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# EXPLORING TWITTER REPORTING AND BEST PRACTICES IN A SOUTH AFRICAN NEWS ORGANISATION

## ABSTRACT

*Twitter journalism is a new phenomenon with limited local research that identifies specific models for the dissemination of news that could be used in a South African newsroom context. Identifying best practises when using Twitter alongside a primary medium of news production is crucial to understanding how to harness the potential of this social networking site. Methods to train reporters in using Twitter as a journalism tool as well as an awareness of the ethical implications pertaining to the incorporation of Twitter in mainstream news, also need to be established. This article identifies Twitter journalism in the South African context by using a local news organisation, Eyewitness News (EWN), as case study. Self-administered questionnaires and interviews were used to collect qualitative data from reporters and senior editorial staff. Based on the findings, guidelines are provided for a localised Twitter journalism model, which could be used when developing media policies, newsroom production strategies, journalism training courses and ethical guidelines that encompass the use of social media tools as necessities in mainstream newsrooms.*

**Keywords:** Eyewitness News; fake news; innovation; newsrooms; social networking sites; Twitter journalism

## INTRODUCTION

As technological, economic and infrastructure advancements increase Internet access globally, social networking sites (SNSs) have become communication mainstays for millions of users. Not only do SNSs provide new avenues for the dissemination of information and news reports, but personal and professional relationships are also forged on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. This is achieved by means of public and private messaging, photo sharing and providing hyperlinks in tweets and Facebook posts to other online information sources and news organisations' websites. The importance of studying the impact of Twitter on news dissemination has increased as journalists move away from merely using the SNS as a news gathering tool but also as a news production tool (Garman & Van der Merwe 2017: 312).

Boyd and Ellison (2008: 211) define SNSs as web-based services that allow users to create profiles within online environments and select other users with whom they want to connect and whose information they are interested in. Although various SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube share similarities such as real-time feedback and interactive features to promote user participation, “the nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd & Ellison 2008: 211). Twitter poses various advantages within the context of online reporting. Not only does the SNS provide opportunities for rapid news dissemination, but it also enables reporters and news organisations to signal their trustworthiness to media audiences in terms of providing credible, accurate and reliable news (Barnard 2014).

This article aims to identify best practices that can be suggested for a traditional news organisation such as Eyewitness News (EWN) in order to develop social media strategies that enhance Twitter journalism within the context of mainstream newsrooms. It is posited that if there are specific best practices, these guidelines could be replicated by other news organisations to increase and amplify their presence on SNSs, and specifically Twitter, to promote the credibility and image of news organisations. It is postulated that if a news organisation manages its online presence well, it could strengthen its reputation and attract larger audiences that could, in turn, result in more advertising and increased profit margins.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND JOURNALISM

Although news organisations’ online presence and reputation could be augmented on SNSs, fake news and miscommunication spread via SNSs continues to challenge the media industry. Both consumers and news producers require increased media literacy and awareness to distinguish between reliable news reports and fake news articles. In this context it is important that reporters maintain an ethical high ground when disseminating news and/or links to websites on Twitter. This can only be achieved through proper training related to the verification of news and the dissemination thereof on SNSs as the news generators, the reporters and the consumers become more digitally literate and take measures not to promote fake news.

Albeit that fake news is a concern, SNSs offer various benefits for media audiences and news organisations alike. According to Boyd and Ellison (2008: 221), since “SNSs enable individuals to connect with one another, it is not surprising that they have become deeply embedded in [users’] lives”. An example of this is the #FeesMustFall South African student protest campaign that started in 2015 and gained rapid momentum on Twitter through the use of the hashtag, which was named Newsmaker of the Year for 2015 by the South African National Press Club (Pretorius 2016).

In addition to SNSs being deeply ingrained in the social fabric of everyday life, Joseph (2012: 43) argues that Twitter is a powerful tool that is a constant source of story ideas for reporters. Benefits include building contacts as well as finding new sources of information. Reporters can communicate directly with potential sources through tweets and direct messages, or make requests for information on their timelines which all Twitter users have access to. Additional uses of Twitter for reporters include crowdsourcing, monitoring trends, and being the foremost platform for breaking news (*ibid.*).

