



REUTERS
INSTITUTE for the
STUDY of
JOURNALISM

Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper
University of Oxford

**NEWS AGENCIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA:
A RELATIONSHIP WITH A FUTURE?**

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Michaelmas Term 2012

Sponsor: Austria Press Agency Alfred Geiringer Fellowship

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost I want to express my gratitude to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and my sponsor, the Alfred Geiringer Fellowship Program and the Austria Press Agency (APA), for giving me the opportunity to spend one term in the incredible academic environment of Oxford University and to carry out this research. Without these institutions none of this would have been possible.

The past two and a half months have been very intense, always challenging and full of surprises. A time packed with interesting lectures and seminars, a time that allowed me to get to know some of the most moulded experts in the field of journalism and beyond, and last but not least a time that was hallmarked by upsetting and fascinating events in the British media system.

Furthermore I want to thank my supervisor, Robert G. Picard, for his enormous help and good will and especially for his positive attitude which guided me through some rough times during this research. Thanks also to the news agencies and media experts who were willing to answer my questions in spite of their very busy schedules.

I want to thank the Institute's staff and the other journalist fellows. It was an honour and a pleasure to meet all of you. Not only did I get new insights in the media landscape from your home countries, but also enjoyed your company immensely and was deeply inspired by all of you.

And finally, thanks to family and friends who were extremely supportive.

Abstract

The last few years have brought many new challenges for news media. The advent of the Internet and the accompanying implementation of new distribution models have radically changed the way journalism is produced and perceived. One aspect of this is social media. Interactive offers like Facebook or Twitter have brought a new dimension and dynamic to newsgathering. As traditional news media like newspapers or broadcasters have already adapted to this information and communication tools to a large extent, there is still a big task at hand for news agencies. Their business model makes it a lot harder to make use of these platforms and interact with users. This research focuses on this aspect and tries to detect how traditional wire services can make use of social media.

To accomplish this, an in-depth literature review of recent studies on journalism and social media is accompanied by analysis of five news agencies as well as interviews with some of their editors and media experts. Global players like Associated Press and AFP function as key indicators of what news agencies are capable of in this new environment as their market position and financial situation makes it a lot easier for them to explore this field. Finally, the focus lies on three smaller European agencies: CTK from the Czech Republic, STT from Finland and TT from Sweden. As all of them are most active on Facebook and Twitter, the media analysis focuses on these two platforms. With the international cooperation for the Facebook page “The Climate Pool”, which was initiated by Minds International in 2009 and operated by eleven international news agencies, a further form of social media use of wire services is included in the final analysis.

In general it can be said that news agencies and their journalists use social media first and foremost as a means of newsgathering. As close to 2 billion people make use of these platforms in one or the other form, this is simply a way of searching the web for new information that cannot be neglected. A second very important aspect for journalists (and institutions) is to build networks with people on the ground, experts and even their customers. Not only can their knowledge be utilized, but also new audiences and clients can be reached, although each of the reviewed agencies has a very different approach to this. The distribution aspect – especially for smaller agencies with a business-to-business model – is probably the trickiest part right now. Without a proper news website of their own, it is a very difficult task to create a model for social media that enables them to distribute news there without affronting their customers. Finally, social media is a way for news agencies to be visible, to present new services and to some extent also strengthen their brand.

All interviewees agreed that social media is something they have to adopt in one or the other form – although the intensity of use can vary to a great extent. But whether it is with specialized channels for a niche audience, presentations of new services for clients or just to build up networks – news agencies will definitely play a role when it comes to news distribution in the digital and social environment. Success on these platforms cannot yet be turned into big revenue streams, but as new content as well as business models are still at an early stage, there is definitely more research to do – both by the news agencies themselves and by academics who analyse this field. This research paper should function as a prelude for further studies and outline some of the most urgent issues in this context.

1. Introduction

For the last few years media executives and consultants seem to be concerned with only one issue: How traditional news outlets can prepare themselves for what ought to be one of the biggest changes in recent history of distribution and potential market growth – the online business. Not only has digitalization brought new possibilities of reaching audiences as well as clients all around the world, but actually changed the way people communicate and interact with each other. This also means that news distribution itself has to face a new environment: Readers, listeners and viewers are not passive consumers any more but actually engage with news sources and play a growing role in the shaping of what the news business of the future will look like. One key to this new game are social media platforms. It seems crucial that media firms engage with these new forms of communication in order to stay competitive and follow an old rule: to be where your consumers are. But while this looks like a tough task for media outlets like newspapers or broadcasting companies, for news agencies it could prove even more difficult, especially if they mainly rely on a business to business model. How can news agencies use social media and at the same time maintain their core business of selling news on a subscription basis?

Nobody will deny that social networks play a very important part in the development of future communication markets, as the figures speak for themselves: At the end of 2012 close to 1.9 billion people were using social networks in one or the other way.¹ These users are able to interact with one another, as well as with countless news companies who have entered the social media world. Thus journalism not only has to cope with what shaped the last decades in regards to changing work flows – from the first computers and content management systems to new means of gathering and distributing news via online channels – but it is also confronted with a new type of audience. People are able to gather more news from many different channels than ever before, using traditional sources like newspapers, television or radio alongside online sources or apps on their smart phones. This means nothing less than the need for news companies to rethink the way they handle information, deal with commentary and engage with both their audiences and their customers.

Many traditional players have developed strategies to deal with these challenges. Whether it is a more focused approach to their core potential whilst distinguishing the key benefits of old media or an attempt to serve both worlds, the analogue as well as the digital. But still there are big differences if a media outlet tries to distribute its news via a website – regardless of whether it is behind a paywall or not – or via social media channels like Facebook or Twitter. Whereas the website can almost be categorised as a safe environment as all the power over its content lies in the hands of editors, journalists and IT people, social media is something completely different.

Here, the power lies with the user – at least to a certain extent. As soon as a posting has been made, the linking and sharing can start, being probably the most powerful tool for the audience. This can be identified as the biggest potential for reaching new recipients. At the same time there is the danger

¹ James Manyika, *The Social Economy: Unleashing Value and Productivity through Social Technologies*, Lecture at the Oxford Internet Institute, 8th November 2012

of losing control over the usage of certain amounts of information with the link to the original posting always being present.

But surely it is not the question if a news company should engage with social media or not. On the contrary, it is much more important to get an idea of what these new distribution channels can offer any media outlet in regards of audience reach, global approaches or news gathering itself. Therefore it is crucial to neatly define what one wants to achieve by entering the social media world, which audiences shall be targeted and how social media channels can be integrated in the work flow without making compromises when it comes to the core business of gathering and selling news.

I doubt if one can find a correct answer, as every media has its own terms and conditions, every media company has its specified goals and rules and every (national) market its certain characteristics, all of which has to be considered. But especially this last statement requires a closer look: Can we define social media platforms as a new market? A niche, that grew over the last years to such an extent that traditional media sometimes even seem to be scared by this new competitor in the fight for attention of the audience? Or is it rather the case that social media provide means to strengthen brand loyalty, to engage with users on a very personal level and to offer clients additional value? If so, there is another challenge to face. Masses of user generated content makes it hard to find a place for serious, independent and balanced journalism. Or as Jane Chapman and Nick Nuttall describe it:

“The ultimate challenge for journalism in the twenty-first century could [...] be to discover the ‘precise nature of the correlation between efficient markets and good journalism’. The recurrent danger is that in attempting to monetize the internet news organisations lose sight of the fundamental characteristics of good journalism – the successful integration of democratic values, technological innovation, ethical standards, and respect for audiences. Current trends – multiplatforms, paywalls, PR-dominated news gathering, shrinking editorial staffs, re-evaluation of the ‘special status’ accorded journalists’ information – rather than pointing the way are often contradictory, at times ephemeral, and always challenging.”²

In this short paragraph we find several key indicators which not only stress the importance of news media concerning themselves with these new players on the digital market, but also outline the dangers media companies could face if they get involved with social media. It is also a question of authenticity, reliability and trustworthiness. But just like the integration of other new technologies in the everyday life of journalists, social media as a tool for both distribution and news gathering cannot be left aside as “technological possibilities of the digital revolution are empowering and extending the craft of journalism in ways that were unimagined just a few years ago”³.

