LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

• Understand how best to reach your audience in a variety of ways through social media.
• Compare and contrast traditional media and social media with regard to usage, trust and value.
• Understand the basic benefits, drawbacks and usage strategies associated with social media.
• Become familiar with several social media tools that serve the various forms of communication, including text, photos and videos.
• Outline key elements of successful blogging.

THINKING AHEAD: RETHINKING HOW TO REACH READERS

The advent of social media forced journalists to rethink how they approach their jobs. The writing and reading now happen on both sides of the conversation, with readers and journalists often discussing issues through Twitter exchanges and Facebook posts. The explosion of low-cost digital technology has produced a rise in citizen journalists, who cover incidents on their own, as opposed to calling in tips to their traditional journalistic counterparts. Even more, many media outlets rely on the content these outsiders gather.

Media production is no longer a one-to-many model that is based on the credibility and presence of a standard media outlet. Instead, social media has resulted in a many-to-many model that gives anyone with access to the web or a mobile device the ability to build an audience and create content for it.

Social media has continued to grow as an important resource for users everywhere. A Pew Center research study on mobile messaging and social media found that from 2012 to 2015, the use of social media continued on an upward trajectory. Pinterest, a social sharing site akin to a series of old-fashioned bulletin boards, saw its users double from 15 percent of those Pew surveyed in 2012 to 31 percent in 2015. Instagram, a photo-sharing site, saw its usage double in that time span from 13 percent to 28 percent of survey participants.

In terms of specific tools, 36 percent of smartphone owners reported using messaging apps, such as iMessage, and 17 percent reported using tools like Snapchat, which we will discuss later in the chapter. If these trends continue, social media will show continued growth and eventual domination on the information-sharing scene within a few short years.
As a reporter, you need to understand what makes social media valuable as a research tool and a publishing outlet. You also have to understand how the rules on these platforms may differ from those you follow as a journalist. This chapter will explain the basics of social media, including the positives and negatives of relying on it as a journalist. It will also outline the ways in which journalists can use it to further their work and engage their audiences.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

People who try to define social media often find themselves tripping over their words because social media’s meaning varies from person to person. For some people, it’s a way to reach out to friends. For others, it’s a marketing tool. For even others, it’s a more reliable way to get news on crucial topics of the day.

People often define social media as it relates to tools such as websites and apps. However, not all websites have the Web 2.0 features that put the “social” in social media. In short, social media seems to be in the eye of the beholder, recalling Justice Potter Stewart’s famous line about obscenity: “I know it when I see it.”

For our purposes here, it might be best to think about social media the way that Daniel Nations, a trends expert, defines it: a digital tool that doesn’t just provide information but also seeks to have you interact with it while you are getting that information. He makes the analogy that traditional media, like broadcast news and newspapers, are like one-way streets, while social media is a like a two-way street where readers get to join the discussion.2

Social media tools allow users to generate and share their own content in the form of text, photos, videos, graphics and more. The tools also allow people to build their own audiences based on congruent interests and conferred authority.

Perhaps the three most important things to understand for reporters in regard to social media are the following:

1. **The model has changed**: The mass media model in which one source transmitted to many people in the form of a newspaper or news broadcast isn’t how this works. Social media allows anyone to become a source of information. This many-to-many model means that you are no longer a single voice of authority with a ready-made audience waiting to hear what you have to say. You are on the same playing field as anyone else who can send a tweet or share a photo. You can’t assume you will gather a large audience simply because you always had one. You have to fight harder to grab people’s attention.
WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

HELPFUL HINTS ➤ HOW TO BUILD AN AUDIENCE

If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? You could easily ask the same question about tweets and posts that lack an audience. In the days of traditional media, it was easy to rely on the brand name of the TV station or the newspaper to draw eyeballs. Circulation numbers and market share provided journalists with a sense of how many people paid attention to their work on a daily basis. Social media requires a lot more work on the part of the individual journalists to build, maintain and engage an audience. Here are some helpful hints based on the ideas of online marketing guru John Rampton:

- **Identify goals and objectives:** One of the biggest mistakes people make in taking part in social media is to jump in without a sense of what they want to do or why people would look to them for information. Rampton suggests that you figure out who is in your audience, what those people want and what you want to accomplish in connecting with them.

- **Let them know you are human:** Rampton notes that connecting with audience members is crucial to growing a social media presence. He says that good social media professionals will post often, respond to posts from readers and connect with the audience on a personal level. He also states that you should engage with everyone who posts to your social media pages. If you let people know you will listen, they will want to stay connected with you. This will also help you reach back out to them and give them more of what they need and want.

- **Understand their needs:** If you know what people want to see, you can more easily deliver it to them. Rampton says that knowing and understanding an audience will allow you to interact with them on an intimate level.

- **Produce valuable content:** This is a standard throughout the field of journalism, but it bears repeating here in terms of social media. People who follow you quickly will be just as quick to dump you if you don’t give them a reason to hang around. Rampton says that having the best content will continue to draw people to your work.

- **Consistently post at a comfortable rate:** Once people like what you have to say, they will want to see more and more of your content. Rampton says readers will get frustrated if people don’t get new content each time they check in on social media. It is worth noting that readers can also feel overwhelmed if you dump a massive amount of content on them at once. This often happens with traditional publications, like student weekly newspapers, that tweet out links to all the print stories on publication day and then go dark for six days. Meter your approach to providing information and you will cultivate readership habits.