Unlike traditional media that promote the one-to-many news dissemination approach, Hill (2010: 8) posits that Twitter is a utility device that can serve many models including one-to-many, many-to-one and one-to-one. It is, therefore, imperative for mainstream news organisations that use traditional media, such as radio, print and television as primary platforms to communicate news reports, to embrace SNSs such as Twitter as a reporting tool and additional platform to disseminate news.

In a study that examined the Twitter practices of 1202 Italian journalists, Bentivegna and Marchetti (2018: 286) found that journalists adapted their journalistic norms to align with the social media “participatory culture”. This was implemented to build their follower base and increase the reach of their news content. In light of this, Herrera and Requejo (2012: 81) note that organisations can use Twitter effectively to distribute news. News organisations must, however, define and identify the objectives of the chosen SNSs before conceptualising newsroom strategies that will be used to communicate news via SNSs. Reporters and editors alike must take cognisance of the latest trends in news distribution and its associated processes. Furthermore, newsroom policies need to be revised, training on SNSs should be provided, and an awareness of media ethics within the context of Twitter reporting should be cultivated to accommodate and reflect the dynamic media landscape (Boers *et al.* 2012; Scott 2014). This is supported by Neilson (2018: 544) who found that although journalists were under pressure to engage online with media audiences in order to expand their news coverage, those expectations were not reinforced by adequate training, social media policies and resources.

Media convergence has promoted the merging of different news gathering and production methods. To this extent Boers *et al.* (2012: 54) note that conventional workflows that focus on one main medium are no longer suitable. Herrera and Requejo (2012: 81) argue along similar lines that news organisations must create new models of news production “that match this emerging paradigm” created by SNSs. The aim of this is to give SNSs a primary role in news production, rather than regarding it as a supplementary or inessential journalism tool.

Sharing stories and links to stories via tweets, as well as retweeting to promote the work of other reporters, can further build the reputation of the reporter and the news agency. According to Barnard (2014: 10), sharing stories and links to news agency websites as well as promoting other reporters’ work through retweets and comments, illustrate the role of Twitter in “building and maintaining status as a journalist”.

In addition, the Twitter success of the individual reporter has an effect on that reporter’s news organisation if the reporter is identified on his/her Twitter profile as working for a particular organisation. Therefore, the level of community engagement and the impact of different social media interactions become increasingly important for news organisations.

The constant evolution of the newsroom due to rapidly developing SNSs such as Twitter, Facebook and live blogging necessitates research into the use of those sites and reporters’ use thereof. As such, this research employed a social constructivism approach and qualitative research methods to explore how Twitter is used by editorial staff in a mainstream South African newsroom, namely EWN. The aims of this article are, thus, to identify the Twitter practices of EWN reporters, the ethical implications of

Twitter journalism in South Africa, and to propose social media guidelines that could be followed when reporters are trained to use Twitter as a journalism tool.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A combination of communication and information technology theories alongside mass media and cultural studies theories form the theoretical foundation of this article in order to identify the different approaches to the adoption of new technologies in newsrooms.

### Diffusion of innovations

The diffusion of innovations theory was developed by Rogers in 1962 and is regarded as one of the theoretical frameworks for this research as it provides categories in which to place different user-groups of new technologies and innovations such as SNSs like Twitter. The diffusion of innovations theory contributes to the study of the impact of Twitter on the production of news and newsroom routines and it describes the adoption of innovations, with the focus on technological developments, in relation to communication.

Twitter's rapidly expanding role as a reporting tool in newsrooms locally and abroad provides motivation for identifying how it is adopted and used by a mainstream South African news organisation. This SNS is an example of an innovation that has "trialability" (Rogers 1983: 231). The adopter (i.e. reporters, news organisations and ordinary users) is not required to pay a fee to create an account and multiple accounts can be created, updated or deactivated, if and when desired. News organisations can also create social media usage policies as well as update these policies when necessary, thereby adapting to the use of the innovation.