Newspapers, radio stations or TV networks can act more or less independently concerning their appearance on social media platforms. But what can news agencies do? An agency has not only to think about reputation or commercial success, but first and foremost maintain its position as an independent news provider. “The balance act for the agency between commerce and public duty is

² Jane L. Chapman; Nick Nuttall, *Journalism Today: A Themed History*, Reviewed by Nancy Roberts, H-Net Reviews. January 2012, pp 313-314; <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34225>, 10th November 2012

³ Andrew Currah, *What's happening to our news: an investigation into the likely impact of the digital revolution on the economics of news publishing in the UK*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2009, p. 103f.

not easily mastered”, argue Dörfler and Pensold.⁴ Apart from the two main points for journalists these days concerning social media – how do I present myself on such a platform and how can I use it safely as a news source – the question how to integrate it into the portfolio of a news agency whilst not alienating its business and media clients is probably one of the most difficult to answer. While most of the news media communicate with the public, news agencies are based on communicating with media clients. But as the wire services expand onto social media platforms, they also enter the realm of direct communication to the public and can become competitors to their clients.

In this research I plan to investigate this aspect: How can news agencies generate public value through an appearance on social media or an integration of social media channels and applications on their own websites? Which position should they take up in the handling with these forms of global communication? Which benefit will come from it for the agency as well as its customers or will the latter just disapprove of this step? And is social media nowadays inevitably necessary to maintain a role as a leading news provider?

Much has been written about the challenges of social media in our society and also ongoing convergence of old and new media forms. But news agencies are still only a side aspect in the research about the wide field of journalism 2.0. This research tries to analyse already existing models of some of the biggest international news agencies as well as smaller ones. Apart from that, interviews with experts from Associated Press (AP), smaller European agencies and media experts shall give further insights in why agencies moved onto social media platforms in the first place, which kind of information and communication they are using there and how they are measuring their success.

“The future is about telling stories across platforms”, writes media designer Mario R. Garcia⁵. A statement that in my point of view only has to be altered in one small aspect: it is not the future we talk about, but the present. “[T]he rhythm and spontaneity that social media afford is not likely to disappear anytime soon, so news agencies, and news people generally, have an obligation to find solutions in which the professionals and the always-engaged users come together.”⁶ And Angela Phillips emphasizes a new pillar of good journalism, which up to now has been defined mainly by speed and quality: “Now there is a third pillar: sociability. It is no longer enough to be ‘first with the news’, nor is it sufficient to be comprehensive and trustworthy. It is now increasingly considered necessary to ensure that news is produced in a form that is capable of spreading virally.”⁷ The spreading of course can be influenced and increased exponentially by the means and use of social media. This research will give an outlook into the future of this uncertain relationship between news agencies and social media and therefore pave the way for subsequent studies to follow. As more and more agencies discover social media platforms as a possible new market, a scientific research of underlying communication models, possible market forms and business solutions is inevitable.

⁴ Edith Dörfler; Wolfgang Pensold, *Die Macht der Nachricht. Die Geschichte der Nachrichtenagenturen in Österreich*, Molden Verlag, Vienna, 2001, p. 534

⁵ Mario R. Garcia, *News Agencies and the Social Media Challenge*, http://garciamedia.com/blog/articles/news_agencies_and_social_media_challenges_of_producing_news_whe_n_everyones/ / 10th November 2012

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Angela Phillips, *Sociability, Speed and Quality in the Changing News Environment*, in *Journalism Practice*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2012.689476>, 10th November 2012

1.1 Methodology and research questions

After this introduction to the topic I want to outline my methodology as well as the key research questions that shall be answered. Apart from a literature review that includes some of the most recent articles and studies regarding the relationship of social media and news companies I will look at the ways news agencies use social media outlets to distribute their news and engage with audiences. This also includes interviews with some of the social media editors as well as media experts who studied this field.

In chapter two I present a short overview of how different authors define the relationship between news companies and social media. Chapter three will provide a closer look at what the leading international news agencies are doing online with special emphasis on their social media activities. Obviously Reuters, AP and AFP are using these techniques to engage with their audiences, but this doesn't come as a surprise as these agencies are global players and have the kind of reputation that gives them some advantage in the online field.

To get a better idea of what especially smaller agencies are able to do with social media, this research therefore focuses on three European wire services: STT (Finland), TT (Sweden) and CTK (Czech Republic). These agencies have been chosen because they not only use social media in one form or another, but especially because they are doing this in very different ways. Whether it is to distribute press releases as an additional service for their clients, to enforce traffic on their main news websites or to keep audiences up-to-date on recent developments within the agencies, all three make use of the possibilities provided by Facebook, Twitter or other platforms.

This analysis is accompanied by interviews with members of the staff to provide insights into the main reasons for implementing these tools at first and to get an idea of how social media publishing and monitoring is made part of the work flow for journalists.

Putting all these different aspects together, the following core questions shall be addressed:

- 1. What are the main reasons for news agencies to use social media platforms and how do they use them?**

It is important to know where the idea came from in the first place, who was involved in the decision making and implementing of new work flows and if the move onto these platforms was a well planned decision or merely a jump into cold waters as many other media outlets were doing it. Furthermore I want to address the norms which are being used when communicating with a totally different audience than what is the core market of the wire services, which benefits the single agencies hope to achieve by using these platforms, as well as whether there was a plan from the beginning to use different content for different platforms. This leads directly to the second research question.

- 2. What kind of information and communication works best on social media platforms?**

Though it may be possible that not even the agencies themselves will be able to fully answer this question, a main focus will be aimed at which sorts of information the news agencies are using for different platforms. At the core it will be about a differentiation between hard and soft news. It could be argued that news distributed via social media platforms tends to be more successful in terms of

further sharing or commenting if the topics provide lighter characteristics – such as celebrity news, funny and unusual events or pop culture issues instead of domestic and world politics or economics. Another part of this question is if the news agencies are able to monitor their impact on these platforms. Furthermore the research shall address the topic of user engagement: If postings are for example 'liked' on Facebook or retweeted on Twitter, if people post their comments directly beneath it – do the agencies respond in any way? Do they monitor the feedback and critique that is coming through these channels and do they act on these? Do they have employees who are in charge of the interactions with users on social media? And because comments, shares, retweets and likes can be characterised as being the most important currency in the social media world, the final question has to be:

3. How do the news agencies measure their success on social media platforms?

This also addresses the effectiveness of news agencies and their postings respectively their distribution of content on social media. What form of measurement has been implemented and do the single news agencies vary in this particular field to a great deal? One possible success which has already been mentioned is strengthening the brand loyalty. But is there actually a way to measure this? Or can news agencies maybe also monetize new audiences that they are able to reach via Facebook et al? One crucial challenge for the success in a digital environment may be to identify new business models within the realm of social media and therefore this will serve as proof of the difficulties many news companies still have in this regard.