2. **Authority matters:** With all of these additional information sources now available, people have more choices than ever for content. Their decisions regarding where to go and whom to trust are based on authority and trust. You have to prove yourself to be valuable and trustworthy in the eyes of your audience members. Journalists used to be trusted because they were the only ones out there, meaning that people heard only what the journalists wanted to say. Now, social media users can bestow authority on anyone they see fit. Even worse, from a journalist’s standpoint, the people might be making bad choices regarding trust, so we need to make sure we can demonstrate our authority. Finally, authority is fleeting in this new model. If you fail to provide people what they need or you make one too many mistakes, social media users will stop paying attention to you and seek another information source.
3. **Not everyone follows the same rules:** In your journalism or communications program, you received strong ethical and legal training. Your instructors gave you reasons to make sure you were always fair, accurate and decent when you plied your trade. However, because everyone can use social media and because not everyone got that same training, you have to be careful as you use social media in your reporting. Aside from the trolls, who decide to make people’s lives miserable just for sport, some social media users don’t fact-check their content or worry about libeling someone. If you find something on social media and forward it, even if the content looks pretty safe, you are taking an unnecessary risk.

### Value of Social Media

Social media outlets have value to reporters, as both tools to send information and tools to receive information. Social media allows you to reach out to people at the scene of an accident or a disaster. These tools give you the ability to capture and share information instantly to your audience. They also serve as a source of tips for stories, inside information and key sources for your stories. Consider these thoughts regarding the value of social media, from your readers’ perspective:

### Easy Access on All Your Devices

About 20 years ago, computers became a dominant tool in information gathering and dissemination. However, even at that time they remained bulky and mostly restricted to desktops. Even when laptops became more cost effective and portable, they remained shackled to landline internet connections.

In the subsequent two decades, technology has not only become faster, cheaper and better, but more ubiquitous. The advent of Wi-Fi and hotspots meant that users could grab information on the go with their laptops. The creation of tablet devices and smartphones meant that users could get access to the internet almost anywhere. Improved technology also allowed designers to build social media apps that were scalable and that met specific needs within the market. The cheap cost (in some cases, no cost) of the apps meant that people were more willing to try them, adapt them to their needs and use them to join social networks.

The 24/7 access to groups of trusted people who share information on a multitude of platforms gives social media a leg up in the world of Web 2.0. In addition, the way people can then use those apps to respond and become part of the discussion from anywhere engages people who want to be “in the know.”

### Choose Sources You Trust

In some cases, people are placed into a situation in which trust is inherent. Children tend to trust parents and teachers, until they are given ample reason not to. Spouses trust one another with various expectations in life until, again, one of them violates the trust of the other. For years, it was like this in media. With few sources, you had limited choices as to whom you would trust.

Today, the array of sources has grown exponentially, and readers can decide whom they trust and why they trust those individuals. Social media users provide everyone on a given platform the opportunity to earn their trust. If a user trusts you and you can demonstrate value to the user, you will remain a vital part of that user’s network. If you fail in either of those areas, the user will stop paying attention to you, and you have no recourse.
Mac Slavin attended a college media conference while he was a student at Wartburg College, where he saw someone speaking about some “new thing called Twitter.”

“His session was so good, we all went back to our hotel rooms and created accounts,” Slavin said years later.

Upon his return to campus, Slavin started using social media to reach the readers of the student newspaper. From there, he took on various internships and jobs that mixed his love of sports with his passion for social media.

Today, Slavin is the digital and social media specialist for the Detroit Tigers, where he manages all of the team’s social media channels, helps with the team’s paid social media advertising strategies and works with some of its mobile initiatives.

“During the season there’s a ton of content collection,” he said. “I’m always scrolling through our team photographer’s photographs, on the field or concourse looking for photos or up in the press box tweeting about the game. There’s plenty of time spent on content creation, graphics and events, but there’s a lot of event and game coverage during the season.”

“As you can imagine, the off-season focuses more on content creation. We don’t have the players around or new highlights rolling in daily. We spend a lot of time planning what our content is going to be and creating fun and engaging pieces.”

Slavin said it was the immediacy of social media that drew him to the field. He was able to break news on campus as a student and improve the reach of his sports coverage as a professional.

“We are able to get information right as it’s happening,” Slavin said. “We are able to get updates on everything from tragedies to the World Series in real time. I had friends in Paris during the attacks, and I was able to hear their version of the story as I was getting more in-depth updates on TV. On the other side, I had friends at the World Series last year, and I was able to experience it through their Snapchat Stories like I was actually in the stands.”

Immediacy, however, does have its risks, he added.

“Instead of fact checking, a reporter hits send,” Slavin said. “During major events, it takes less than a minute to get thousands of retweets. Even if you submit a correction, your correction isn’t going to have the same reach as your initial tweet. It’s so easy to disseminate incorrect information it’s ridiculous.”

Even with the occasional bumps in the road, Slavin said he loves the way he interacts with his audience in real time through various social media platforms.

“One of the great things about social media is the instant reaction,” he said. “You know if fans like your content, because they will share or engage with it. You know if they don’t like it, because they’ll tell you. There are definitely times when you want to ignore some of the engagement and avoid feeding the internet trolls, but there are a lot of

(Continued)
times you can use it for feedback. If you’re more of a photographer or videographer, you’ll start to build up a network of artists following you that will help critique your work. If you’re a feature reporter, you’ll undoubtedly get tweets with story ideas or types of stories fans want to hear. It’s great.”

“One of the other great things your audience can help you with is content creation,” he added. “You have to be able to identify the authenticity pretty quickly, but from a brand standpoint, our fans are always sharing photos and memories with us. This helps create strong and extremely authentic content that is incredibly hard to duplicate.”