Although Rogers' theory of diffusion is seen as seminal research, Micó *et al.* (2013: 120) argue that the innovation process is not always predictable, especially in the news organisation context. The challenge of introducing an innovation to a complex news organisation can be minimised by simplifying and centralising the phasing-in of the innovation (Micó *et al.* 2013: 122). This makes a case study of the use of Twitter in a single newsroom ideal as other news organisations may then be able to customise best practices related to the use of such an innovation to their individual environments.

Varied applications of Twitter have been included in the production of news in South African newsrooms and this is directly associated with Rogers' categorisations of adopters and attributes that influence the use of specific innovations. With direct reference to EWN's use of Twitter in the newsroom, the 2014 *State of the newsroom South Africa* report notes that the difference between EWN and print publications was "striking" (Wits University 2014: 61). The report states that the hourly news cycles for radio and sometimes half-hourly news bulletins may be the reason why Twitter was a more natural fit for radio than for print.

### The evolution of SNSs

The 320 million monthly active Twitter account users (Twitter 2016) and more than 1.59 billion monthly active Facebook users (Facebook 2016) indicate that the phenomenon of SNSs have become central to users' daily routines (Boyd & Ellison 2008: 210).

Facebook has a multi-faceted approach to Internet usage with users being able to connect to other SNSs and online tools that include YouTube, blogs, Instagram and Twitter. By using the “share”, “link” and “like” functions, it is easy to create a chain reaction where users spread a message, photograph or video which can reach thousands of connections in a short period of time.

In contrast, Twitter does not rely on personal connections between users and does not require biographical details as Facebook does, or allow for in-depth verbal discourse (Hill 2010: 1). Instead, the success of Twitter is associated with its micro-blogging format. Previously Twitter restricted users to compile tweets with a maximum of 140 characters, but now offers a new functionality where tweets may be 280 characters (Busby 2017). This stands in stark contrast to blog posts that do not have character limits. The platform is also widely used for commercial purposes (Pcmag Encyclopaedia 2016). It also influenced the political campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the 2016 American Presidential elections, with Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 212) finding that 62 percent of US news consumers retrieved and read news from SNSs.

## Twitter journalism

The speed and brevity of Twitter makes it ideal for news organisations to disseminate “scoops” and breaking news to media audiences (Farhi 2009: 1). McAdams (2014: 32) concurs that a tweet’s character limit is the key to it being perfect for sharing news as consumers are able to get headlines and breaking news faster. Not only do news organisations have the opportunity to interact with audiences and share information on Twitter, they could also embrace the micro-blogging platform as a means of self-promotion. However, McAdams (2014: 33) argues digital skills need to be developed in South African newsrooms to optimally utilise the SNS. Individual journalists as well as news organisations’ executives must commit to this digital evolution.

The power of communicating that an individual journalist now has through the use of Twitter emphasises the need for the provision of adequate guidelines and social media policies in newsrooms (Wits University 2014: 61). However, the 2014 *State of the newsroom South Africa* report adds that while Twitter is now a mainstay of newsrooms, there is no consensus in the country on how it should be used as a professional tool (*ibid.*).

As no definitive South African set of rules govern journalists’ conduct on Twitter, Du Plessis (2014: 21) states that journalists still need to be ethical, credible and fair when working online. Pavlik (2013: 183) has a similar view, stating that innovations in news media such as the use of Twitter can only be sustained through good research, freedom of speech, accuracy and ethical behaviour.

In her study of two major South African newspapers, *Mail & Guardian* and *Rapport*, Jordaan (2013: 21) indicates that social media and Twitter are rarely mentioned in editorial planning meetings. If formalised guidelines on the usage of Twitter for reporting existed in newsrooms, as well as a code of conduct for social media use, this would require editors to pay more attention to the SNS on which news is shared.

## Gaps in existing literature

The rapid growth of Twitter has resulted in numerous studies related to a variety of fields (public relations, marketing, political communication). However, Armstrong and Gao (2010: 219) note that a more in-depth analysis of the SNS is needed to combat declining news industry resources such as staff size and decreased funding. Moreover, Vis (2013: 29) asserts that the study of Twitter and Twitter journalism is still gaining momentum and has earned a place as a research topic itself. As researchers and practitioners are faced with the challenge of defining convergence as partnerships between traditional and digital news media organisations increase, this lack of understanding makes it difficult for news organisations to develop and update their news production routines (Dailey *et al.* 2005: 3).