2. Social Media and Journalism: A new form of distribution

What is it that makes social media so special for the consumer? Why do traditional news outlets have to jump on this digital bandwagon to be part of the game? One answer to these questions has already been touched upon: “More than at any time in history, the consumer [can] create their own content, be it text, photographs, audio or video files, that [can] easily be shared and networked among ‘friends’ and contacts.”⁸ In this short sentence Albarran refers to the most important aspects of social media for the user. This obviously is a reason why Facebook and other platforms have become so popular. But for the media and news industries this also has a crucial aftermath as new possibilities of coverage evolve: “Eventually media companies [will] embrace user generated content as a way to expand and facilitate news coverage.”⁹

Media and communication industries are not the only ones that have been through transformations, as Albarran argues with reference to automobile, manufacturing or airline industry transformations in the last decades. “But transformation should not just be looked at as a negative process. Transformation in any industry presents new opportunities and innovations for companies involved in the industry, new pricing and cost structures, new ways of doing business, and in the case of media industries, more options for consumers and more platforms for advertisers.”¹⁰

A similar argument can be found in a recent study published by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company. In “The Social Economy”, the authors see an “untapped potential” of up to 1.3 trillion US-Dollars in the social networking business per year – across all industry sectors.¹¹ An astonishing figure that seems to justify the aspirations media executives see in new media and social media services. But although 72 percent of the companies which have been surveyed by McKinsey use social media in one or the other form, they “are far from capturing the full potential impact of these technologies. Indeed, new uses, technical advances, and social business models will evolve – driven by user innovation and advances in technology.”¹² That is a very important point: As many companies try to engage on social media platforms with their clients using these techniques, a huge part seems to be satisfied with just being there, being part of the social media world, and does not really try to unearth everything that is possible. At the same time the technological developments start to spread further into the everyday life of users, with new tools and gadgets being introduced into the market almost every other day. Or as Albarran argues: “The transformation of the media and communication

⁸ Alan B. Albarran, *The Transformation of the Media and Communication Industries*, Media Markets Monographs, Issue 11, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, 2010, p. 14

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 18

¹¹ Michael Chui et al, *The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies*, McKinsey Global Institute, July 2012,

http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/mgi/research/technology_and_innovation/the_social_economy, 12th November 2012, p. vi

¹² Ibid., p. 2

industries didn't happen overnight. This transformation is far from complete, and how long it will take remains an unknown."¹³

This also leads to a new way media companies have to encounter their markets: "The digital environment completely disrupted traditional business models; in the old analogue world content was controlled by media companies and access was more limited. In the digital world it is all but impossible to manage access and distribution options are rampant."¹⁴ A fact that cannot be neglected as online news have surpassed newspapers in terms of popularity already some years ago "and ranks just behind television", according to Hong who refers to a study by Pew Research done in 2010.¹⁵ In the UK and USA, the weekly access of online news is even ahead of TV, as the most recent Reuters Digital News Report shows.¹⁶

2.1 Defining Social Media

Simply put, social media are "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking"¹⁷. This means that we deal with a whole branch of different models, such as weblogs, Internet forums, wikis, podcasts, microblogging or social networks. The most important platforms as of 2012 are Facebook (social network) with over 1 billion users¹⁸ and Twitter (mix of network and microblogging), which has surpassed the 500 million user mark early 2012¹⁹. These developments also have an impact on mobile applications as smart phones have become extremely popular. For example, 488 million users regularly use Facebook mobile.²⁰

But social media are not only used by people to communicate with friends and family. More and more companies create pages on these platforms and try to use them to communicate with their audience. Especially for marketing and public relations, social media have brought a whole new level of engaging with the target groups. This doesn't exclude media companies, as the news business for some time now has encountered the online environment as a crucial place to be successful in order to be competitive. Overall, digital media "has the potential to transform our consumption of news, and the way in which we engage in the democratic debate. It can help users find many more sources of news than ever before. Over time it may support new business models for high-quality news." Robin Foster clearly sees the chances of moving onto the digital field, but claims that "there are risks, too."²¹

¹³ Albarran, p. 18

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 29

¹⁵ Sounman Hong, *Online news on Twitter: Newspapers' social media adoption and their online readership*, Information Economies and Policy, Harvard University, Volume 24, Issues 1, March 2012, p. 69

¹⁶ Nic Newman (ed.), *Reuters Digital News Report*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford, 2012, p. 12

¹⁷ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/social%2Bmedia>, 6th December 2012

¹⁸ <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-10-04/facebook-the-making-of-1-billion-users>, 6th December 2012

¹⁹ http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/500-million-registered-users_b18842, 6th December 2012

²⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brian-honigman/100-fascinating-social-me_b_2185281.html, 6th December 2012

²¹ Robin Foster, *News Plurality in a Digital World*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford, 2012, p.

As an example the author dips deeper into the topic of digital intermediaries. According to Foster, there are four kinds of digital intermediaries: News aggregators like Yahoo, search engines like Google, social networks like Facebook and digital stores (or devices) like Apple. None of them are yet an essential channel for news, “nevertheless, as the importance to news of digital media grows [...] their role will collectively become more critical”²². But what does this mean for the news business and journalism in general?

2.2 Impact on Journalism and News Companies

One impact social media platforms have for news media is that the journalists now have an additional news source – or rather numerous sources. But this does bear one big problem for traditional news services as well as other citizens, as Merrill explains: “The volumes of voices will increase far beyond their need or value. It will become harder to find credible information, and high ethical standard will be the exception as the bottom line further devours authentic journalism.”²³ Blogger and other so-called citizen journalists are now able to voice their opinions to an uncountable number of potential readers, viewers or listeners, depending on what format they are using. But at the same time, social media offer news companies a new market to explore. And many news companies see citizen journalists more of an addition to their tool belt than a threat.

On the other hand, social media can (also through citizen journalists) create an alternative news agenda, as we saw especially during the first days of Arab spring when images and videos of the events went viral. “Stories broken this way by new digital media are then often contextualized and validated by established news media.”²⁴ Overall, the advantages for news gathering through these new portals seem to outweigh some of its negative aspects that we can see right now. The reasons for the fear that many executives from news companies and especially from newspapers seem to have could be found somewhere else, as Küng, Picard and Towse argue: “The newspaper industry has become accustomed to decades of reliable generation of high levels of cash. Years of profit have led to unwieldy and bureaucratic structures, high cost bases, slow decision making, complex reporting lines and moribund corporate cultures.”²⁵ Naturally, the want to maintain these profits alongside some narrow structures at first led to a very strong refusal of traditional media against new developments.

But the online market has also led to less revenue through advertising across the media landscape. With social media the audience becomes even more fragmented which also implies new challenges for media production, distribution and selling. The mass audience for news is – to some extent – already passé²⁶ and the relationship between the news media and the Internet is often described as chaotic²⁷. “Audiences can now ‘pull’ the content they want from a variety of platforms. As a result,

²² Ibid., p. 6

²³ John C. Merrill, “Introduction to global western journalism theory”, in: A. S. De Beer; John C. Merrill (ed.), *Global Journalism. Topical Issues and Media Systems*, Pearson, Allyn and Bacon, Boston/London, 2009, p. 18f.

²⁴ Foster, p. 21

²⁵ Lucy Küng; Robert Picard; Ruth Towse, “Theoretical perspectives on the impact of the Internet on the Mass Media Industries”, in: Lucy Küng, Robert Picard, Ruth Towse (ed), *The Internet and the Mass Media*, SAGE, Los Angeles/London, 2008, p. 35

²⁶ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Ten Years that shook the Media World*, seminar at Green Templeton College, Oxford, 11 October 2012

²⁷ Currah, p. 11

advertising slowly began moving away from 'traditional' media like print and broadcast, purchasing more time and space in 'new' media options via the Internet and other digital platforms."²⁸ At the same time the revenue from advertising decreases rapidly – in the online market as well as everywhere else, as internet ads tend to be cheaper than those on TV, radio or in newspapers. "Moreover, the internet provides advertisers with unique customisation capabilities, including the tracking and adaption of advertising messages to the behaviour of individual consumers."²⁹

Revenue loss is not something completely new to the media business, as Sir William Barnetson outlined in a lecture about the economics of newspapers and news agencies almost 40 years ago. He referred to the "Great Pruning Season" in the late fifties and early sixties, as "one newspaper after another had to close down".³⁰ Back then it was the advent of television which changed the audience. "[P]eople are becoming better informed, less easy to please, more sophisticated in their interests, and more discriminating in their requirements."³¹ This means that the audience itself can function as some sort of corrective nowadays as news turns from a relatively static product "into a dynamic, evolving, expanding resource that is actively co-developed by the users of such citizen journalism sites, participating a process of *produsage*."³²