**ONE LAST THING**

**Q:** If you could tell the students reading this book anything you think is important, what would it be?

**A:** “One of the biggest things people don’t realize when they jump into a career in social media is that running a brand’s social media channels is a HUGE difference than running their personal social media channels. Everyone uses social media differently. Some people use it to keep in touch with friends from high school, others use it to show off their photos of traveling or their newborn baby, and others use it to share funny cat videos they find when they are supposed to be doing work. Ultimately these are all centered around sharing, but the type of content is different, which is a topic that comes into play in the industry all of the time.

“There are people who love straight to the point, factual tweets, while others love sharing funny videos on Facebook. All of these users make up your community and you have to try and please them all as much as possible (or at least identify which fans are more important to your brand). There’s definitely a bit of science and psychology involved in working in social media. There’s a lot of experimenting and trial and error.”

As a reporter, you can gain some credibility and trust because you are associated with a professional media outlet. Beyond that, however, it will be your job to demonstrate that you deserve the respect of your followers. On the other hand, reporters are also consumers of social media, which means you can extend trust to certain social media participants and consider them to be good sources for information. As you find people who post interesting and accurate information, you can add them to your list of worthy sources and quality tipsters.

**READ, SHARE, REPEAT**

In the days of traditional media, sharing was a physical act, in which you would clip out an article or save a magazine so you could give it to someone you think might be interested in a particular topic. This method was slow and limited to people you could reach either via direct contact or mail. Even more, by the time you thought enough of an article or a topic to cut something out, put it in a safe place and send it off, you probably figured this was not worth the effort.

The benefit of social media is that the interest and the sharing are almost instantaneous. If you find a news article that interests you, you can pin it on a Pinterest board, post it to your Facebook wall or tweet out a link. Even if you use “older” forms of digital media, like email, you can rely on the social media platforms to warehouse the content you want to share and then send off an email to someone with the direct link to the content. This approach happens rapidly, and you can share it with multiple people at the same time, regardless of where they are.
SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

One of the best things about social media is that it’s always changing and adapting to the needs of users. The scalability for each platform gives the users options to reach more people as the platform continues to expand in usefulness and popularity.

For example, the earliest incarnation of Twitter was meant as a way to stay connected with people you knew through a Short Message Service (SMS) approach. To aid in that process, Twitter’s initial prompt was “What are you doing?” Once the tool became more widespread and used for everything from breaking news to marketing clothing, the company decided in 2009 to change the prompt to “What’s happening?” Other elements, such as the use of direct messaging, the creation of a hashtag element and the way the company allowed third-party applications to use the platform, all aided in its growth and development.

Even as the platforms, apps and other digital trinkets change from day to day in terms of presence and usefulness, several underlying values and typologies will likely persist. To that end, the next part of the book will divide social media options into different segments to show you the various tools available to you. That section will also discuss a few of the current items that best exemplify those segments and talk a bit about how they can be helpful to you as a journalist:

TEXT

The written word remains a dominant force in the field of journalism because of its pliability and simplicity. Social media has changed the way we use text in a variety of ways, including options to create long-form narratives and interactive elements without having to worry about the restrictions of traditional media. Blogging, long derided by professional journalists as a second-rate form of content, has blossomed as a valuable way to cover micro-niches of information. Bloggers often can reach specific audiences through text as they integrate hyperlinks, visuals and other elements that traditional platforms like print and broadcast cannot.

On the other hand, social media has forced us to shrink content to only a handful of words. Microblogging is a simple concept of sharing small bits of information with a wide array of people. In many cases, people who see what the users post can socially boost it, either by sending the content to other followers or by signifying its importance through some sort of “liking” process, akin to the one Facebook uses.

This approach to social media relies on making clear points in short bursts of text. The content in these forms of information dissemination can include a link to a larger story, with the short text message serving as an enticing headline. In other cases, they can launch a threaded discussion of short responses, akin to what readers might encounter on a website’s message board or an article’s comment section. Below are a few tools that rely heavily on text to reach interested audiences on a variety of devices:

Here is an example of a collection of “pinned” items that someone has gathered on Pinterest. The board allows for people to save and share items of interest on a wide array of topics.
If you are responsibility for sending tweets that represent your organization, keep these helpful hints in mind:

**Noun-verb-object (NVO): the core of a tweet:** If you passed a beginning-level journalism or English class, you know that a sentence needs a noun and a verb, with a direct object (or other object) serving as a nice additional element. In most cases, the idea of “what did what to whom” serves as the core of good journalism writing in print and on the web. It becomes crucial for good tweets.

As we discussed in Chapter 3, consider using the NVO elements to create a tweet’s “core” and then build outward from the core, with each concentric ring adding more value. This idea also allows you to more easily trim information when you need to.

**Tweet to be read:** When text-messaging services became available, most people did their tweeting and texting using a simple 12-digit keypad. This limitation made it more difficult to convey longer ideas or to write in complete thoughts. Since those early days, phones have incorporated full QWERTY keyboards, and tweeting can also come from desktops, laptops and tablets, making the typing and editing much easier.

With 280 characters, you can make your point without forcing your readers to reach for the Rosetta Stone to figure out your tweet. If you punch down your thoughts and they are too long to fit into a single tweet, look for ways to swap longer words for shorter ones. You can also rely on some of the old print headline rules, such as using numerals instead of spelling out numbers. However, keep simplicity at the front of your mind.

**Spelling and grammar count:** Not every tweet will be an award winner, but you can make sure you don’t end up on a series of “Twitter fail” websites if you check your tweet over for spelling and grammar. In some cases, the spelling problems just make you look dumb, as is the case with the laundry list of “Twitter fails” that The Poke gathered. These include people describing problems with their “selfstream” (self-esteem) or the concerns one user had about her grandmother’s “die of beaties” (diabetes).

