

The susceptibility of the South African Media to be used as a tool for information warfare.

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Abstract: Many theorists refer to the “digital revolution” when they refer to social media and new media technologies. Internet use can also aid journalists in the mainstream media to improve their traditional reporting in terms of speed and feedback. However media practitioners should also recognize the negative consequences and ethical implications of these new media platforms, as the sources distributing information on social media sites such as Twitter may not be truthful and accurate. Journalists should be aware that these sites can be used by enemies of the state to distribute false information. The purpose of this article will be to investigate whether the South African media is at risk of being used as a tool for information warfare. The paper adopts an argumentative analytical approach on case studies with the intention to sensitize journalists to the possibility that different forces may try and exploit their weaknesses in order to influence social opinion with potentially destabilizing effects. In conclusion the paper ends with an overview of some challenges the mainstream broadcast media have to overcome to prevent being used as weapons by the enemies of the state.

1. Introduction

Journalists are increasingly drawing on the internet and social media as news sources. The key advantage of the social media such as Twitter is that it gives journalists the opportunity to publish ‘breaking news’ around the clock. News organizations have adopted social media sites such as Twitter because its speed and brevity makes it ideal for breaking scoops. However, these attributes raise the question of whether this could be called journalism, as true reporting is not just merely stating facts, but rather verifying the information, interpreting and contextualising stories (Manoim 2006). Social media sites may *contain* journalism, but journalists and the audience should be aware that propaganda can be part of the content and therefore could be used as a weapon for information warfare. Information warfare for the purpose of this article is defined as the use of information or information technology during a time of crisis or conflict to achieve or promote specific objectives over a specific adversary or adversaries (Princeton University). The information on Facebook and Twitter often originates from partisan sources that have vested interests and ulterior motives (Maher 2006). This raises questions about the reliability of information gained from social media sources. The verification of the information distributed through these channels remains difficult and therefore false information can be disseminated. Information Warriors can potentially use these platforms to influence the population negatively against a government as seen in the recent Arab Spring (Comminos, 2011)..

2. The role of the social media in a network society

Media theorists have argued for a long time that the mass media transmit the ideas that constitute the basis upon which a society is formed and developed (Hassan 2004). However, this has been a highly contested theory since the development of the “network society”, a term coined by Castells and Van Dyke to express the reality of a 21st century information society that is characterised by its flexible, informal and less hierarchical networks (McQuail 2000). McLuhan states with his “the medium is the message” theory that technology shapes news (McLuhan 1994). In turn, whilst many users regard technology as ‘neutral’, Hassan argues that there is an ideological bias embedded in every tool (Hassan 2004). According to him the audience perceives the world through the instruments and technologies they use. Theorists such as Chandler criticise this theory for its narrow, reductionist viewpoint (Chandler 2007). Whatever the case may be, the social media revolution has changed the role of media practitioners and presents new challenges for journalists (Hirst, 2011).

The Internet and social media are valuable resources for journalists. In the field of distribution, new technology has made the production process more cost effective (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn 2004). A key advantage of the social media is that it acts as an early news alert system to give journalists the opportunity to publish breaking news around the clock.

The Mobility 2011 research project by World Wide Worx have shown that the mobile phone habits of South African phone users have evolved dramatically in 2011 since smart phones, mobile applications and the mobile Internet entered the mainstream. At the time of writing almost 83% of South African households have mobile phones with 39% of urban netizens and 27% of rural netizens browsing the Internet on their phones (Jansen van Vuuren, Grobler, & Zaaiman 2012). Thus the South African audience uses mobile platforms such as Twitter and the internet to access news on their mobile devices.

According to Rossouw, the South African media initially saw the expansion of the web as a huge threat, but since then “they have started to ride the digital wave and seize the opportunities created by it” (Rossouw 2006). Since then most newsrooms have been re-engineered into content providers that offer their news collection to other media platforms (Underwood 1995). Therefore media companies have transformed themselves to be cross media “profit centers” (Fink 1996).