Overall it can be said that "media companies are struggling to find new business models and revenues streams to support their digital platforms. As companies adapted content to the Internet, most of it was made available for free with some advertising provided. But media companies find themselves in a position where they can no longer give away content for free, even though consumers are used to getting free content."³³

On the other hand the consumers have to face new developments almost every day when the big providers release updates and introduce new gadgets to the market almost every few months which means that users of old ones will be struggling with software problems or other drawbacks. Funnily enough the acquirement of new media tools seems to be a small problem as everyone wants to go with the Zeitgeist and be up to date. But at the same time, media and information providers have to stay abreast of changes and must develop new ways of serving these channels, gadgets and tools. One problem can be that there will always be a certain part of the audience that can or will not get new tools every few months – maybe because of their unwillingness to dangle after every new trend or simply because they cannot afford them, "creating a digital divide and an information-rich versus information-poor dichotomy among audiences".³⁴

For news agencies this new environment can be a positive development. As many of them already serve their customers not only with basic information in almost every form possible, but also provide ideas for distribution and most importantly different technological solutions such as content management systems, they could also be part of the transformation as traditional media outlets try

²⁸ Albarran, p. 30

²⁹ Currah, p. 41

³⁰ Sir William Barnetson, *The economics of newspapers and news agencies*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, 1974, p. 5

³¹ Barnetson, p. 8

³² Axel Bruns, "The Active Audience: Transforming Journalism from Gatekeeping to Gatewatching", in: Chris Paterson; David Domingo, *Making Online News – The Ethnography of New Media Production*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2008, p. 178f.

³³ Albarran, p. 30

³⁴ Ibid.

to enter the world of social media. Especially markets in smaller countries could provide a possibility for local news agencies to become pioneers in that field and supply their customers with means to face this new challenge. Subsequently for the news agencies this could lead to a stronger position in the market, growth in customer loyalty and the creation of new ways of income.

The importance of news agencies for other publishers is also stressed by Currah, as he thinks that “wire agencies [...] are an increasingly critical element of the digital transition as they provide access to a trusted and geographically extensive newsgathering operation, which is adept at generating text, video and photography.” Therefore the relationship to the wires “is becoming one of greater dependence”.³⁵ And Czarniawska even sees a positive side aspect of the current financial crisis, as news media seem to depend more upon news agencies. “Perhaps most important is the increase of news delivery straight to individual consumers.”³⁶

³⁵ Currah, p. 59f.

³⁶ Barbara Czarniawska, *Cyberfactories. How News Agencies Produce News*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2011, p. 213

3. How the big boys play

Although entering the realm of the social web may change the way news agencies gather news and interact with the audience, their core function still stays the same, as they try “to gather and to sell news throughout the world for the benefit of ‘retail’ media (newspapers, broadcasters, on-line suppliers) and other outlets (business, finance institutions, governments, private individuals)”³⁷. But with more and more news outlets in the online news market, the circumstances seem to shift slightly, as “news agencies [...] are playing a growing role in the contemporary news environment, primarily due to the prevalence of the 24/7 online newsroom and its associated need for speed and volumes of copy.” Susan Forde and Jane Johnston even go one step further by arguing that “[t]he online environment has [...] also enabled a blossoming role for the news produced by wire agencies.”³⁸

So now, for the first time it seems, the agencies are not mediated anymore. “Global and regional news agencies have grown more crucial as they bypass intermediary processors of news in cyberspace enabling them to directly reach – for the first time – a large portion of the news audience.”³⁹ But still it is important to keep in mind that the predisposition of online communication was not only greeted when the first impact hit the news business. It seemed as new digital tools allowed other competitors to enter the field that the Internet initially appeared to be “more threat than opportunity for news agencies because it reduced the costs of market-entry for news-gathering and distribution”, as Terhi Rantanen and Oliver Boyd-Barrett put it.⁴⁰

On the other hand, major news agencies have always been “at the forefront, sometimes the pioneers, of new communication technologies”.⁴¹ A conclusion that Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen further explain: “[B]y 2007 the larger news agencies had successfully accommodated to a multimedia universe. All the major news agencies now ran Internet news and information services for direct client access, as well as news and information packages for client Web sites and mobile telephone services. Thus, the Internet had greatly expanded the number of potential clients for agency services, increased agency flexibility in generating novel information packages, and reduced the costs of distribution so that a greater proportion of expenditure could be dedicated to content and service quality.”⁴²

Last but not least this has also lead to the dominance of two or three international news agencies, depending on the point of view. It can definitely be argued that “increasing concentration of control

³⁷ Oliver Boyd-Barrett, “‘Global’ news agencies”, in: Howard Tumber, *Journalism. Critical concepts in media and cultural studies*, Volume IV, Routledge, 2008, p. 22

³⁸ Susan Forde; Jane Johnston, *The News Triumvirate*, Journalism Studies, Routledge, London, 2012, p. 1

³⁹ Chris Paterson, *International news on the internet: Why more is less*, Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics, Vol. 4, No. 1/2, 2007, p. 61

⁴⁰ Terhi Rantanen; Oliver Boyd-Barrett, “Global and National News Agencies”, in: A. S. De Beer; John C. Merrill (ed.), *Global Journalism. Topical Issues and Media Systems*, Pearson, Allyn and Bacon, Boston/London, 2009, p. 44

⁴¹ Boyd-Barrett, p. 35

⁴² Rantanen; Boyd-Barrett, p. 44

over the global wholesale news system made the global news agencies more influential than they had ever been”, as Chris Paterson writes.⁴³ He defines the New York based Associated Press (AP) and London based Thomson-Reuters as the most influential players. Also the French agency AFP can be listed among these news companies which have an extraordinary reach.

But why is this dominance possible? So many times it has been argued that as communication online gets more and more fragmented due to more specialized audiences and with more and more (possible) competitors entering the field, a break of this dominance could be imagined. Paterson has an explanation for this: “It makes economic sense that the two leading news agencies should dominate international news delivery in cyberspace, for as in any open and unregulated market, the strongest producers with the lowest unit costs thrive. Such is the case for the major wire services, which each have a century and a half of experience in developing production processes which generate massive amounts of news. Digital technologies have made news agency production more efficient, and their (technological) convergence has permitted easy access into new markets through the creation of products tailored to new media, built from the same agency words and pictures upon which traditional media have long depended.”⁴⁴

In this chapter I want to look at two of the above mentioned agencies which are generally seen as the most influential and – to put it simply – the most important and biggest news agencies worldwide. Their use of social media provides nothing less than an impression of the actual state of the art of what news agencies are capable of in the social web. This does by no means indicate that this usage should be adopted by other agencies, especially if they operate primarily on a national level and with a much smaller budget. But it is important to gain an overview of what is possible on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms in order to get a notion of where the efforts of smaller agencies like CTK, TT or STT are to be indexed on this scale.

3.1 AP

There is little to say about AP’s history and place in the news business that hasn’t been documented in dozens of papers and studies. Associated Press, founded in 1846, is one of the largest and oldest news agencies worldwide and works as a not-for-profit news cooperative owned by its American newspaper and broadcast members. In its over 160 years of history the agency has evolved from a traditional wire service to a multimedia company focusing on “the highest standards of objective, accurate journalism”. Today, AP employs over 3,700 people worldwide, two-thirds of them being journalists and editors.⁴⁵

But instead of painting the full picture of the agency – including its various services like a digital photo network, a multimedia news service or TV and radio services – I want to focus on their social media appearances.