However, in some cases, a typo can cause a major catastrophe. The makeup and beauty company Sephora made the mistake of failing to proofread a tweet that went out to thousands of users. The company used the tag #CountdownToBeauty as a way to promote the opening of its first store in Australia. However, the person who sent the tweet didn’t realize that the “o” in “Countdown” was missing, thus leading to a vulgar message and an unrelenting amount of scorn from the Twitterverse.

A longtime copy editor once noted that you can drown just as easily in a couple inches of water as you can in the Pacific Ocean. The point was that the small things can be just as dangerous as the big ones. When it comes to those 280 characters, check each and every one of them before hitting the send button.

**Keep an audience-centric focus:** Twitter allows you to pump out information quickly and from almost any venue. This gives you a great opportunity to reach your audience whenever you want. That said, you can’t forget that people on the other end of your Twitter account only want content that relates to their lives. People who follow you won’t want to know about your personal problems or your thoughts on every single event of the day. They have lives to lead themselves, so unless you can show them why something matters to them, they will likely stop following you. You should keep an audience-centric focus when you take to Twitter as a purveyor of information. That means you should not only consider what you should or shouldn’t tweet, but also when you should tweet and how often you should tweet. If you don’t give people enough information when they need it, your readers can feel isolated and ignored. If you constantly pepper your audience with every nuanced moment of a speech or news conference, you can become as annoying as a toddler pulling on his mother’s...
Of all of the microblogging platforms that have emerged within a short period of time, Twitter has become the dominant force for both disseminating and receiving short bits of information. Each tweet is sent to a group of followers the user has established, and those followers can then modify, respond to or retweet the information. In November 2017, Twitter doubled the maximum size of a tweet, providing users with a 280-character limit. Reaction to the change was mixed, as many users argued more useful options would have been more appreciated. Even with this change, it is best to focus on short, tight tweets. The underlying aspects of tweeting listed in the "Helpful Hints" box are still valid, even if the larger character limit becomes the standard for Twitter.

Twitter is an outstanding platform for reaching readers of a given interest through hashtags and direct messages. In addition, it offers you the opportunity to provide up-to-the-minute content updates as a situation continues to unfold. For example, #CharlieHebdo and #JeSuisCharlie emerged in January 2015 in the wake of a violent assault at the offices of Charlie Hebdo, a satirical French publication that had drawn cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad. The first hashtag drew attention to the shooting, which was linked to Islamic extremists, and allowed readers worldwide to follow the developing story. The second hashtag was used as a solidarity movement to show sympathy and connection between people around the world and the slain journalists.

A reporter can use this platform to find sources on the ground near a developing news event or to find people with an interest in a general topic that the reporter is covering. Reporters can also use this tool to update readers as to developing situations, such as traffic crashes, important governmental meetings and even sports scores.

Twitter helps you connect with your readers and helps your readers connect with you, all in real time.

**TWITTER**

As a reporter, you can consider Twitter to be a source for hints and tips, but before you share the information you get there, make sure it is right. The internet has a way of creating rumors or half-truths that people continue to pass along as facts. It also has a way of watching rock-solid facts get warped through misinterpretation and resharing. It doesn’t take a lot of extra time for you to check out the facts of a tweet before you retweet it. If you take the time to make sure things are right, your readers will thank you.

**Be careful with the tweets of others:** Good journalists vet information prior to reporting it as their own, and that traditional value should translate clearly to Twitter. Reporters wouldn’t go on live TV with a rumor or publish secondhand information as fact in a newspaper without fully checking it out. However, so many people are more than willing to click the “retweet” button on things that come flying through their Twitter feeds without giving them a second glance.

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Redditors provide readers with an opportunity to voice their opinions on stories of interest in thousands of niche topics. The up and down votes determine the overall value of the content, as well as its placement on the site.

**REDDIT**

This social media tool bills itself as “The Front Page of the Internet,” based on its information aggregation and social interaction aspects. Users submit links to a variety of categories, including Education, Entertainment, Humor, and Technology. Within each of these categories are “subreddits” that focus on specific areas of interest where readers can go deeper into narrower topics. For example, Education has a subreddit for News, which is then divided into dozens of other subtopics like world news, politics, and business.

Readers of these posts can respond to them as part of an ongoing discussion. They can rate these posts by “voting up” or “voting down” each individual link. The most popular links rise to the top of the subreddit page and remain there until something more popular moves them down.

The site includes search functions based not only on search terms of interest by the reader, but also through filter options that prevent dominant topics from overwhelming other content that might be of interest to readers. For example, a series of news “filters” listed in 2017 for the world news section included “Filter Trump,” “Filter Syria/Iraq,” and “Filter Israel/Palestine.” You can subscribe to certain Reddit feeds and subreddits so you can receive alerts when new topics emerge or when particular topics are getting “hot.” Many of the subreddits are monitored for quality or have specific rules to them to prevent things from getting out of hand.

Reporters can see a number of benefits from engaging with the Reddit site.

- First and foremost, they can see the trends in certain areas of interest, such as what stories are most popular in the wake of a big national or worldwide event. This can help reporters find stories of interest to track or follow as they look for ways to localize the topic or assess its impact on their audiences.

- Beyond that, many of the subreddits contain active posters on niche topics that could be helpful when a reporter needs a source on a given topic. For example, an entertainment reporter might be interested in what gamers think about the release of a new video game system or new title. The “Gaming” subreddit could be a good source for reporters to get a general sense of what serious gamers think of the new release.

