry has developed to survive. This is one of those times. For the survival of the industry, technology like social media needs to be embraced and implemented to its fullest extent. Since further study into the use of social media use in newspapers will undoubtedly occur, study into the technological drive should occur.
References


Appendix A

Survey on Breaking News in Traditional Newspaper Organizations Through Social Media
(Includes Persuasive Attempt to Garner Responses that Was Included in the Email)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The research conducted is in how
newspaper organizations in the Cattaraugus and Chautauqua County region of Western New York break
stories on social media.

I am asking that you help me out with a bit of time to complete a 10-question survey on how
your agency uses social media like Twitter and Facebook to break stories.

Let's face it, we are in a time when each one of us is faced with the problem of how to use these
social media, and to what level, when it comes to telling the story of each of our respective
communities. I ask that you take just a bit of time out of your busy day to help us all in understanding
how we, in our own little corner of New York State, are using emerging technology to produce better
information for our readers and media consumers across all platforms.

Questions:

✓ How long have you held your position within your organization?
✓ How long have you been in the journalism field?
✓ What is the average ages and experience level of your organization's editorial staff?
✓ When did your organization start using social media?
✓ What policies dictate content that is uploaded to social media?
✓ What policies dictate the speed at which stories are posted to social media?
✓ How do readers describe your newspaper?
✓ What demographic would you say needs bolstered for your newspaper?
✓ Has social media increased revenue or readership?
✓ What do you feel is the direction social media will take in the future of your organization?