

**AUGUST 2013**

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**SOCIAL  
MEDIA**

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**TIM BLACK  
& ED NOEL**



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## KEY TERMS

Arab Spring

Awareness campaign

Citizen journalism

Journalistic Ethics

Social media

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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Referred to by some scholars as the “fourth revolution” in communication (thus equated with the arrival of language, writing, and the printing press) it is claimed that the internet has the potential to fundamentally alter the spreading of news and information in contemporary society [Ref: [eprints](#)]. Today, this seems especially apt where social media, from blogs to Facebook and Twitter, is playing an ever more prominent role in our understanding of world events. The public no longer has to rely on traditional news outlets for reportage and commentary. Instead, everyone and anyone can be a de facto journalist. Videos and images of incidents can be uploaded instantly; commentary on a protest can be tweeted as it happens. It isn’t simply the speed in which we consume news which has changed; the amount of blogs providing commentary and leaks has also proliferated. Anyone with an internet connection can let millions of others know their particular take on an issue or event. Does this hinder or improve our understanding of events?



## SOCIAL MEDIA:

“Social media improves our understanding of major world events”



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## The democratisation of the media

There is certainly no doubting the ubiquity of social-media technology, be it the advent of the smart phone or the emergence of social networks like Twitter or WordPress. In the words of one academic, it has allowed ‘anyone to become a journalist at little cost... Nothing like this has ever been remotely possible before’ [Ref: [American Journalism Review](#)]. For many, this is a positive development. It means that we do not have to rely solely on big media companies to interpret the world for us; we can use other sources, other commentators, and even make the news ourselves. As a result, our understanding of world events potentially deepens. As one social media advocate explains, if a particular media outlet is considered untrustworthy, people can now go elsewhere: ‘What’s more, they could stop being passive recipients’ [Ref: [Niemann Reports](#)]. During the Turkish protests #BugünTelevizyonlariKapat (Turn off your TV Today), began trending on Twitter, reflecting widespread distrust with the information mainstream media outlets were propagating [Ref: [New Internationalist](#)]. As one blogger argues: ‘The notion of political commentary as a few-to-many exercise, produced by highly paid elites and policed by big business, has been shattered beyond repair’ [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Questions remain about the extent to which social media offers the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of important events. Gauging public opinion on twitter has become a regular feature of news reporting; an acknowledgment perhaps, that this new forum is important when digesting current affairs. The Arab Spring, in particular, was heralded as the democratisation of the media - it wasn’t professional journalists spreading the news about Tunisia, Bahrain and Egypt, it was ordinary citizens armed with little more than access to a social network. One citizen journalist, convinced of the capacity for social media to enlighten, argued that during the Arab Spring, social media became

a place ‘to shape and discuss articles of the constitution, build mass awareness campaigns, and have entire Facebook-based news agencies with millions of worldwide subscribers’ [Ref: [The European](#)]. Others were less convinced of social media’s political role [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)].

## A medium for falsehood

Discussing the rise of citizen journalism, the Economist notes that the use of social media in reporting world events has done away with editors and highlighted precisely why they are necessary [Ref: [Economist](#)]. In the absence of editorial standards, social media allows half-truths, conspiracy theories and wild rumours to flourish. Hyunjin Seo, a Kansas University professor of journalism, even calls social media ‘an amplifier of misinformation’ [Ref: [Topeka-Capital Journal](#)]. Another writer describes its effects as playing to our desire to feel good ‘in return for not doing very much’, creating a situation where: ‘Facts get lost, vanity goes viral’ [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Though mainstream news outlets can use social media for leads, trawling through the scale of information is a gargantuan task [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. The example of tweets by “Boya Dee”, immediately after the Woolwich attacks in south London, illustrate how social media can beat mainstream outlets to the story, though the extent to which this ensures reliable information is questionable [Ref: [The Week](#)]. This problem, evident in the Boston Bombings where Reddit users were scouring relevant photos looking to identify the bombers, resulted in several people being misidentified as the culprits [Ref: [Wired](#)]. Even US president Barack Obama felt it necessary to warn against ‘jumping to conclusions’ ‘in this age of instant reporting, tweets and blogs’ [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. As one commentator complained, ‘We have more information, but it’s a morass of truths, half-truths, and what we used to call libel.