- In addition, it is possible to contact sources of those posts with the hopes of establishing contact for an interview on the topic for a story. Having Reddit as a “clearinghouse” of sorts for a large array of people who are actively engaged on a variety of topics can be helpful for you as you work on stories where you have little initial insight or a limited number of sources. That said, as with any open source anonymous forum, you run the risk of dealing with people who don’t conform to the same standards of fact checking and ethics you might. Don’t assume the sources here are rock solid or that the people you interview always have the best of intentions. As stated throughout the book, make sure you are sure before you publish.
One of the things noted earlier in this book is that the giant array of content online tends to overwhelm readers. The purpose of Storify, according to its creators, is break through the noise and make sense of what people post on social media. People who use Storify practice many of the same strategies that traditional journalists use to tell stories. Users search a wide array of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and others, and they gather content on particular topics of interest. The users then assemble those bits and bites of information to tell a coherent story to a larger audience.

This story can be in the form of a timeline, in which the user wants to recount how a developing event emerged in a chronological form. For example, in July 2012, James Holmes entered a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, during the premier of “The Dark Knight Rises” and opened fire on the audience. Holmes killed 12 people and injured 70 others in the attack. In the wake of the shooting, The Denver Post used Storify to build a 4-day timeline primarily out of tweets from various witnesses, stakeholders and journalists. The story they told included links to Post photos and graphics as well as photos and tweets that other people published.

Storify users can also develop more traditional stories through the use of the inverted-pyramid approach or by creating a series of informational “chunks” on various subtopics. About five months after the Aurora shooting, gunman Adam Lanza fatally shot 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School, drawing massive media attention to Newtown, Connecticut. Digital Media First compiled a Storify that was a collection of various links to blogs, detailed newspaper stories and other media reports on the shooting. The organization broke the coverage down into specific subtopics, such as information about the event, background on the shooter, the list of victims and information about the town.

When you use Storify to help readers understand a given topic, you can arrange your content however you see fit, much in the way you can determine order within a traditional news story. The selections you make from other people’s feeds and posts mimic the choices you make in selecting sources and quotes for inclusion in your piece. The crucial element here is that you have to gather as much information as you can find and then determine what best tells the story.

**VISUALS**

When you share photographs with your audience members on social media, you can take them to the scene of an exciting event, give them a sliver of time that will awe them or help them easily understand a concept that’s difficult to describe via text. Visuals are like any other tool you have in your storytelling toolbox: Using them just to use them undermines their value and limits your effectiveness in getting your message to your readers. With that caveat in mind, here are a couple popular social media tools and some ways you can use them to reach your audience:

**INSTAGRAM**

This visually based social networking tool gives people the ability to shoot and share photos with their phones and other mobile devices. Instagram integrates some of the crucial aspects of other social media options, such as the ability to add text, Twitter handles and hashtags to augment coverage on a topic. In addition, users can share the images on platforms that reach people on Facebook and Twitter. Over the past few years, Instagram added a video feature, which allowed it to keep pace with potential competitors like Snapchat and Periscope.
Social media platforms, apps and sites have grown and developed over the past 10 years or so to help users share information through all sorts of communication formats. Throughout that time, most of the outlets discussed here have in some way crossed paths with Facebook.

Facebook serves as a hub through which almost 1.2 billion people travel on a monthly basis and that draws strength through its pairings with other social media options. For example, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr and other social media tools allow users to have the content they share simultaneously posted to their Facebook profiles. In addition, most websites now contain an option for readers to use their Facebook profile to log in as commenters and post content to a user’s Facebook wall.

However, the question of Facebook’s ability to create “social bubbles” for readers has led to concern among journalism practitioners and media scholars alike. Critics have charged that Facebook had a responsibility to eliminate false news, much of which was created purposefully by think tanks and internet trolls, as that content had real consequences. A BuzzFeed analysis of Facebook news content leading up to the 2016 presidential election showed that fake news outperformed real news stories in terms of engagement.

When it comes to figuring out what to believe and how to keep fake news from conning you, here are some simple suggestions:

- **“Who told you that?”** This is a common question many parents of young children ask when the kids hop in the car after school and tell a story that strains credulity. Parents always look at the source: a little kid. They also look at the primary source: “Who told you that?” Usually, it isn’t a teacher or a principal or another trusted adult source, but instead, it’s “that one kid” who has a really active imagination and loves the attention. Apply the same rule to your media diet when you are reading content online: “Who told you that?” Legacy media, like the Washington Post and the New York Times, as well as major news networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) tend to have more credibility than “JimmyRulesTheUniverse.blogspot.com”. It’s not to say that bloggers are always wrong and major media outlets are always right, but always consider the source as part of your investigative process.

- **Strength in numbers:** This goes along with the first point, in that a blog can break major news, and if it turns out to be true, a lot of other journalists are likely to run similar stories quickly. Do an internet search for any other stories on the topic, using keywords. The more stories you find on a topic, the more likely that story is to have some merit.

- **The root of the rumor:** Just because a quick Google search yields a ton of stories on a topic, it doesn’t always follow that you are going to be “fake free.” Keep in mind, you need to read those other stories to make sure they aren’t just citing the first story as their only source. Good stories will have multiple root sources, with various publications, websites and television broadcasts all using their own reporting with multiple, varied sources to confirm information. If you rely on stories with many, quality sources, it will help you separate the weak pieces from the stronger ones.

- **Click the links:** Much like citations in a research paper, links are supposed to provide clear evidence that supports the claims a journalist wants to make. However, just like students who are trying to fake their way through a last-minute research paper, some writers will cram their stories full of links that add no value with the idea of trying to fake people into believing the piece’s main idea. When you see a link, click it to see if it really supports what the writer had to say. Also, see if it links
to an outside source or if it's linking to another post or piece by that same author. Click around on the links within a story to see how strong the legs of the story actually are.