Not surprisingly, AP uses social media first and foremost as a tool for newsgathering. “We simply needed to start using social to be competitive – indeed, to stay ahead of the competition, as I feel we’ve established some of the industry’s strongest procedures and standard in the area of digital

⁴³ Paterson, p. 60

⁴⁴ Paterson, p. 63

⁴⁵ <http://www.ap.org/company/about-us>, 5th December 2012

newsgathering”, explains Eric Carvin, social media editor of AP. This is done by AP as an institution as well as single AP journalists. “We’re constantly scouring the social Web in search of news tips, witnesses, sources and user-generated content, which needs to be carefully verified.” The agency has about 20 accounts on Twitter, six on Facebook, one on Google+ and a YouTube channel. These are not only used to share “our best content in all formats, starting conversations around it and establishing our and our journalists’ credibility through a strong online presence”, but are also used to actively search for news sources or try to gather insights in what people want to know about a certain topic.⁴⁶

The main Twitter account of AP is followed by 1,428 million people. As of today, almost 40,000 tweets have been published there, using all common known features of the service like hashtags, TinyUrls for linking and also the conversation-function.⁴⁷ Other Twitter accounts include AP Entertainment (747 followers), AP Sports (12,541 followers), AP CorpComm (7,276 followers) with updates from the APs media relations team, AP Fashion (221,657 followers) or AP Interactive (1,670 followers) to name but a few. In addition, many of the journalists maintain a Twitter account themselves.

On Facebook one can find six different AP accounts. The main account, APNews, has 93,051 likes and shows strong engagement from the users’ side, when one looks at the numbers of likes, comments and shares for each posting made. All postings have rather short information about the story alongside a link to one of the different online news portals AP maintains, where the actual story can be read.⁴⁸ Further accounts include AP and the Civil War (808 likes), AP Top 25 (3,093 likes) dedicated to college football, AP Images (9,345 likes), AP Live (48,072 likes) dedicated to entertainment issues and AP Copa America (368 likes) dedicated to the football competition of the same name. Further Facebook pages are dedicated to the AP Stylebook, a manual produced by AP since 1953, and a page dedicated to the mobile applications of AP.

Journalists of AP are encouraged to have accounts on social networks as well as it is stressed in the social media guidelines which try to apply the “long-tested principles” of the agency (to be found in the “Statement of News Values and Principles”) to the social media space.⁴⁹ To keep an overview of the multiple accounts as well as the millions of tweets and postings each day, AP is using for example software like SocialFlow (to manage the accounts), TweetDeck or HootSuit (on the monitoring side).⁵⁰

But what was the main reason for AP to enter social media in the first place? “It was important for our credibility and our brand presence for us to be there”, states Carvin. And again the point of wider audience reach and interaction comes into play. “In today’s news environment, it’s critical to make a connection with individual news consumers, and social allowed us to do that. It also exposes our content to a wider variety of audiences, which is good for business around here.” This also means to integrate information from the user side, what in the past years has come to be known as citizen journalism. “We don’t see [them] as a threat – we see a role for professional journalists in

⁴⁶ Eric Carvin, email interview, 16th November 2012

⁴⁷ <https://twitter.com/AP>, 5th December 2012

⁴⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/APNews>, 5th December 2012

⁴⁹ http://www.ap.org/Images/Social-Media-Guidelines_tcm28-9832.pdf, 5th December 2012

⁵⁰ Carvin

determining what content is accurate and relevant, and adding the context that consumers want and need.”⁵¹

The strong affiliation of AP with social media does not mean that they will break news on these platforms. According to Carvin, customers and members come first, “though we may distribute it [on social media] very quickly (within seconds) after it’s gone out to our paying customers. The fact is, at that point, if we don’t tweet it, everyone else will anywhere – once news breaks, it’s out there, and you can’t put the genie back in the bottle.” On the other hand are journalists very well able to live tweet certain public, non-exclusive in order to provide readers an extra value.⁵²

But which news works best in the social media environment? Carvin sees the strength of AP’s social media coverage as parallel to the traditional wire service. “We do better with hard news, but that’s mostly because that’s how people think of AP.” That does not indicate that soft news doesn’t work. For example, AP’s entertainment page on Facebook or fashion account on Twitter are very popular. Such specialized accounts are very helpful when an agency wants to go beyond traditional news, according to Carvin. But still, “the interactive aspect of it all is the key”. To engage the audience can therefore be crucial. “When news breaks, AP is usually somewhere nearby, but someone we find through social media may have been right there when it happened – and they may have even taken a photo or shot some video. It serves the news report enormously well. And I think it enhances our credibility with the audience, and makes our journalists more human and relatable to them.”⁵³

With the last argument alone, Carvin gives a pretty good idea of what news agencies can achieve on social media platforms, but that leaves still the question of how to measure success. As with most businesses, news companies also rely on hard facts and figures to a certain extent. The question is, whether and how thousands of likes, shares or retweets can attribute to an agency’s revenue. Carvin’s answer points rather in the direction of improving journalistic skills and the service than actually monetizing the share in the social media market. “When we see that a certain tweet or post is generating a lot of clicks or retweets, we often take that as a clue that the story is one we should continue to develop into the next news cycle.” Software like SocialFlow can therefore assist decision making about news coverage. But ultimately all this information is considered “through the spectrum of our news judgment and experience, which remain the most important factors”.⁵⁴

3.2 AFP

The Havas agency was founded in 1835 as “the world’s first news agency”, today known as Agence France-Presse (AFP). 1,500 journalists and altogether 2,260 employees work in 200 offices around the world, producing roughly 5,000 stories and 2,500 pictures per day in six languages. Currently the agency has about 4,000 customers throughout the world.⁵⁵ The service of AFP includes text, video, graphics and images as well as mobile or web solutions.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ <http://www.afp.com/en/agency/>, 5th December 2012

⁵⁶ <http://www.afp.com/en/products/services/>, 5th December 2012

The main Facebook page of AFP (in French) garnered until now 54,727 likes. Short articles, pictures, graphics and videos are posted every few hours acquiring dozens of comments, likes and shares with each of the postings.⁵⁷ The English version of AFP on Facebook (41,201 likes) presents itself in the same way and gets a similar amount of user interaction.⁵⁸

More action is taken on the several Twitter accounts of AFP. The English version has 41,036 followers and so far 14,539 tweets have been posted⁵⁹, while the French account even surpassed 100,000 followers (with 28,353 tweets).⁶⁰ The Spanish Twitter account on the other hand is still rather small with 539 followers and 889 tweets.⁶¹ But all accounts work with the different features of Twitter, using short URLs to link to other pages, hashtags to correspond within a certain topic and of course the conversation function of Twitter to respond to other users.

Although AFP is one of the world's leading news agencies with a special focus on France and the French speaking parts of the world, strengthening its English services seems to be crucial for success in social media. "It has been a bit difficult getting an increase of followers on our Facebook and Twitter accounts, but building this presence in the Anglo world is necessary. It makes the AFP better known, and in turn helps journalists' work down the road", explains Marianne Barriaux, social media editor for AFP. "If journalists are reporting internationally, it helps if people who are being contacted know the AFP."⁶²

So again we hear the criteria of brand awareness and brand strength – even from two of the biggest news agencies. But in comparison to its US competitor, AFP has still a rather small social media team with three people working in French and only Barriaux overseeing the Anglo side. But the connection with the rest of the bureau in Paris seems strong, as she says: "We work really closely with the group of global editors who oversee the whole coverage of the AFP, and we also speak to the regional editors. Essentially, we tell them if we spot something on Twitter, or if there is something that appears to be emerging or breaking news. That way, they can relay it to the various bureaus who would be concerned."⁶³

And as social media become more important to the journalists, they also become the same for other people in the public sphere. One example Barriaux talks about are politicians and the special case of the 2012 US presidential election. US president Barack Obama announced his reelection first through Twitter and Facebook. This development has also consequences for journalism. "We are realizing that most big news stories have a social media angle these days. The idea at the AFP is going forward on big events there will always be a social media team, at least in the next few years, who will go to which ever bureaus where the story is and assist the team."⁶⁴

And finally, Barriaux sees her own job description diminishing over the next few years, as more and more journalists integrate social media in their everyday workflow. "Part of our mandate [as social

⁵⁷ <http://www.facebook.com/AFPfra>, 5th December 2012

⁵⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/AFPnewsenglish>, 5th December 2012

⁵⁹ <https://twitter.com/AFP>, 5th December 2012

⁶⁰ <https://twitter.com/afpfr>, 5th December 2012

⁶¹ <https://twitter.com/AFPeSpanol>, 5th December 2012

⁶² Marianne Barriaux, interview with Global Editors Network,

<http://www.globaleditorsnetwork.org/2012/marianne-barriaux-inside-the-afps-social-media/>, 29th November 2012

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

media editors] now is to train the staff on how to use social networks effectively as a journalist, position the organization on social networks, and to alert and write articles with a social media angle.” But over time, especially for journalists with a certain area of expertise, she paints the picture of journalists doing their regular job alongside constant social media monitoring and engagement. “If you are doing general news then it becomes a bit more difficult I suppose.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ibid.