Some of the key role players in the South African media industry differ about the role of the social media. The head of news research at the South African Broadcast Corporation (SABC), Izak Minnaar, suggests that journalists should use the Internet more for assistance in their reporting (Minnaar 2007). According to Maher some of the strongest forms of citizen journalism are happening on sites operated by the digital arms of traditional media (Maher 2007a). Maher argues that since the commercialised media conglomerates mostly run the traditional media, citizen journalism upholds the true ideals of the fourth estate. In the past readers had to write letters to the editor to express their opinions to reporters, whilst social media now gives the audience a direct communication line to share opinions, contacts and content with each other online (Acceleration-Media 2007). Thus in this globalised era, it is possible for the *consumers* of the content to interact with the *producers* of the content (Moerdyk 2007). As a result “modern” consumers play an important role in the network society (Fink 1996).

As new media technologies have developed, it has changed the techniques in which reporters tell stories (Powell 1993). Blogging, podcasting and social media such as Facebook and Twitter are some of the prominent new technologies that are practically implemented by reporters in their storytelling. In 2007 the Afrikaans national PBS radio station, *Radio Sonder Grense* (RSG), launched a website that offers diverse podcasts additional to the current “live streaming audio” services (Steyn 2007). These podcasts varies from short newscasts to long-form programmes that consumers can download. The webmaster, Herman Steyn states that the website offers interactivity opportunities for their audience. The station’s current affairs shows, *Monitor & Spektrum*, also have their own Facebook page on which journalists report on news as it happens. Listeners can also upload their own photographs and videos of newsworthy events on this site (MonitorenSpektrum 2012).

The Online video portal, YouTube, features clips from international news networks such as CNN. Even our local South African investigative journalism programme, *Carte Blanche*, can be downloaded from this site. Many of these clips have been uploaded on the site without permission of the authors or producers (News24 2007). Thus, the quality of the journalism or “citizen reporting” on social media websites is the subject of many debates within newsrooms and media platforms.

In explaining *Mail & Guardian (M&G) Online*’s multimedia strategy, Maher (2007) states that they want to contribute to democracy instead of entrenching the elites. Therefore social media has been called the “watchdog of the watchdog” because it monitors the mainstream media (Holian 2007). However, the question that arises then is, who will act as a watchdog and monitor the quality of information distributed via social media sites?

According to Maher (2007) ethical standards was a prominent consideration when *M&G Online* created their blog, *Thoughtleader*. In the end they created a hybrid between a group blog and a more traditional editorial site where they would be able to monitor the content that is published on the site. *M&G Online's* aim was to have an open media platform while still maintaining their reputation as a quality news source (Maher 2007b).

Maher argues that the debate between citizen journalism and the mainstream media is irrelevant, because they both aspire to the same ideals. However, it must be taken in account that blogging and tweeting often runs counter to journalistic practice. Some information on these social media sites originates from partisan sources that have vested interests and ulterior motives (Maher 2006). Social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook may *contain* journalism, but journalists and the audience should be aware that it could be used as a weapon for information warfare. Therefore journalists that use social media platforms, as sources, must still apply all the "checks and balances" associated with the standard practices of journalism (Maher 2006). Still, many theorists argue that this cannot be called journalism, as true reporting is not just merely stating facts, but rather interpreting and contextualising stories (Manoim 2006).

Though Editors and newsroom managers are grateful for the positive aspects of technology and digitisation, they are also concerned about the social media's negative consequences (Fink 1996). News distributed by social networking sites is generally written in directory style without context or interpretation (Pavlik 1998b). This is especially relevant in the case of Twitter. It has become a recent trend in newsrooms for journalists to make use of Twitter, a micro-blogging site that restricts posts to 140 characters or less, as a news-dissemination channel and a reporting and source-building tool (Smith 2011). As Farhi states: "Whether they are reporting about it, finding sources on it or urging viewers, listeners and readers to follow them on it, journalists can't seem to get enough of the social networking service" (Farhi 2009). Carafano argues that the use of social networking tools to facilitate discussion and the exchange of information on an international scale is a well-established phenomenon (Carafano 2009). However, Farhi (2009) criticises Twitter as being an "overhyped technology" and "cultural technofad". According to a new-media consultant, Craig Stoltz, news organizations have adopted Twitter because it's speed and brevity makes it ideal for breaking scoops to Twitter-savvy readers: "Twitter works best in situations where the story is changing so fast that the mainstream media can't assemble all the facts at once" (Farhi 2009). Another advantage of Twitter is that it attracts the type of audience the media wants: "those who are interested in, and engaged with, the news" (Farhi 2009).