- Be suspicious: Humorist Jean Shepherd titled his 1966 novel “In God We Trust. All Others Must Pay Cash.” Former President Ronald Reagan once noted of his dealing with Russia in nuclear disarmament that he would “trust, but verify.” (The source of that is actually an old Russian proverb.) The core idea of both of these premises is simple: Be suspicious of what you are told until you can independently verify it through sources you trust. This is particularly true of things that merely reinforce your own worldview or stories that don’t seem to match up well with reality. A good way to process “facts” that concern you is to presume everything you are told in a story is incorrect until you can prove to yourself that it isn’t. You may seem paranoid or overly suspicious to some people, but at least you won’t get duped.

Beyond the basics of sharing selfies and augmenting images with filters, Instagram has value for journalists in the field. This tool is great for people attempting to capture and share images from a breaking news situation or a visually engaging moment in time. In addition, the app allows users to geotag images, helping journalists better provide geographic reference points for their readers.

As a research tool, journalists can review Instagram feeds of other people to find out what happened at a major event prior to the arrival of the media or authorities. They can also use the tool to reach out to the shooters of those images to gain information from them, much in the same way a reporter would interview a witness at the scene of an accident or a crime.

SNAPCHAT

This mobile app allows you to take photos and videos to send to friends and other contacts. Snapchat allows people to add filters, doodles and text to the photo or video prior to sending it. In addition, the receiver can “snapback” at the person who sent the original message, allowing the pair to engage in a back-and-forth conversation over the app. The app launched in 2011, and within three years users were sending more than 700 million snaps per day.10

What makes Snapchat different from other social media apps is that the content is preprogrammed to self-destruct within 10 seconds of the receiver viewing the message. However, options within the app allow you to create stories through a collection of videos and photos that
you can package and broadcast to followers, specific friends or the entire world. The app also has options for re-viewing previous snaps and even saving snaps you send or receive.

In 2015, Snapchat launched its Discover feature, which gives users the ability to follow various professional media outlets that use Snapchat to send out bits and bites of information to app users. Much in the way that Twitter can reach mobile users with short blasts of breaking news or information about a developing story, the Snapchat Discover feature provides journalists with a similar option just with a different app and more visual options. Journalists and media outlets noted that this form of social media will be helpful in engaging potential news consumers and drawing them into longer form content as well.

**VIDEO**

The line between social media tools that provide still images and those that convey content via video is a muddy one at best. Even though the apps and many current cameras allow you to capture both photographs and video at the same time, as discussed in Chapter 10, there are some crucial reasons to use video. Rather than rehash those here, below are a couple of video-related social media tools that can be helpful as you gather and share information with your audience:

**YOUTUBE**

This site serves as the standard bearer for video uploads and sharing. According to a 2014 analysis, the site received approximately 300 hours of new videos every minute. The site allows users to upload videos of varying lengths and quality for anyone with access to the site via the web or a YouTube mobile app. The site offers long-term storage of the videos as well as standard video playback features. Like other forms of social media, YouTube allows users to rate and share content as well as follow and subscribe to the feeds of various users. The site contains a wide array of content, including music videos, television show clips, movie trailers and original films.

In terms of journalistic opportunities, the site allows the creation of user-specific “channels” where users can upload and store content for viewers to watch at any time. The site also offers video blogging options, advertising capabilities and an expansive reach for content. Perhaps even more important, this social media channel allows citizen journalists to aid the mainstream media in telling stories and also to tell their own stories without the proverbial middleman. According to the Pew Research Center study mentioned earlier, 39 percent of all videos news organizations use comes from raw footage shot by nonprofessionals.

In addition, YouTube provides a home base for videos that have gone viral, thus exponentially expanding the videos’ reach. For example, in 2015, a number of protests on the campus of the University of Missouri drew national attention. Protestors called for the resignation of UM President Timothy Wolfe and University Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin after a series of racial and workplace related issues raised concerns regarding leadership quality throughout the educational system.
After both men resigned, journalists attempted to capture the resulting actions of protestors, who had taken over Carnahan Quad on the Mizzou campus. Those on the quad clashed with photographer Tim Tai regarding the journalist’s right to be present at the event. Student Mark Schierbecker captured the exchange between Tai and several protestors on video. Near the end of that confrontation, assistant professor Melissa Click confronted Schierbecker and called for “some muscle” to remove him from the quad. Schierbecker’s video went viral on YouTube, with more than 2.8 million views. A second longer version, which included his run-in with Click, garnered another 355,000. Other users subsequently uploaded versions of his video, the news coverage of it as well as “memed” versions of the video.

**PERISCOPE AND FACEBOOK LIVE**

These services allow users to create live streaming video and broadcast it to anyone else using this platform. It combines the video-sharing approach of YouTube, the immediacy of Twitter and the underlying concepts of Skype. Megan Pruitt of Social Media Week equated Periscope to having “your own live TV station.” One advantage it has over its competition is that you can make your broadcast available for replay for people who missed it live. Periscope, which is owned by Twitter, drew more than 1 million users within less than two weeks of its launch. Facebook later followed with its Facebook Live platform, which has many of the same benefits as Periscope. Given its dominance of the social media field, it is possible that Facebook will surpass Periscope in market share by the time this book hits the shelves.

Many local bands and DJs use these social media tools to showcase their skills and draw followers as well. Businesses have used the video service to conduct live product demonstrations or to take viewers behind the scenes of their operation. As on Twitter, you can follow specific “scopers,” and as on Facebook, you can show your support for users. (In this case, it’s through giving the broadcasters “hearts” for their efforts.) The app also integrates “push” notifications, so when a broadcast occurs in one of your preset areas of interest, Periscope will alert you to the new “scope.”