4. Smaller scale, fewer benefits? European News Agencies going social

Large international agencies are not the only ones to make use of social media platforms. Smaller agencies try to engage with the online community to gather news and distribute their own stories. In this chapter the focus will be on three European agencies, CTK from the Czech Republic, STT from Finland and TT from Sweden. Apart from a short analysis of their activities in the social web, interviews with editors provide an insight in the current strategies of these agencies. One thing that can be said beforehand is that although all of them are using social media platforms in one way or another, none claims to have reached the full potential of what is possible on these sites. The agencies are very much aware that they are just at the beginning of a transition period and still try to figure out the best way to make use of these tools in means of distribution. The importance for news gathering on the other hand seems to already be integrated to a certain extent in the everyday workflows of the journalists – or at least it is regarded as the most important feature of social media platforms for news agencies and journalists right now.

4.1 CTK

The Czech agency CTK was founded in 1918. At the beginning of the 1990s even before the separation of Slovakia and the Czech Republic the agency started anew under its current name. The agency views itself as independent from the state, as the seven persons sitting on the board of directors (CTK council) are elected by the parliament.⁶⁶ The agency claims to have an output of about 600 news items, up to 400 photos, 10 videos and 50 audio files per day.⁶⁷

When it comes to their online appearance, the main website www.ctk.eu provides general information about the agency and its services, as well as a short overview of the main news of the day and some press releases. By clicking on one of the news stories, the user is forwarded to the news portal of the agency, <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz>. This is very similar to most online news portals, provides a broad variety of national and international news in Czech and English, enables the users to comment on the stories, share them via different social networks and relies heavily on advertising.

The decision of CTK to enter the social media was a “conscious decision” by management and journalists with the main goal of news gathering, as they have “access to more relevant information sources via their Twitter and Facebook accounts”. On the other hand CTK uses social media for marketing research to “follow developments much more closely and continuously”.⁶⁸

The Facebook page of CTK, available also through a link on their main website, has 3,700 fans.⁶⁹ The text in the ‘info’ section is rather short and more or less the same as is provided on the main website

⁶⁶ http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%8Cesk%C3%A1_tiskov%C3%A1_kancel%C3%A1%C5%99, 4th December 2012

⁶⁷ http://www.ctk.eu/about_ctk/, 4th December 2012

⁶⁸ Karel Petrak; Jiri Majstr, email interview, 15th November 2012

⁶⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/CTK.cz>, 4th December 2012

of the agency. Overall, at least one story is posted on Facebook every day, always linked to the news portals of CTK. Concerning the user interaction it has to be said that although almost every posting is liked, shared or commented by users, this is as far as the interactive moment goes. This is also underlined by the agency itself, which describes the importance of user interaction as “mildly. Our main interaction is with our clients.”⁷⁰ But that doesn’t mean that CTK only uses its Facebook page to refer to its news portal. “We use them [social media] as a news source, as a distribution channel, as a tool for fact checking and signaling possible mistakes and story ideas, as a brand building tool. Last but not least [we use social media] as a marketing research tool to follow developments in our industry.” This shows that expectation as well as demand of news agencies towards social media is rather broadly defined, although the execution is still not what could be called state of the art.

The Twitter account of CTK is branded with the name of the news portal Ceskenoviny and produced up to now over 23,000 tweets. The account is followed by almost 2,600 people and follows itself 4 other accounts.⁷¹ On average, the agency tweets every one or two hours, making it between 15 and 30 tweets per day. Hashtags are used as well as Tiny URLs, which direct the users to the news portal of the agency. The same can be found with a second account in English: CTK_news has 2,600 followers and up to now 7,495 tweets, which makes one tweet every few hours or around 5 tweets per day. Again, the short URL links lead to the main news portal in its English version.⁷² Three other Twitter accounts provided by CTK’s news portal Ceskenoviny are grouped around specific topics – one could call them special interest accounts. They mirror the further sections of the news portal dedicated to finance, sports and soft news.⁷³

One of the most recent additions to the social media services by CTK is a Google+ account with 542 people following it and articles posted there every other day. The approach is parallel to their Facebook page with links to its news portal.⁷⁴ The reason to use Google+ is rather obvious: “We simply couldn’t ignore Google+ and wanted to be there to see what would happen. Generally, we believe that CTK should be where its users (readers and clients) are. That’s why we’ve set up our LinkedIN company profile recently.”⁷⁵

CTK continues to think of new markets and new portals that could be integrated into their offer. “We tried to foresee trends and also to think through the usefulness of the tool for our purposes. For instance while we are on Pinterest, we are not very active there, because as long as majority of Pinterest users are US women, there is almost no scope for us to have any useful engagement there. As Pinterest will become more ‘embedded’ with Czech speakers, than we will probably reconsider.”⁷⁶ The core goal can be summarized as follows: “We want to reach the general public, in order to build our brand and to promote our news website.” This is also the main difference to other news agencies, as CTK argues: “In this respect we are not a typical news agency as we publish our own news website. If we did not do that, our use of the social media would be necessarily different because we would not be able to publish for free stuff that our clients would be paying for.”⁷⁷ But

⁷⁰ Petrak; Majstr, email interview

⁷¹ https://twitter.com/ceskenoviny_cz, 4th December 2012

⁷² https://twitter.com/CTK_news, 4th December 2012

⁷³ https://twitter.com/CTK_news/following, 4th December 2012

⁷⁴ <https://plus.google.com/114774569198890888109/posts>, 4th December 2012

⁷⁵ Petrak; Majstr, email interview

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

still, the main priority lies with the traditional services, as no articles can be published through social media before it is on the wire. Social media is in this regard just an additional tool to support the news website. “It does bring some ‘eyeballs’ to our news website and there we sell advertising. We also feel that it will help to sell ‘consumer products’ that we have in the pipeline for the future.”

Altogether between 3 and 4 journalists are involved in the support of social media tools provided by the agency and CTK is very aware of the fact that they do not fully exploit everything that’s possible on social media platforms. This is also backed up by CTK’s answer to the question about traffic impact through referrals to their major news portal through social media. The Facebook page was started in February 2010, the five Twitter accounts already in December 2008. “Of course, the number of visits from these sources doubled in a month but later growth was rather incremental and more or less followed social media adoption rates among the audience and the change of their behavior. As we do not have a huge fan or follower base, more important is what users share themselves than what we post.” Therefore, the interaction of CTK journalists through social media with their users is also very limited: “We reply to all questions and messages for CTK on our Facebook page. We usually do not react on retweets and shares, we also don’t give ‘likes’, share or retweet other users’ posts.”⁷⁸

One interesting aspect is that CTK sees no possibility to break news on social media platforms before it does so through its wire services, although this could be an option “when our wire service would stop operating due to some catastrophe”.⁷⁹ Therefore social media portals like Facebook could be seen as some sort of backup services if technical problems prevented the agency from publishing through its major channels.