The South African News Service "Eye Witness News" (EWN) that broadcast on the commercial radio stations owned by Primedia, was one of the first news organizations in the world to use Twitter as a news outlet (Katopodis 2012). The editor-in-chief, Katy Katopodis, explains that EWN has various accounts on Twitter, including 'EWN Updates' (an automated feed that 'tweets' the stations' news headlines"), "EWN Reporter" (reporters give insights on the stories that they follow whilst they are covering it) and "EWN" Sport. EWN is regarded as an agenda-setter, as many other South African news outlets tend to report on a story after it was made public on one of the EWN radio stations. As EWN use both the social media and the broadcast media as platforms, they tend to report on matters faster than many other news outlets such as newspapers (Katopodis 2012).

Thus, whilst social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly becoming "agenda-setters" for what the media reports on, the reliability of the information distributed through these channels remains difficult to verify. Therefore they foresee the need for new editorial skills to suit this new production environment (Pavlik 1998a).

3. Reliability of social media such as Twitter

In his article on how social networking shaped Iran's Election Protests, Carafano (2009) explains that when the Iranian government cracked down on the traditional media the world turned to social-networking tools in support of: street journalism, the mobilization of the Iranian diaspora and organizing the activists. He argues that the lessons of the Iran crisis illustrate the challenges of operating in a Web 2.0-enabled world. According

to Carafano, the key challenge of employing social networks such as Twitter is information assurance: "... ensuring the right information gets to the right person at the right time, while making sure that the information provided is credible, understandable, and actionable" (Carafano 2009).

Silverman (2010) raises awareness on credible reporting with a case study in which an erroneous "tweet" was sent to almost 2 million followers (Silverman 2010). In April 2010 MSNBC.com tweeted on their Twitter account (@Breaking News) that there was an *indication* that the Icelandic volcano, Hekla, has begun erupting. The news spread at an immense speed. Although the journalist, Alex Johnson, used the word "indicate", to show that the report was unconfirmed, his followers on Twitter treated the report as a fact. Johnson later followed it up with a tweet to emphasise that the eruption has not been confirmed, but at that stage the message had been sent out to millions of people (Silverman 2010). In the end when it turned out that the volcano did not erupt Johnson had to issue a correction on Twitter (Silverman 2010).

According to Johnson it is a problem with breaking news on Twitter sites to find a balance between speed and sourcing (Silverman 2010). He explains that at certain times news is sent out without proper attribution of "who" or "what" the source of it is (Silverman 2010). Therefore questions arise about the reliability and credibility of news that are spread through social media and raises the following concern: In this new era where any person has the potential to be a reporter by spreading news through the use of new media technologies such as Facebook and Twitter – Is there potential for "incorrect" or "biased" news to be spread by the state and enemies of the state? (Smith 2011).

4. Social Media as a tool for information warfare

Since 9/11, terrorism and international conflict, especially the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been the most popular subject in North American news (Ecoo 2009). Ecoo argues that at the most critical state of American history the mass media has failed in its capacity as a watchdog of the people as it only reported one side of the War story. The South African authors De Beer and Merrill (2004) agree that the media has an important role to play in war reporting and to be sensitive to unverified information especially in a time where the media are drawn to sensationalism, violence, wars and political controversies.

Carafano argues that Web 2.0 technologies have an important role to play in a range of activities related to national security, from public diplomacy to communication with citizens during catastrophic disasters: "Government must become practiced in effectively employing these technologies, battling malicious actors online, and ensuring the resiliency of the global open network of free debate made possible by social networking tools" (Carafano 2009). This raises the question of what the role and responsibility of the media is.