Journalists can use this tool to get in front of breaking news stories. Anna Jasinski at PR Newswire for Journalists called Periscope “a game changer,” noting that early users in March 2015 covered an explosion in New York City with live footage before the traditional media outlets even arrived. The app works with hashtags in the same way Twitter does, so you can title a broadcast with a tweetable headline to garner viewers. In addition, you can allow people watching your video to weigh in with comments and thoughts, thus increasing your interaction with your audience.

Aside from breaking news situations, Jasinski notes that journalists can use short live videos to promote upcoming pieces on other platforms or to seek sources for stories that need help. It is also possible, she says, to conduct a Q&A with your audience.
The term “blog” came from a shortened version of “web log” and was one of the earliest forms of mass communication opportunities for many people who wanted to write online content. The writings tended to take a diary-style approach, with the most recent content showing up first on the site and older posts being pushed deeper down the page. This gave dedicated readers the opportunity to easily find the most recent missives of their favorite writers and new audience members the ability to easily dig through the history of the blog.

Sites like Blogger and LiveJournal launched in the late 1990s and gave the general public an opportunity to create online diary-style pages of content. Unlike traditional media, the blog posts were done in a variety of styles and sizes, giving authors the ability to format their work as they saw fit. The size of the posts varied from author to author, and the use of language varied as well, a clear departure from space-driven, style-monitored professional journalism.

As blogging became even easier and more popular, many mainstream media outlets and professional journalists tried their hand at the approach, with varying levels of success. Consider these suggestions as to how best to approach this form of journalism:

**FOCUS ON AUDIENCE INTERESTS**

Blogs often serve niche interests, and as such, your readers will have specific desires when they click on your site. To retain as much of your audience as you can, you should establish the purpose of the blog and then adjust it based on the interests and needs of the readers. For example, if you decide to publish a blog that explores the issues sixth-graders face in private schools, you may find an active and engaged readership. The more you learn about the people who are surfing your site, the more you will know if you should focus on boys, girls or both. You will also learn whether your blog is more popular with students than with their parents, which will require you to adjust your topics and the way you address your audience. You might also determine which types of topics will draw more readers or push readers away.

**ESTABLISH A TONE**

Traditional news journalism has long relied on the use of facts and quotes to create a clear, objective approach to conveying information. Agencies like the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International served to guide the style and structure of the content, while organizations like the Society of Professional Journalists provided ethical standards for practitioners. This sense of “tone” helped provide consistency across the field.

In the world of blogging, you can set your own tone based on how many of those tenets you want to embrace and how many of them just cramp your style. As you adjust your language and
HELPFUL HINTS

HOW BEST TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

The number of social media tools you can use to share information has the potential to overwhelm people. When you decide to use social media as a journalist, it is important to keep a few things in mind so you can provide the best overall experience for your audience members:

• **Content is king:** The one rule above all else in journalism is that if the content is good, people will want to see it. All of the gizmos, gadgets and grandstanding can’t replace strong, clear reporting on valuable topics. If you don’t have anything important to say, don’t waste your audience members’ time shoving it at them via 237 social media platforms. All you are doing is annoying them.

• **Right tool for the right job:** Each of the tools outlined above, and the hundreds of others that will continue to develop in the next few years, has a specific purpose. You need to make sure that you figure out what benefits and drawbacks are associated with each of them before you use them. Then, you can use the tool effectively for your audience members. A Periscope video of a student government meeting is likely going to be as boring as watching paint dry. Live-tweeting a football game after every play will be as annoying as a pestering 3-year-old in a candy store. Figure out what your audience will want and how each tool can get it to them. Then ply your trade with their needs in mind.

• **Less is more:** Social media tools continue to emerge at a rapid pace, giving citizens and journalists a vast pool of options when it comes to getting information out to an interested audience. However, as discussed earlier in the book, the desire to be first on every platform and with every tool can lead to “shiny-object syndrome.” Instead of chasing after every app and trend that social media throws at you, become well versed in one or two dominant tools per communication method. For example, don’t have 29 video apps and sites that you pump random content out to. Instead, pick one or two video tools or platforms and grow a quality audience for each of them. This will help you showcase your skills as a professional and keep you focused on the crucial element of journalism: storytelling.

Social media allows you to link to audience members in a wide and viral pattern. Taking advantage of social media will allow you to spread your message far and wide.

For example, ESPN.com and Deadspin.com both use their websites to cover sports on a national level. However, ESPN relies more heavily on a traditional tone, including the use of third-person writing for most news stories, a stronger sense of the inverted pyramid and the AP’s approach to word choices. Deadspin has no problem using profanity in its work or having its writers infuse themselves and their thoughts into the content. (A headline like “So, the Warriors Got Their Asses Kicked” is among the more PG-rated examples.) The tone for each website works well because the audience members know what to expect. When you build your own blog, make sure you know your readers well enough to understand which tone will work best for you and them.
OFFER QUICK READS

Just because the internet allows you to write an infinite number of words with impunity, it doesn’t follow that your readers will read all of them. As noted elsewhere in the book, the average human has an 8-second attention span, so you need to get to your readers quickly and give them what they need in a hurry. Look for ways that you can provide simple bits and bites of information with links to larger stories. In the case of posts that delve into analysis, you might want to hit the highlights up top before going deeper into your own “take” on the topic. Regardless of your approach, consider this basic blogging adage: If you wouldn’t take the time to read it, don’t take the time to write it.