It's fast, but it's bad. And bad information is a cancer that just keeps growing.' Even the social media coverage of the Arab Spring was criticised for exaggeration and inaccuracy. Marc Lynch, in particular, criticised the hype and mistruths peddled during the Egyptian uprising. 'I still remember the first time I was driving around a perfectly calm, absolutely normal Cairo', he writes, 'while reading a Twitter feed describing apocalyptic clashes and mayhem' [Ref: [Foreign Policy](#)]. Worst of all, the potential speed in which social media can report world events gives a dangerous competition to mainstream media outlets, creating an incentive for journalistic standards to slip, as they did with numerous false reports of Nelson Mandela's death [Ref: [International Business Times](#)].

### A deeper understanding?

Some suggest that social media has the capacity to improve our understanding of world events by raising awareness of events and stories that other mainstream outlets have ignored. A well-known example of this was the Kony 2012 video, which attempted to focus public attention on the use of child soldiers by Uganda's Joseph Kony in his paramilitary group, the Lord's Resistance Army. Some have sought to praise this style of campaigning journalism: 'The millions who watched the "Kony 2012" video — and donated or contacted a legislator — acting individually and however naïvely, might collectively force some big decisions' [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. However, the backlash against the Kony campaign by mainstream media outlets, and its subsequent demise, raise important questions about the dangers of the partial take on events promoted by such campaigns. Arguably the shift away from reliable media outlets to social media, especially blogs, jeopardises our access to reliable facts. Traditional media outlets "can fund in-depth reporting and research. They can underwrite projects

that can take months or years to reach fruition... They can employ editors and proofreaders and other unsung protectors of quality work" [Ref: [Rough Type](#)]. None of this is possible with a simple blog, and their lack of accountability frequently leads to neglect of basic journalistic standards like verification of sources [Ref: [Wordpress](#)]. It is also questionable whether a medium in which acts of "trolling" fellow users, public figures and celebrities is consistent with producing accurate, reliable information. As one academic puts it, 'the anonymity and dynamic, playful quality of the [internet] has a powerful disinhibiting effect on behaviour' and therefore it may not be one conducive to developing a considered understanding of any unfolding events [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Others warn of a stifling conformity on Twitter which drowns out discussion on certain issues once the 'collective spite and collective bile' of a Twittermob is unleashed [Ref: [Telegraph](#)].

## ESSENTIAL READING

Boston and the new media: the far from madding crowd  
*Guardian* 23 April 2013

Why is Twitter on trial? \*innocent face\*  
Rachel Sylvester *The Times* 13 November 2012

When Everyone's a Journalist  
Carl Sessions Stepp *American Journalism Review* December 2005

## FOR

Don't blame the internet for false rumours about Boston - it's the enemy of falsehoods  
Roy Greenslade *Evening Standard* 24 April 2013

The Phone Is Mightier Than the Sword  
Sahar el-Nadi *European* 26 January 2013

Taking power through technology in the Arab Spring  
Ramesh Srinivasan *Al Jazeera* 26 October 2012

The rise of citizen photojournalism  
Dan Gillmoor *Al Jazeera* 15 March 2011

Welcome to the fifth estate  
Laurie Penny *New Statesman* 22 June 2010

## AGAINST

Social media as confusing as helpful in crisis situations  
Alex Dingman *Topeka-Capital Journal* 22 April 2013

Twitter Devolutions  
Marc Lynch *Foreign Policy* 7 February 2013

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What are we losing in the Web's images of suffering and schadenfreude?