The journalists of the agency itself are encouraged to use social media tools, but not to engage with the general audience. Workshops, training and general guidelines for the use of social media are also provided for the journalists.

4.2 STT

As is the case for many news agencies, the Finnish wire service STT, which was founded in 1887⁸⁰, not only provides news, images and video, but “offers media companies other services to help them quickly and efficiently create high quality products”⁸¹. This also includes solutions and services for different media services. STT is owned by 38 news companies, with Sanoma News, Alma Media, and TS Group being the largest shareholders. Unlike CTK and other news agencies, the main website of STT does not provide any news on current affairs but concentrates on outlining the different services the agency offers.

If one wants to find a Facebook account of STT, you have therefore to search for yourself, as the main website doesn’t provide any further information of such an account. One Facebook page that can be found refers to radio news provided by STT. The page called STT Äänituutiset has 294 likes and publishes a few short stories with updates for radio news every day, very seldom accompanied by an image, but almost exclusively without links for further information.⁸² If links are provided, they come

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Mimma Lehtovaara, *The News Agency Goes Internet*, Reuters Paper 2010/11, p. 8

⁸¹ <http://www.stt.fi/en>, 4th December 2012

⁸² <http://www.facebook.com/sttaaniutiset>, 4th December 2012

with an image and lead to the web portal of the picture agency Lehtikuva, which was founded in 1951 and bought by STT in 2010.⁸³ User interaction is very seldom found; only now and then users 'like' a posting or share it on their own wall.

A second Facebook account is dedicated to STT Info. This is a business services for press releases which also has its own website www.sttinfo.fi. On the Facebook page, this services has 187 likes and again almost no interaction with users. The amount of postings on the other hand is bigger than with STT Ääniutiset: almost every hour a posting can be found. These postings all direct the users to the main website of STT Info where the full press release can be read.⁸⁴

Parallel to its Facebook accounts, STT also provides Twitter accounts for Ääniutiset and Info. The Twitter account of Ääniutiset has 30 followers, while following 11 accounts itself. Up to now 1,512 tweets have been made, with an average of between one and five tweets per day. The tweets provide a short headline and a link to the Facebook page of STT Ääniutiset.⁸⁵ STT Info on the other hand is much more active on Twitter, which doesn't come as a surprise as every press release is tweeted. The account has 677 followers, while at the same time not following any other account. By 4th December 2012, 15,731 tweets have been published – everyone providing the headline of the press release and a link to the main website of STT Info. The average amount of tweets per day is exactly the same as Facebook postings, as these two are identical.⁸⁶

Overall one could surmise that STT is using social media first and foremost as an additional service for its business clients who publish press releases via the agency. STT Ääniutiset can to a certain extent be left aside, as the different accounts show very little engagement with users, provide only very few new postings every day and almost look like a test tool to check whether social media applications can be integrated into the services or not.

This view is to some extent supported by an interview with the editor in chief of STT, Minna Holopainen. "So far we have used social media mainly as a news source, naturally according to our other news criteria and reliability guidelines." But at the same time, also STT seems very aware of the potential of social media, as there has been a workgroup implemented which tries to figure out "how to make more efficient use of social media (particularly Twitter) as a news source and how to use social media for branding the agency and its journalists. A news agency can't ignore any relevant news sources, and a news journalist can't ignore any relevant changes in the general way of life. Virtual reality is the new reality."⁸⁷

But although the agency itself is rather absent on social media, it nonetheless encourages its journalists to use these tools, also providing guidelines for that.⁸⁸ These were developed together with the employees, who are also provided with training and workshops for the use of social media, as Holopainen explains. She also gives a further example for the relevance of Twitter in journalism:

⁸³ <http://www.stt.fi/en/>, 4th December 2012

⁸⁴ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/STT-Info/223011648582>, 4th December 2012

⁸⁵ https://twitter.com/STT_Aaniutiset, 4th December 2012

⁸⁶ <https://twitter.com/STTInfo>, 4th December 2012

⁸⁷ Minna Holopainen, email interview, 29th November 2012

⁸⁸ <http://www.stt.fi/content/tyylikirja>, 4th December 2012

“We encourage any use of social media, but particularly Twitter and Facebook because of their dominance – and Twitter because of its relevance as a tool.”⁸⁹

Asked about the interaction with users, Holopainen sees the importance in that, since “an agency has less of that than other [media companies]”. What STT will make of these tools in the future shall be defined by the above mentioned workgroup, which is right now also the only group really dedicated to social media. But one thing is clear for the editor in chief of STT: “We will always publish news first on the wire.”⁹⁰ Therefore the question whether it is hard to argue with clients about the role news distribution through social media is of no importance – at least right now. But – along with her colleagues at CTK – Holopainen could envision a situation which would give news distribution through social media a new spin: “Maybe a technical failure which would prevent the normal publishing. This has not been discussed.”⁹¹

Concerning issues like revenue from social media platforms or the grade of exploitation of these platforms, Holopainen gives a realistic evaluation of STT’s situation right now, as both areas have to be developed further.

4.3 TT

The Swedish news agency TT (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå) dates back to the 1920s. Apart from the core business of the wire service, TT Group also provides “editorial outsourcing, news graphics and media monitoring services”. The agency covers national and international affairs with a staff of about 110 journalists and 330 employees for TT Group overall. As it is the case with many international agencies, TT Group is privately owned by the largest Swedish media houses.⁹²

The main website of TT provides information about the different services and companies that exist within the TT Group. The main part of the page is dedicated to recent events with rather big images and accompanying articles. Below that there is a section called “TT Live” with current news, containing one little image, a headline and one very brief paragraph, mostly just one sentence, outlining the content. These articles can be shared via different social media platforms, as TT provides a share feature with more than 300 services to choose from. Links to the Facebook and Twitter accounts of TT can also be found.

TT also wants to engage the audience in the news gathering process. A feature on their website asks users to contact the agency if they happen to witness something newsworthy. This indicates a very open approach to citizen journalists, as TT is looking for people who are on location when something important is going on.

The Facebook page of TT has gained 577 likes up till now.⁹³ New posts can be found every other day, mostly around new products and different services of TT, as Mats Johansson, Managing Editor, underlines.⁹⁴ But it can be quickly observed that TT does not actually publish any news there. For

⁸⁹ Holopainen, email interview

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² <http://tt.se/om-tt/in-english/>, 24th October 2012

⁹³ <http://www.facebook.com/ttgruppen>, 5th December 2012

⁹⁴ Mats Johansson, email interview, 5th December 2012

them, it is much more important “to be on social media platforms as the audience, both the public and other companies, is very active there. And so are the interesting decision makers who are part of the ongoing news process”⁹⁵.

The Twitter account of TT was established in January 2012. So far, they shared 88 tweets and have 1,969 followers while following 78 other accounts themselves.⁹⁶ They do not tweet the actual stories or links but focus on things that “influence the process of innovation”, as is outlined on their website. The company has also a second account (TTgruppen). This one is more active, with 2,373 tweets and 5,532 followers (and following 474 other accounts).⁹⁷ Both accounts work with hash tags and are having direct discussions with other users. A third account is devoted to the language and style of TT. The account is called TTspraket, posted 156 tweets and has 2,593 followers (following 28).⁹⁸

Overall, this paints a very clear picture of the social media policy TT follows right now. Again, the agency uses these platforms as a news source and wants to be present there “in order to be seen on the same platforms and technical environment that the public, the news consumers, is using [and as it is] a quite fast and effective way to communicate around certain matters”⁹⁹. Johansson stresses that for the reporters, the main purpose of Twitter et al is “to create links to persons that in the specific news story or in the future can be useful as a source or in other ways be useful for us”¹⁰⁰. Although TT makes sure not to publish any news from the wire service on these platforms, journalists are nonetheless allowed to make a short notice about a story they have written on Twitter.