The desire of news outlets in the current competitive environment to "break the news" first can result in an external force placing a strategic message on the South African news agenda. Jantunen argues, "the legitimacy of warfare is one of the key themes in news reporting in the 21st century" (Jantunen 2011). She then explains that the language used in news coverage of war reporting can paint a different picture of own and enemy action: "The enemy typically behaves in an immoral and cowardly way, as the enemy is demonized and the 'self' is glorified," (Jantunen 2011). Therefore, through simple lexicon, it is argued that a journalist can describe its own country as leading a "liberation operation" whilst the enemy has instigated "a brutal attack". In spite of this, external forces that are tired of being represented as the "villain" in their enemy's war narrative are now using social media to take matters into their own hands.

One of these external forces is the Islamist militant group in Somalia, Al-Shabaab that launched their own Twitter account in December 2011 to give their point of view of the military conflict. Al-Shabaab's Twitter feed, @HSMPress, has a self-description that states: "Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen is an Islamic movement that governs South & Cen. Somalia & part of the global struggle towards the revival of Islamic Khilaafa" (Smith 2011). At the time this article was written, they already had 11 257 followers, demonstrating that "in the 21st century, no radical insurgency or martyrdom operation is complete without a social media platform run from California's Silicon valley, even if Somalia is one of the world's poorest and most anarchic

countries” (Smith 2011). Smith describes Al-Shabaab, who has links to al-Qaeda, as fighting the weak, UN-backed Somali government with sophisticated media operations. This includes sending out press releases with photos in well-written English. Al-Shabaab has already allegedly exaggerated the numbers of wounded civilians and its military victories on its twitter feed, but as Smith states: “While their fighters wage war with bombs and bullets, Al-Shabaab is locked in an online propaganda war with Kenya, using weapons of 140 characters each” (Smith 2011). The spokespersons for both Al-Shabaab and the Kenyan army frequently trade insults on the social network and according to a Kenyan human rights activist, Hassan Omar Hassan, “the flurry of tweets obscures the paucity of information about actual operations by the Kenyan military since it entered Somalia in October,” (Smith 2011). Hassan states that Kenyans need more accuracy in war reporting to be able to make an honest judgment about the war (Smith 2011). This scenario demonstrates another case study in which journalists have to check the facts they receive on Twitter as the information can be obscured to suit the interests of the party who sends it out. The media should also contextualize the information they report on in such a way that the audience can form their own opinions of what is *really* happening out there.

5. Twitter as a tool for information warfare in the South African context

Some classic examples of the misuse of Twitter (with potential dangerous consequences) in the South African scenario involve the health of the country’s 93-year old former president, Nelson Mandela. In an incident in December 2011, a well-known radio host, Bob Mabena, announced erroneously during a live radio broadcast that Mandela had been hospitalized. The source of this information, Mabena later said, was a broadcast on a privately owned South African news channel, eNews - which turned out to have been a rebroadcast of a news story done earlier in the year when Mandela was indeed in hospital. Ten minutes after making the announcement, and still not aware of his error, Mabena tweeted the following under his Twitter account @bob959: “Breaking news - Nelson Mandela is in hospital” (Masungwini 2011). Mabena has more than 2000 followers on Twitter, among them influential figures in the South African media community, such as City Press assistant editor Adriaan Basson and international relations spokesperson Clayson Monyela. Within minutes other Twitter users including some media organisations picked up the rumour. Less than an hour after the initial tweet, the Johannesburg newspaper *The Times* tweeted on its Twitter account, @TimesLIVE: “Former president Nelson Mandela is in hospital, according to reports. Watch this space for more information” (BBC-News 2011). Monyela, who often tweets in his capacity as government spokesperson, also picked up the tweet. On this occasion he wrote: “Pray for Tata”, referring to Mandela (Katopodis 2012). The editor-in-chief of popular private radio news service Eyewitness News, Katy Katopodis argues that it was really Monyela’s tweet that created a problematic situation in this case - because he “gave credibility to an unsubstantiated rumour” (Katopodis 2012). Katopodis says that Eyewitness News (which has more than 26 000 followers on its Twitter account) took a conscious decision in the aforementioned case not to retweet the rumour before seeking confirmation from the presidency. She says she tries to teach her news staff to always ask themselves the question: “Am I being used, and by whom?” when dealing with breaking news and so-called tip-offs. Katopodis admits however that the popular EWN has made mistakes of its own in the past. In 2008 the news service erroneously reported the death of former Zambian president Levy Mwanawasa, after a reporter received a telephone call claiming that he had died. They tried to follow it up by phoning the Zambian High Commission, whose response was that they would get back to EWN. Therefore, when EWN received a telephone call later on confirming the report, and was prepared to go on record with the information, they assumed it was a response to their initial call to the High Commission (Katopodis 2012). “Later on it surfaced that this person did not work for the Zambian High Commission. It was someone with an agenda, most probably with an incentive to cause harm,” (Katopodis 2012). This incident, however, helped EWN to get a system of checks and balances in place for dealing with so-called ‘breaking news’.

