

# Context crucial when judging social media

When Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. forces, many people learned the news from Facebook. In fact, Pew Research Center reported that more than six percent of Americans overall and more than 14 percent of Americans aged 18-34 learned of bin Laden's death that way. Even more important, Pew reported that 44 percent of media users who use Facebook learned of bin Laden's death first on [Facebook](#). The truth is, many people are getting their news from social media before traditional media is reporting the facts.

From the Midwest to the Middle East, social media play a role in providing information to the public. At times, it seems social media play a prominent role in providing information quickly – as long as the public digests it correctly.

When Rodrick Dantzler went on a shooting spree in Grand Rapids, Mich., social media played a pivotal role in providing information to those who needed information. At times, social media trumped traditional media in news being reported and information about what was happening where, and in discussing the safety of residents and bystanders. People posted updates, confirmed crime scene locations, commiserated over the day's events and more.

Traditional news media are often in a difficult position, compared with the average poster who is near the action and has Facebook and Twitter access. The average poster relays information in a way not unlike that of an eyewitness or a primary source in a traditional media account, says Southern Illinois University Carbondale assistant professor Aaron Veenstra.

“People who post information like this have an insight into

what's happening, but no context," Veenstra said. "They are able to give a piece of the puzzle. If enough people post you can start to construct what happened through these people. They play an important role in framing the traditional coverage."

Context is important when examining how social media news is processed. In Grand Rapids, news/talk radio host Scott Winters spent the day of the Dantzler ordeal following traditional and social media, and listening to the police scanner. He reacted by reporting some scanner details on Facebook, but with his news background erred on the side of caution. Ot

hers posted just about anything they heard – sometimes correctly, sometimes not. Credibility isn't a major concern with many posting information on social media.

"For most people, the process of journalism is invisible," Veenstra said. "They know what they see or read, but they don't really understand the process that gets it there. They report exactly what they see. But they may not see all that is happening around them or have a context for all that is happening. There is no filtering."

Veenstra describes people who present information this way as providing a journalistic service without using the tools of journalism.

But how long before a family member learns about a loved one's death through Facebook or Twitter, before the information has been officially released? There is also an underlying fear of reporting something that may hinder law enforcement or put people in danger.

Most news agencies won't report news without first fact-checking. But where news sources are concerned, social media are bounding ahead of traditional media. People who once joked, "If it's on the Internet, it must be true!" now realize that others might believe the Internet is all-knowing. People

must seriously consider the veracity of what they read online and the credibility of the source, particularly in social media venues where most anyone with a computer could post what he or she deems news – no confirmation required.

At the same time, Veenstra pointed out that on the night bin Laden was killed, CNN's Wolf Blitzer was on the air filling time while waiting for President Barack Obama to make his announcement. Before the press figured out what was happening, Blitzer spent on-air time speculating about the news to come and creating numerous scenarios. He even speculated on possible retaliation scenarios, before the official announcement was made.

Speculation was rampant on social media that night as well.

Context may be the key word in examining social media in crisis situations. Traditional media cannot keep up with social media as events unfold. But the audience must keep in mind that what it receives from social media are snippets of information without context. Traditional media still play a role in providing context to what is happening.

Scott Lambert contributed to this story