Addison (2014) argues that social media commentators and researchers focus largely on the technological aspects of networking but a comprehensive analysis of networked communities should be conducted. This is supported by Wasserman (2010: 10) who states that the divide between developed and developing countries in terms of access to the internet and new technologies means that academics should be looking at journalism in different contexts as South Africa lags behind technologically.

Although the use of Twitter in newsrooms has been the subject of many recent academic studies conducted in newsrooms globally, Jordaan (2013: 22) maintains that research in a developing country such as South Africa is limited to broad overviews of how SNSs have impacted newsrooms as opposed to how journalists are using the SNSs to produce news. Furthermore, Hermida (2010: 304) asserts that the ever-changing social and cultural habits of media audiences make SNSs vulnerable platforms that require ongoing research so that news organisations are able to adapt to these changing needs. Additionally, Hedman (2017:2) states that while journalists tend to adapt their use of SNSs to traditional news production processes, it is important to distinguish between “social media logic” and “news media logic” in order to optimise the use of Twitter as a journalism tool.

Local research on South African media and Twitter usage also tends to be done in the context of development and democracy, for example studying the impact of the use of SNSs by civilians during protests, rather than focusing on the actual models of Twitter journalism used in newsrooms. All of these factors provide motivation for further in-depth studies on South African news organisations’ use of Twitter journalism with the focus on working models that would, in theory, function well in a technological, social and editorial context.

## METHODOLOGY

In this research the authors followed a social constructivism paradigm and made use of primarily qualitative methods to identify the Twitter routines of EWN reporters and any best practices that exist in the EWN newsroom. Self-administered questionnaires and interviews with senior editorial staff were used to identify the ethical implications of Twitter journalism in South Africa and to propose social media guidelines that could be followed when reporters are trained to use Twitter as a journalism tool.

The EWN newsroom was used as a case study (Punch & Oancea 2014: 18). The motivation for selecting EWN was prompted by the lead researcher's own observations of that news organisation's reporters' activity on Twitter and the prominence of several of the reporters on the SNS. Although basic quantitative methods were used to obtain numeric data, the authors used thematic coding to identify themes related to the manner in which reporters at a news organisation utilised Twitter as a journalistic tool, their understanding of the platform's functionality, along with their own meanings and interpretations of the ethical implications of disseminating news on Twitter.

Purposive sampling was used due to the small population that represents the EWN newsroom. As such, the self-administered questionnaire was distributed to all 20 full-time reporters at the EWN Johannesburg newsroom and voluntary semi-structured interviews were conducted with four senior editorial staff members. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions and was divided into four sections. Face-to-face, telephonic and e-mail interviews were conducted during the data collection period and were then transcribed by the lead researcher. Research also included the observation of Twitter accounts which are linked to specific EWN reporters.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic coding based on the objectives of the research, including EWN's social media policy and social media training of reporters. The authors also analysed the responses to questionnaires in order to identify individual reporter's perceptions of Twitter usage in the EWN context.

## FINDINGS

Sixteen of the 20 EWN editorial staff who were invited to complete the self-administered questionnaire responded (i.e. a response rate of 80 percent). The findings indicate that access to a smartphone device by reporters was an essential part of their working routine as it gave them immediate access to Twitter in order to immediately compose updates (tweets) pertaining to breaking news event. All 16 respondents indicated that they had personal Twitter accounts.

In response to how the use of Twitter benefits EWN, seven respondents cited audience interaction, real-time story updates, and being able to verify news by cross-checking several sources on the SNS. Senior editorial staff interviewed also listed Twitter as being valuable for breaking news quickly and interacting with media audiences as news organisations compete for numbers, which translate into profits.

