Chapter 76

The Use of Facebook as a Pedagogical Platform for Developing Investigative Journalism Skills

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ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates the extent to which Facebook could be used as a training and learning tool for investigative journalism students. This study is based on the deployment of Facebook as a pedagogical tool for an "Investigative Journalism" unit at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. This chapter, accordingly, outlines the challenges, issues, and benefits of using Social Networking Services (SNS) as pedagogical tools for the training of future investigative journalists, which could in turn assist other instructors to make use of such online social platforms for media training. By conducting an observation of student usage of Facebook and interviewing students and tutors on their experiences from this activity, this chapter concludes that Facebook can serve as a useful online collaborative platform for investigative journalism students and as a progress monitoring tool for their instructors.

INTRODUCTION

Investigative journalism is a branch of journalism practice which seeks to uncover important and crucial happenings and occurrences that cannot be ignored or undermined. Several scholars have their own interpretation and understanding of investigative journalism and this has been discussed in their work (Hunter 2012; de Burgh 2008; Ettema and Glassers 1998). James Aucoin (2006) interprets it as informing the public about something that is of importance to them and which they do not know. The Dutch-Flemish Association for Investigative Journalism (VVOJ) defines it as "critical and in-depth journalism" (VVOJ, 2011). Yet a comprehensive and encompassing definition

of investigative journalism has been articulated by Robert Green, where he sees investigative journalism as "the reporting, [primarily] through one's own work product and initiative, matters of importance which some persons or organizations wish to keep secret" (cited in Ullmann, 1995: 2). According to Ansell et.al (2002), investigative journalism has a few defining aspects that differentiates it from other forms of journalism: first investigative journalism is about digging deeper on a particular issue or topic which is of public interest; it is a process rather than an event; it needs to be original and proactive; it must shed light on new information; it should be multi-sourced; and due to its in-depth nature, it calls for greater resources, teamwork and time than a routine news report. (Ansell *et al*, 2002: 4-5). From these defining aspects it can be seen that training future investigative journalists would benefit from an online platform, such as Facebook, since it allows investigative journalism to be conducted as process and through teamwork.

There are more than 30 universities teaching a unit or a course on investigative journalism in the Pacific region (Bacon 2011). Yet investigative journalism is mainly being taught by the use of the traditional paper and pen method. In general, investigative journalism units taught adopt two main teaching approaches: the first approach teaches the basic understanding and conceptual framework, whereas the second is more about practical expertise and skills. Teaching investigative journalism can be challenging since it can be time consuming and requires a certain measure of trust-development with the sources for the story (Tucker, 2011), and more than often time is limited when teaching an investigative journalism course which is usually taught over a semester. It is also questionable whether such a skill could be taught within a classroom environment since student-directed courses are different than the on-job training provided within the newsroom to cadets, and in turn is also different than investigative journalism training offered to journalists in

the field. Accordingly, training future investigative reporters requires tools which replicate real life scenarios and which also allow students to conduct team work such as that of an investigative journalism unit in a media organization. Training investigative journalism, therefore, using Social Networking Services (SNS) such as Facebook could provide an interactive learning experience similar to that of a newsroom, where students are required to actively research, collect, and disseminate sourced information for their investigative stories. Most investigative journalism educators tend to devize their own methodologies for investigative journalism courses. These vary from course to course, and include the use of academic articles, textbooks, multi-media, YouTube and documentaries to produce and deliver lectures and discussions. Yet, although such methodologies continue to be useful for teaching the concepts and techniques for writing investigative reports, the actual 'hands-on' experience, as we argue, could be nurtured through online social networks which investigative journalists themselves are using in the industry.

This chapter aims to evaluate the extent to which Facebook could be used as a training and learning tool for investigative journalism students. The results of this chapter stem from an activity carried out by the authors' home institution, Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, where they deployed Facebook as a pedagogical tool for an Investigative Journalism unit. Facebook pages were set up to assist students working in groups on investigative stories that aim to uncover issues pertaining to the usage of genetically modified foods in Australia. With this in mind, the authors—who were overlooking this activity—were interested in understanding the ways in which students utilized Facebook as a communication platform, and in turn, uncovering the challenges, issues, and benefits of using Social Networking Services (SNS) as pedagogical tools for the training of future investigative journalists. This chapter, accordingly, will outline these chal-

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