

Chapter 17

Training for Mobile Journalism

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ABSTRACT

In just over five years, the growth of mobile communication has changed the practice and teaching of journalism in higher education as well as practice in the media industry. New devices and tools are released and adopted in rapid cycles. Social-media platforms thrive in the mobile environment. Journalists and journalism organizations are forced to explore new practices, while higher education works to integrate new methods into its curriculum. The author, an early adopter of mobile tools in practice, training and in higher education, examines the changes that have led to the mobile era, the new jobs now available, and how industry and academia are adapting.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, Brian Williams, then the respected anchor of NBC Nightly News, gave a lecture to students of the School of Communications at Elon University in North Carolina about the effect of technology on TV audiences.

“Now the president is competing with the author’s iPad. He’s competing with a 4-year-old after dental work falling asleep in the back seat,” Williams told the students, the university’s news service reported after the visit. (Townsend, 2011).

In 2015, Williams was no longer the anchor of NBC Nightly News, banished because he was caught fabricating memories. Williams was brought down because of the very technology he talked up in front of the Elon students.

In 2011, social media was becoming a part of the television production process: Today, a hashtag or a link to a Facebook Page are commonly displayed on the lower third of the television screen. Then, it was a novel idea. The first NBC News director of social media, Ryan Osborne, discussed social media training for employees in an interview with a blogger in 2010.

I have found the best kind of training happens one on one. Simply introducing people to tools and how they can be used to tell stories. Within a big organization, we can have different goals and we want to empower our employees. (Smith, 2010)

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One-on-one training might have helped Williams react to the allegations that surfaced about his activities in reporting in Iraq in 2003. But in 2015, Williams, the winner of just about every honor a television journalist might win, was fact-checked very publicly through social media, investigated by his employer and had to publicly acknowledge his errors.

Originally, servicemen involved in an incident involving enemy fire on helicopters had raised questions about Williams' retelling of events from an eyewitness perspective, but it wasn't until Williams' appearance on "The Late Show With David Letterman" was posted to YouTube and then to Facebook that the soldiers had a platform to publicize angry complaints about the anchorman's recollections. Their comments on Facebook led a Stars and Stripes reporter to investigate, and Williams' fabrications came to light. (Somaiya, 2015)

Williams' denouement is a very high-profile example of new consequences in the digital era and the need for training to go beyond one-on-one coaching.

The year 2011, when Williams spoke at Elon, might well be regarded as the dawn of the mobile era, as the expanding popularity of Facebook and Twitter, combined with the growing convenience of always-on mobile, transformed media. Mobile media entered the mainstream via the wide distribution of second-generation smartphones, supported by higher bandwidth mobile broadband networks, and the wider availability of mobile applications.

In 2016, mobile has affected journalism in ways that overshadow the public embarrassment of one high-profile anchor. Affluent society is at an inflection point as smartphone penetration into the U.S. population (Sterling, 2015) matches social media penetration for Internet users, at 74 percent (*Social Networking Fact Sheet*, 2015).

INTRODUCTION

Mobile Phone as Printing Press, TV Station

The digital alchemy of social media plus mobile allows anyone with a smartphone to craft a tweet or a Facebook status that can circle the globe with the tap of a finger. Now, it is a journalist's job to do the same -- but better and faster -- and to judge truth or fiction in 140 characters, adding significant value using the same widely available mobile tools that anyone else can use to document every moment, and every misdeed.

In a three-week period in June 2015, journalists took advantage of new mobile apps to share live video from upstate New York (James, 2015), where two convicts were the object of a massive manhunt, to Charleston, S.C., where nine black churchgoers were killed in an evening bible study (Boughton, 2015), to the steps of the Supreme Court after a watershed ruling achieved legal equality for same-sex marriage (Scotto, 2015). Sadly, none of the original shared videos were archived, as the live-streaming service used did not keep video longer than 24 hours.

The early-adopter journalists were using Periscope, a live-streaming mobile app that first appeared in late March. It and its main competitor, Meerkat, captured the wider public's attention -- not just journalism professionals -- with the capability to easily and simply replicate the work of a TV truck or a satellite uplink in sharing live video to a global audience.

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