Some advantages of Twitter over radio that were identified by senior editorial staff interviewed included "calling for info from the community" (interview respondent 4) and supplementing on-air radio reports with tweets that expand on the story by including photographs and videos. In addition, interview respondent 4 said that Twitter allowed the newsroom to identify trending topics in local and global spaces and to monitor stories being promoted by so-called citizen journalists.

EWN broadcasts news bulletins every hour, news headlines every half hour, and breaking news is immediate. Therefore, according to interview respondent 4

[w]e try where possible to get the info out on whichever platform we can first. For instance, if a story breaks five minutes before a news bulletin, then the bulletin takes priority over Twitter. But if it breaks at ten past the hour, when we still have 50 minutes to go before the next bulletin, we will break it on Twitter first.

Questionnaire respondent 11 added that in the rush to publish stories sourced through Twitter, mistakes such as the incorrect spelling of sources' names and surnames as well as tweeting factually incorrect information could occur. An example of such an error was a spelling mistake found in the tweets collected during the Twitter profile observation phase of the research which read: "#Xenophobia #Alex He says while he still fears for his life (trading from behind the shop's gate), he must make ends meat" [sic].

While EWN reporters were encouraged to tweet from the official @ewnreporter account as well as their personal account, if a follower of @ewnreporter also follows the reporter, "this [could] lead to people choosing to follow individual reporters and unfollow the official account", said interview respondent 4. Interview respondent 2 stated that EWN was one of the "pioneers of live tweeting in South Africa" through coverage of court cases and live news events. Interview respondent 2 added that "Twitter [was] now part of the news gathering process and [was] seen as an absolute must to remain competitive".

Both reporters and editors cited verification of information as a key concern when using Twitter whilst reporting news. Questionnaire respondent 5 said, "[t]here are moments when one would like to be brutally honest about one's views on Twitter, but to do so would be detrimental to both your brand, and that of your employer". Questionnaire respondent 8 added that due to the character limit on Twitter, reporters "[cannot] include context; people read tweets isolated and make wrong assumptions".

Derived from the questionnaire, the authors were able to establish that reporters faced various ethical dilemmas as they conducted their daily work duties. This included the following main themes: the need to separate personal views on matters; and maintaining objectivity in order to make decisions in short time frames. The immediacy of Twitter allows impulsive behaviour, which may lead to tweeting subjective information and/or personal standpoints that are unrelated to news events. Nine reporters made comments related to decreased accuracy with tweets as a result of time and space limitations on Twitter.

Responses from the interviews corroborate the findings from the questionnaire with interview respondent 4 stating that,

[t]he main challenge is the verification of information – both in terms of info going out and in terms of info picked up on Twitter by our journalists. With the increasing speed of news dissemination, often the information concerned is not properly verified.

Additionally, interview respondent 2 said,

[a]s we have seen a wrong step on Twitter can and does cost careers. So this is a field we have to navigate carefully.

Senior staff members interviewed said that mistakes ranging from typing errors to more serious errors tended to occur when reporters used Twitter to report timeously

on a news story. “The key here is correct these quickly and to learn from them,” said interview respondent 2, adding, “[a] big challenge is how we approach correcting factual errors on Twitter and whether to delete incorrect tweets (and deal with the abuse that comes with doing that), or leave them on Twitter with a correction attached”. The abuse referred to includes the reaction that some SNS users have when a reporter corrects or deletes news tweets. Users may interpret the correction or deletion as an attempt to hide information or hidden biases of the reporter or news organisation.

Both questionnaire and interview respondents indicated that factual errors arising from the speed at which a reporter needed to live tweet news stories or break major news stories was the biggest ethical challenge faced by EWN editorial staff. Making judgement calls regarding breaking news tweets without having to first obtain approval from a senior or editor, placed the burden of responsibility on junior editorial staff. This trend is supported by findings that Dutch journalists were increasingly relying on SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook as reliable sources of news and information (Internationale Nederlanden Groep 2015: 4).

Findings from the questionnaire and interviews showed that EWN provided adequate training for staff members. There was, however, a need for further training that is focused on speed and accuracy when under pressure whilst live tweeting stories. Although the fast pace of newsrooms may limit the amount of time allocated for training, editorial managers should dedicate more time to training journalists on how to use Twitter as a reporting tool alongside news production for the organisation’s primary news medium (Scott 2014: 9).