6. Consequences of false rumours on Twitter

The Twitter frenzy around the Mandela rumours, however, proves that other media institutions in South Africa are still susceptible to false information feeds via Twitter. The December 2011 incident was not the first surrounding Mandela. In January of the same year a tweet from @lebolukewarm, a private user, reading: “RIP Madiba”, sparked a similar Twitter frenzy (Zarella 2011). Social media expert Dan Zarella compiled statistics showing that within 90 minutes of the first tweet the rumour was being retweeted 100 times per minute (see table below).

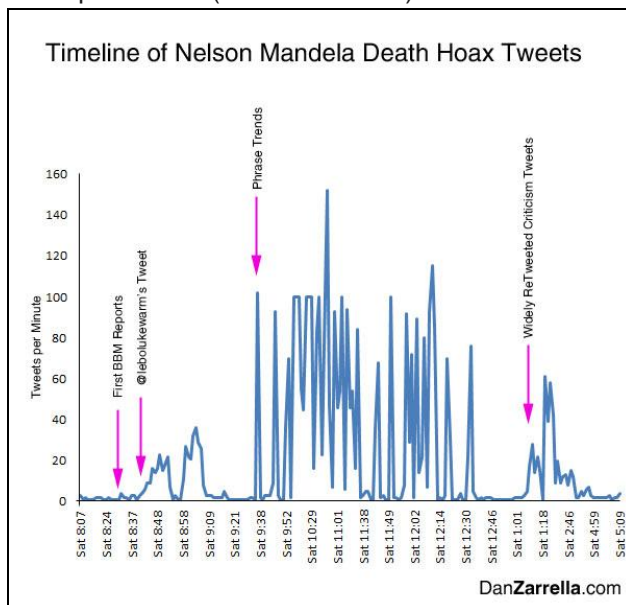


Figure 1: Timeline of Nelson Mandela Death Hoax Tweets (Zarella 2011)

In September of the same year a rumour again surfaced on Twitter that Mandela had died. In that instance, news outlets were quick to seek confirmation, and soon after the rumour surfaced the assistant editor of the weekly newspaper City Press, Adriaan Basson, tweeted: “Almost certain Mandela death is twitter hoax. Zelda [la Grange] says she's heard nothing like that and [a] family member told @SaPolitics1 [political journalist Cedric Mboysis] Tata is fine.” La Grange, who spent years as Mandela’s personal assistant, later tweeted: “You want a rumour to stop? Stop speaking about it. Thank you!!” (Pasley-Banks 2011).

This touches on another aspect of the twitter rumour: perpetuation through denial. In all three case studies the #mandelahashtag continued to trend on Twitter long after official denials were issued - and many users were slow to catch on to the fact that the initial rumour was untrue (Zarella 2011).

The ruling African National Congress, in its statement railing against those behind the latest Mandela hoax, perhaps summed up the problem the best: it described the false news of Mandela’s death as akin to creating “an atmosphere of panic and anxiety in the country”, and continued to say that: “Those behind this hoax are certainly people without any interest in the political and economic stability of South Africa, which we very much owe to the immense contribution by comrade Nelson Mandela – the country’s first democratically-elected President” (Mail&GuardianOnline 2011). This could easily be seen as a information warfare attack.