Philip Kennicott *Washington Post* 27 December 2012

Why is Blogging Bad for Journalism?  
*Whose News?* 16 January 2010

Newspapers vs. Bloggers: The New News Process  
Jeff Jarvis *Seeking Alpha* 8 June 2009

## IN DEPTH

Syria, Citizen Journalism, and the Capital 'T' Truth  
Matthew Ingram *Bloomberg Business Week* 28 March 2012

The people formerly known as the audience  
*Economist* 7 July 2011

The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world  
Peter Beaumont *Guardian* 25 February 2011

Post-Gutenberg Galazy: The Fourth Revolution in the Means of Production of Knowledge  
Steven Harnad *eprints*

## BACKGROUNDEERS

### Social Media's Role in Turkey's Dissent

Karin Alexander *New Internationalist* 4 July 2013

### Woolwich Attack: Social Media Reaction

*BBC News* 23 May 2013

### Social Media's Rush To Judgment In The Boston Bombings

Steve Henn *National Public Radio* 23 April 2013

### Is Your Social Media Editor Destroying Your News Organisation Today?

Choire Sicha *Awl* 19 April 2013

### What the Boston bombings taught me about journalism

Chris Cillizza *Washington Post* 19 April 2013

### Reddit users are hosting a witch-hunt for the Boston Marathon bomber

Ian Steadman *Wired* 17 April 2013

### Citizen Journalism is Reshaping the World

*TEDxTalks* 17 December 2012

### How Social Media Affected Newtown Coverage

*New York Times* 17 December 2012

### A Video Campaign and the Power of Simplicity

Noam Cohen *New York Times* 11 March 2012

### The future of video: democratisation of creativity and production

*Guardian* 23 February 2012

### A Twitter Revolution for Journalists

Joel Simon *Huffington Post* 14 February 2012

### Citizen Journalism Paves the Way in Egypt

*Pulitzer Centre* 16 November 2011

### Digital first: what it means for journalism

Jeff Jarvis *Guardian* 26 June 2011

### Is Egypt about to have a Facebook revolution?

Abigail Hauslohner *TIME* 24 January 2011

### Authentic journalism: weapon of the people

Al Giordano *openDemocracy* 19 November 2010

### Why the News Media Became Irrelevant - And How Social Media Can Help

Michael Skolar *Nieman Reports* 2009

### Evan Williams on what's behind Twitter's explosive growth

*TEDxTalks* 27 February 2009

### The Amoral of Web 2.0

*Rough Type* 3 October 2005

### Kony 2012

### Handbook of Journalism

*Reuters*

## ORGANISATIONS

Anonymous

Associated Press

National Union Journalists

Reddit

Reuters

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

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## IN THE NEWS

Egyptian army's spokesperson garners Facebook 'likes'  
*YNet News* 13 August 2013

Twitter troll forced to apologise after calling historian Mary Beard a 'filthy old slut'  
*Independent* 30 July 2013

Did Nelson Mandela Die? Twitter Grieves For Hero And Posts Morgan Freeman Picture  
*International Business Times* 26 June 2013

Woolwich attack: police monitor social media after rise in racial abuse  
*MSN News* 25 May 2013

Woolwich attack: live tweets from rapper Boya Dee go viral  
*The Week* 23 May 2013

Ian Hargreaves says citizen journalism has big role in Wales  
*BBC News* 5 May 2013

Katherine Jenkins v Jan Moir: Twitter wins the first round  
*Daily Telegraph* 24 April 2013

Anonymous group launches citizen journalism website  
*BBC News* 18 April 2013

Salah Eddin Barhoum, Boston Teen Stunned To Be Portrayed As Bombing Suspect  
*Huffington Post* 18 April 2013

Reddit users are hosting a witch-hunt for the Boston Marathon bomber  
*Wired* 17 April 2013

Alan Davies apologises over Lord McAlpine tweet  
*Telegraph* 19 December 2012

Connecticut school shooting: police hit out at social media 'misinformation'  
*Telegraph* 16 December 2012

Lord McAlpine and the high cost of tweeting gossip  
*Guardian* 27 November 2012

Arab spring leads surge in events captured on cameraphones  
*Guardian* 23 December 2011

England riots: Dangers behind false rumours  
*BBC News* 20 September 2011

Syria Gay Girl in Damascus blog a hoax by US man  
*BBC News* 13 June 2011

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NOTES

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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