The majority of the respondents (93.75%) who completed the self-administered questionnaire were aware of the EWN social media policy and had an understanding of the policy. The policy itself is detailed in giving reporters clear explanations of Twitter’s terms and functions and includes examples of how to use the SNS to tweet news and enhance reporting. Based on the findings there is, however, scope to make recommendations with regard to a more comprehensive social media policy.

The findings showed that a combination of adequate training and a detailed social media policy were in place to provide guidance to EWN reporters and editorial staff. By means of a combination of on-the-job learning, benchmarking of other news organisations’ social media policies, as well as consulting with social media legal experts, EWN’s use of Twitter has evolved as the SNS has grown.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of benefits, the ability to cross-check several sources was mentioned as a key advantage, and seven respondents cited audience interaction, real-time story updates and being able to verify news through the SNS. Interview respondents 2 and 4 also listed Twitter as being valuable for breaking news quickly and enhancing audience interaction and numbers as news organisations compete for prominence and eventual profit because of more advertising revenue. Although Beckett and Mansell (2008: 6) warned of the threat of SNSs to the journalism landscape, by embracing Twitter and using it on a regular basis to disseminate news, the EWN editorial team has made

Twitter an essential news gathering and reporting tool. Another benefit pointed out by the respondents was that instead of pitting radio against Twitter, both could be used effectively due to the following characteristics: different audience profiles; and the ability to supplement a story that breaks on one platform by using the other platform.

Other benefits emerging from the research include measuring the progress of a story as well as identifying big stories from other news organisations and building contacts. EWN's editorial routines and practices showed that newsrooms should have at least one functional official Twitter account from which all reporters on duty could tweet while covering news stories for their news organisation.

One key finding was that all reporters had to balance multiple Twitter account activity as part of their daily work practices. Again, the need for multi-skilled reporters is emphasised as key to the successful use of SNSs as part of the news production process (Wallace 2013: 100). Reporters are continually under pressure to tweet from multiple accounts, including personal and official EWN accounts in order to build their personal accounts as well as the news organisation's account. This needs to be done accurately in order to maintain credibility. However, the EWN editorial management team does not compel reporters to tweet from both personal and official accounts. The segregation of personal versus official (the news organisation's verified) Twitter accounts, also ensures that media audiences are made aware of the fact that a reporter tweets in his/her personal capacity when tweeting from a personal account. Conversely, when including his/her initials or his/her Twitter handle in a tweet sent by the official (verified) EWN Twitter account, it signifies that the reporter is "officially" representing EWN and disseminating factual information.

As established during the interview phase of the research, EWN editorial management are aware of the impact and importance of tweeting in order to promote the news produced by the editorial team. However, there is no set practice related to the development of personal Twitter accounts in conjunction with activity on the formal EWN accounts.

Findings related to live tweeting, followers and interaction suggest there is a link between media audience interaction and the number of tweets produced. This leads to increased exposure and increased followers, which help to promote the news produced if a reporter tweets from both official and personal accounts. A study by Olausson (2017: 3) refers to the "celebrified journalist" and explores the relationship between promoting a news brand and the celebrity or popularity of a journalist. Therefore, EWN should make use of the link in order to build their followers and expand the reach of their news stories.

Lastly, one important motivation for the organisation to promote the personal accounts of their reporters is, as Bruns and Highfield (2012: 4) state, "[...] although this may add to an already busy work schedule, individual journalists are better placed to engage in actual conversations with their audiences through social media such as Twitter".

The following are proposed additional Twitter guidelines and best practices that were formulated for news organisations such as EWN:

- ◆ The basics of journalism such as factual correctness of information and the spelling of names and surnames should be verified before a tweet is posted.