7. Recommendations for journalists on using Twitter in a responsible manner

Silverman uses the erroneous Hekla volcano tweet as a case study to advise journalists to use “backchannels” on Twitter (Silverman 2010). According to him these back channels will allow journalists to share details of their reporting process and interact with their readers, especially in cases where errors were made in reporting news on Twitter. “The use of the separate editors account suggests a model for thinking about how to correct an errant tweet and deal with similar challenges on Twitter and elsewhere”, (Silverman 2010). Silverman explains that the “backchannel” (editors blog or special Twitter account) fulfils the role the ombudsman does in traditional newspaper – in explaining to the audience why certain choices were made and responding to their questions. A Facebook page could also be used to provide instant context and explanation. However, he does warn that even by creating a backchannel it does not guarantee that followers of the news outlet will use it (Silverman 2010).

According to the editor-in-chief of South Africa's Eyewitness News (EWN), Katy Katopodis, the service does not usually get its "cue's" or "tip-offs" from the social media. If a journalist does see an interesting news item on Twitter, it is part of the editorial policy that they have to find three alternative sources confirming the report (Katopodis 2012). Katopodis agrees that using Twitter as a news source carries the risk of being used as a tool for information warfare, because any person can create an account on the social platform and use it for their own agenda. She advises: "If journalists don't want to fall into the trap of publishing unverified information, they have to return to the old values of journalism that includes checking your sources" (Katopodis 2012). Katopodis admits that in the current fast paced news environment some steps in the process are frequently left behind, but that the journalist and editor should use information gained from social networks sensibly, and also be responsible about the manner in which they "tweet" about the news (Katopodis 2012).

Attribution is another problem with Twitter. According to Katopodis any person can create an account on Twitter and pretend that they are someone else. Thus a journalist should check with a news source if the account belongs to him/her and if a specific post can be attributed to the news source (Katopodis 2012).

If a journalist does make a mistake in its reporting on Twitter, the journalist should repeatedly correct it. Silverman explains that the journalist whose tweet on the Hekla volcano situation was blown out of proportion offered multiple corrections on Twitter. "Since Twitter messages flow by in a constant stream, it is important to repeat your corrections," (Silverman 2010). He advises that one should repeatedly send out corrections whilst the mistaken information is being retweeted. "When something is retweeted, it takes on more authority among people and search engines – so your job in issuing a Twitter correction is to get it retweeted as much as possible," (Silverman 2010).

If a journalist has not confirmed the source or validity of a fact, he/she should begin a tweet with words such as "UNCONFIRMED", "DEVELOPING" or "EARLY REPORT" (Silverman 2010). However, after the incident with the death of the former Zambian President that was discussed in an earlier part of the article, Katopodis advises her journalists against posting any information on Twitter that has not been confirmed. EWN also has a journalist that constantly monitors the tweets that gets posted under EWN's name (Katopodis 2012).

Silverman also argues that Twitter and other new media platforms have a responsibility of creating features on their sites that enable corrections or popularizing standards for indicating unconfirmed or corrected reports. He suggests that the new Annotations function of Twitter could perhaps be used for this purpose (Silverman 2010).

Katopodis confirms that although her news service always wants and needs to be the first ones to report on a breaking news story, it would never be at the expense of the truth: "We would much rather err at the point of caution, and take it slower, to ensure that no mistakes are made," (Katopodis 2012).

8. Conclusion

Many theorists refer to the "digital revolution" when they refer to social media and new media technologies. Internet use can also aid journalists in the mainstream media to improve their traditional reporting in terms of speed and feedback. Consequently the "new" or social media has also been called "the watchdog of the watchdog" as it contributes to the democracy of journalism. However media practitioners should also recognize the negative consequences and ethical implications of these new media platforms, as the sources distributing information on social media sites such as Twitter may not be truthful and accurate. Journalists should be aware that Twitter and Facebook could be used by enemies of the state as tools of information warfare in distributing false information.

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