BE TIMELY

Traditional news publications had deadlines that attached themselves to the physical creation of a product. Newspapers needed to be printed and delivered, so writers, photographers, designers and editors adhered to strict time restrictions as they completed their work. News broadcasts went live at 5, 6 and 10 p.m., thus forcing reporters, editors, producers and anchors to be ready by that time with all the stories for that newscast. Digital media has both a 24/7 news cycle and a total lack of deadline, leading to both positive and negative outcomes.

If traditional journalists missed a deadline, the news outlet didn’t carry their stories, photos or videos. The reporters would have to wait until the next day or the next deadline to publish their work. Digital journalists, on the other hand, can produce content immediately upon learning something newsworthy. This gives them an advantage over their traditional counterparts. However, without a true “deadline” to keep their feet to the fire, digital journalists don’t have the same pressure to get something done as traditional journalists. With that in mind, digital journalists need to force themselves to be timely in everything they do.

When you get information you believe to be factually accurate, post it right away. As you find additional nuggets of news, post those as well, keeping your readers up to date on the topic at hand. Your goal in producing a blog is to both be timely in terms of getting content posted and keeping people engaged with ongoing news.
THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Content is still king**: Regardless of what approach you take to social media, you need to realize that the old adage “garbage in, garbage out” still applies. Social media users expect value each time you reach out to them, so don’t waste their time with worthless content. Your ability to use the latest app won’t impress them, but your ability to give them useful information will.

2. **Right tool for the right job**: Don’t use every social media tool on Earth just to prove the point that you’re good at using social media. If you spread yourself too thin or you become repetitive across channels, your work will suffer and your audience will disappear. Think about how each of the tools discussed in the book, such as video, photos and text, provide specific values to your audience members. Then, play to the strength of each tool when you decide how to convey your content to your readers and viewers.

3. **Be careful**: Social media can be deadly to you and your users. An ill-advised tweet or a shared Facebook post that you failed to fact-check can undo years of accumulated credibility. Before you click on the retweet button or share some information, stop and think about what you are sharing and how it could come back to hurt you. Only after you confirm the facts or verify the information should you pass it along to your audience.

KEY TERMS

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What social media platforms do you use? Whom do you follow on those platforms? Do you tend to follow the same people or different people across platforms? What made you choose these platforms and these sources for information on them?

2. People who use social media tend to opt in to networks of like-minded individuals. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks to picking out a few trusted media outlets and ignoring the rest?

3. How do you view social media in comparison with more traditional media, such as newspaper outlets and broadcast news operations? What makes these social media options better than these traditional organizations? What makes social media worse?
WRITE NOW!

1. Select one of the dominant social media platforms you use frequently (Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram etc.) and analyze your social networks. Categorize the people (or groups) you “follow” on this platform by dividing them into areas that best explain who they are, such as “family,” “high school friend,” “sports star” and “media outlet.” Do the same for the list of people and groups that follow you. Which groups have the most members? Which people or organizations do you attend to the most? Do these groups differ between the folks you follow and those who follow you? Write a short essay that encapsulates your findings.

2. Select a social media tool that you think has value as a storytelling option. Research the tool and provide a biography for the tool, including who created it, how long it has been around and any other relevant issues associated with it. Then, outline how you think you can best tell stories with this tool. What are some of the positives associated with the tool and what are some of the drawbacks? Write a short essay on your findings. Include examples of how you have seen the tool used well and poorly.

3. Below are several sets of facts that could be used to create a news story. Use each set to create a tweet of no more than 250 characters (saving 30 characters for links to the article and retweet possibilities). Focus on the noun-verb-object construction, and avoid “text speak” (“U” instead of “you” etc.) in your tweets.

   a. State Highway Patrol officers responded to a call of a disruption to traffic on Interstate 21 early Tuesday morning. Upon arriving, police found that a 2010 Nissan Xterra had struck a 1997 Toyota minivan. The Xterra’s driver lost control of his vehicle and slammed into the minivan, crushing it into the concrete guardrail on the left side of the freeway. The driver of the minivan, Jayne Johansen, 34 years old, was pronounced dead at the scene. The other two passengers, Jack Johansen, 8 years old, and Carl Johansen, 5 years old, were taken to a local hospital, where they later died. The driver of the Xterra, whose name has not been released, was arrested on suspicion of vehicular homicide. The officers say alcohol was a contributing factor to the crash.

   b. The Monroe City Council met Monday night to discuss several issues, including the fate of Windborne Lake. The city owns the artificial lake and land around it, but recently developers have asked about acquiring the property. Davis Group petitioned the council last month, asking to purchase the land for $3 million. The council held a vote Monday as to if that offer should be accepted. The council voted 7-2 in favor of the offer.

   c. Coach Jerry Gibb of the Homestate University Stallions football team called a press conference Thursday afternoon. He noted that he had recently been made aware of several incidents of teamwide hazing. He acknowledged that hazing is against university policy and state law. He investigated the complaints and found that three members of the team had engaged in hazing. Starting running back James Jackson, third-string wide receiver Billy Combs and backup punter Chester Charles did haze freshmen teammates. As a result, Gibb said he had suspended the players for Saturday’s game. The Stallions play the division-rival Cougars of Jonesburg College.

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Stay up to date on the latest in journalism

Remembering that first journalism class: “I was scared out of my mind.”

I was recently on a panel that discussed student media and self-censorship. Most, if not all, of the people on the panel were former journalists and several people in the audience had made the transition to the field to the classroom. One theme that came up repeatedly was the way in which students “these days” didn’t have SOMETHING about them. It might be drive, it might be curiosity or it might be a skill. In any case, many of the people who spoke recalled that when THEY were students at THAT age, THEY had whatever it was that the students today seemed to lack in their estimation.