- ◆ The issue of verifying information is closely related to ethical standards. The policy should overtly clarify that information must be verified in order for both the news organisation and the reporter to remain credible and trustworthy.
- ◆ Reporters should attend a training workshop where deleting tweets, creating lists and advanced searches are explained and practised.
- ◆ Emphasis should be placed on transparency when reporters are trained to delete tweets and to post apologies alongside corrected content.
- ◆ Simulated news scenarios should be used, as part of a workshop's learning outcomes, to teach reporters how to deal with character limitation and the pressure to tweet factually and grammatically correct tweets.
- ◆ Simulated news scenarios that specifically focus on the dissemination of exclusive information (breaking news) should be introduced in training workshops.
- ◆ Reporters should have a list of possible scenarios (i.e. news events) where Twitter reporting takes precedence over radio or vice versa. This would assist junior reporters in their decision-making skills.
- ◆ Even if a reporter is under pressure to tweet breaking news, information and/or photographs that may contain sensitive information should first be sent to the news editor or in-house law expert. Their advice should be sought before tweeting sensitive information.
- ◆ The policy should clearly explain the steps reporters should take to rectify factually incorrect information. The statement could read: "Do not simply delete tweets that were sent in error or tweets that were factually incorrect. Rather post an apology and formulate a new tweet alongside it that clearly explains the error."
- ◆ A basic guide or document should be formulated by using previous Twitter "faux pas" (errors) and conduct a workshop where these errors (spelling mistakes, the deletion of tweets and the dissemination of ethically sensitive information or photographs) are discussed in great detail. Scenarios pertaining to ethical, legal or editorial dilemmas should be discussed in this document and/or workshop.
- ◆ Self-regulation should be explained to reporters in greater detail. For example, provide a definition of self-regulation alongside concrete examples thereof.
- ◆ The notion of accountability when disseminating information on SNSs should be defined in the social media policy.
- ◆ Although self-regulation is common practice in journalism, reporters should be made aware that editors or content managers will monitor their activities periodically to ensure that they uphold principles such as fair and unbiased reporting.
- ◆ Twitter arguments and rules regarding the use of expletives, diversity issues and sexual content should be discussed with all reporters on a continual basis.

- ◆ The social media policy should include specific means that could be used by reporters to report instances of online abuse or bullying anonymously.
- ◆ Personal development courses such as multi-skilled reporting, the use of equipment and software-specific social media training should be held more regularly or self-study guides should be disseminated to reporters via the organisation's intranet or via e-mail.
- ◆ The creation and dissemination of multimedia content should receive greater attention. This could be attained by either organising workshops or formulating basic guidelines.
- ◆ The policy should explain to reporters how to prioritise their work output when faced with having to choose between tweeting and another activity such as taking a video.
- ◆ Concrete definitions of personal tweeting versus professional tweeting should be included in the policy. Examples of the two different practices should be given to reporters and discussed at a workshop.
- ◆ The use of personal and organisational Twitter accounts should be explicitly described in the policy. For example, clear guidelines when to include the news organisation's official Twitter handle or when to only include the reporter's initials in a tweet should be formulated.
- ◆ Audience interaction should be increased by reporters by, for example, replying to tweets, retweeting followers' comments and/or replying to direct messages. Training opportunities on the use of applications that produce analytics reports should also be introduced as a means to assist reporters to increase meaningful audience engagement, leading increased EWN news story consumption.
- ◆ Reporters should be given guidelines on how often they should create tweets that encourage interaction and comments from followers including opinions, descriptive tweets which include atmosphere at a news event, and questions related to news stories being covered by the reporter.

## CONCLUSION

Identifying best practices for Twitter journalism is valuable to all news organisations. This research sought to identify best practices that could be suggested for a traditional news organisation, Eyewitness News (EWN), in order to develop social media strategies that work best in mainstream newsrooms.

The authors propose that best practices identified in this research could be used as guidelines and replicated by other news organisations to enhance their presence on SNSs, and specifically Twitter, in order to promote the credibility and online reputation of news organisations. As such, it is postulated that if a news organisation manages

its online presence well, it could strengthen its reputation and attract larger audiences that could, in turn, result in more advertising and increased profit margins.

The use of SNSs and Twitter continues to be an integral part of journalism in South Africa and around the world. It is, therefore, vital that editorial management increase time and resources on developing reporting routines, policies and practices that promote ethical and high quality journalism in their newsrooms.

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