A definite advantage for news agencies is the now possible engagement with the audience. “That’s the weak part when you are a reporter on an agency, it’s hard to get direct contact with the readers.” With social media, news agencies get a net opportunity to strengthen the brand, “or better said maintain the strength of our brand in a very rapidly changing world where traditional institutions very fast tend to be old fashioned and outdated”.¹⁰¹

The first steps for the move into this digital environment were taken by technically skilled employees of the agency, who had a strong interest in the technical development. After that, Johansson explains, the management decided to form guidelines to outline the general policy of the agency concerning the adaption of social media. “In the process that led to the policy we had several open discussions on what we could or couldn’t do on Social Media, both in the perspective of the company and as an individual agency reporter.” Furthermore, workshops and trainings are provided by TT for its editors and some of its reporters. The Twitter accounts for example are handled by a “pinpointed staffer”, as Johansson puts it, who “needs to cooperate with a number of TT-journalists and people in the management from time to time while handling the accounts.”

On the other hand, TT is very much aware that “there is surely a lot more to do, though it’s not on the top of our list right now”. Strategically planned steps to improve the social media appearance of the agency are therefore not planned right now. Still, to be up to date is important for TT. “We have improved our networking in the media business over the years and by using that network and by

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ <https://twitter.com/NyhetsbyranTT>, 5th December 2012

⁹⁷ <https://twitter.com/ttgruppen>, 5th December 2012

⁹⁸ <https://twitter.com/TTspraket>, 5th December 2012

⁹⁹ Johansson, email interview

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

taking part in both the national and international media society, hopefully we can catch up with the buzz and the new developments in the business.” And again, Johansson cannot see a possible scenario that would make it possible to break news on social media instead of the wire service.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Ibid.

5. Excursion: International Cooperation for ‘The Climate Pool’

Another possibility for news agencies to enter the realm of social media could be through international cooperation. An example of this is the Facebook page ‘The Climate Pool’ that was founded in December 2009 as a “hub for a global discussion on the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen”¹⁰³. All together eleven international agencies like AFP, ANP, AP, APA or DPA contributed with articles to this experiment that was organized by Minds International, a global network of news agencies. “Our goal is to develop ideas and strategies for the future of our business”, outlines Wolfgang Nedomansky, Managing Director of Minds International, the main focus of the collaboration.¹⁰⁴ The basic idea for ‘The Climate Pool’ was to try and find a possibility to cross-national work together and produce a collective service for the online market. This was two months before the conference in Copenhagen took place. “As we saw it as a first test, we did not want to develop our own platform, as this would have been too costly. So we turned to an already existing platform: Facebook.”

The goals for the project were very clear from the beginning, as Nedomansky tells. “First: We had a limited time span of about two weeks. Second: Our goal was not to make profit, but to learn how to use social media as a tool and try to understand how it works. Is a collaboration of news agencies via these means possible? We also wanted to know how quickly we could create an audience on a global scale. And last but not least we wanted to create stories and postings especially for this platform and not just only use articles from the wire services. It was about short and concise postings that could create a discussion that also involves the user.”¹⁰⁵

One very important question for the agencies to answer was whether or not to use feedback, comments and other form of information provided by the users as news source.

With hindsight, Nedomansky sees the collaboration as a success, as the Facebook page generated about 9,000 fans in its active time. As of today, the page, which has not been supplied with new articles or stories by the agencies, still gains new fans with nearly 12,000 likes.¹⁰⁶ “We gained 9,400 fans in 18 days which have been very valuable as they really added something to the topic.”¹⁰⁷ This also is underlined when one looks at the single postings made by the agencies: Every single one of them was liked or commented on by users with the comments surpassing the likes almost every time. “For us, it was really about the audience and the creating of a very diverse and interested readership. 75 percent of the users who interacted in one or the other way with the platform were between 18 and 44 years.”¹⁰⁸ These findings again contribute to trend that news companies

¹⁰³ <http://www.facebook.com/TheClimatePool/info>, 3rd December 2012

¹⁰⁴ Wolfgang Nedomansky, telephone interview, 30th November 2012

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.facebook.com/TheClimatePool>, 3rd December 2012

¹⁰⁷ Nedomansky, telephone interview

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

especially can reach a younger audience by using social media tools. “Within two weeks we counted 6,000 interactions on the page.”¹⁰⁹

If one looks at the page today, one of the first things that strikes the reader that the section ‘notes’ was used pretty heavily. Nedomansky explains this as follows: “We needed an area where we could make sure that only journalists could write. It was important to limit areas where everybody could interact and areas where only the journalistic staff was able to contribute to the page. Another dimension was obviously the triggering of discussions, where we actively sought to engage the users.”¹¹⁰

Right now Minds International is working on a follow up project to ‘The Climate Pool’. In general, Nedomansky thinks that social media can be a valuable tool for news agencies as far as a “serious, clearly defined topic”¹¹¹ exists.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

6. Conclusion

Before the main aspects of the different chapters are brought together for a final conclusion, the following table provides a comparison of the Facebook and Twitter activities of some news agencies. For agencies with more than one Facebook or Twitter account, the most prominent one was considered – even though it might not be a journalistic or news account but rather for media support, as is for example the case with the Belgian agency Belga.

Table 1 (all data retrieved 6th December 2012)

	Facebook fans	followers	Twitter tweets	following
Reuters	284.254	2.276.458	74.877	982
AP	93.141	1.431.178	39.307	6.938
AFP	54.810	100.839	28.482	760
Lusa	27.639	11.207	54.405	1
CTK	3.728	2.587	23.446	4
dpa (news aktuell)	1.720	(infoline) 13.622	3.507	235
TT	579	1.975	88	78
Belga	484	608	17.199	28
STT	294	678	15.775	-
PA	-	12.831	621	301
APA	-	(APA-OTS) 1.658	957	524
EFE	-	205.564	9.917	13
ANP	-	(ANP Photo) 1.107	56	2

One thing this table shows is the strong position of Twitter for the online news business. Not only for news agencies, but almost every other news media Twitter has become the most important tool when it comes to social media. According to Sounman Hong, the strength of Twitter lies with its asymmetric way of communication. Organisations may follow only a few chosen accounts while they are followed by thousands of users worldwide. “This asymmetry makes Twitter an attractive tool by which news organizations can disseminate news.”¹¹² But probably more important is the network function of the platform. “Journalists are making increasing use of Twitter as it gains critical mass as a tool for key sources and media elites to share information.”¹¹³

Overall it can be said that the core function of news agencies is not altered by social media. Quite the contrary, many authors conclude that their role as a distributor for other media outlets in the online market has even increased as news stories have to be up to date at all times. All experts and interviewees agree that news agencies cannot afford not to be on any social media platform. “The

¹¹² Hong, p. 71

¹¹³ Nic Newman, *Mainstream media and the distribution of news in the age of social discovery*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2011, p. 14

newsgathering value alone is huge, and news agencies, along with their individual journalists, are shooting themselves in the foot if they aren't using the tools at their disposal."¹¹⁴

6.1 Findings

This leads directly to the **first research question**. The main reason for agencies to make use of social media is still newsgathering. Tools like Facebook or Twitter have become crucial to access certain information, to stay competitive in a newly shaped media environment and provide active ways to search for news and information via different networks. This also includes the use of information provided by citizen journalists. We've also seen everyday people break news on social media when it comes to event-driven news. Livingston and Bennett¹¹⁵ for example looked at the way TV news altered the coverage of event-driven stories through technology. As has been discussed before, unpredicted events can find their way very quickly onto social media platforms as people post and share their experience and the platforms therefore offer the possibility to connect with other people, provide further information and eventually gain momentum concerning circulation of news feeds.

Another reason is of course to distribute stories and reach new audiences. But here we encounter several different approaches depending on the size and business model of the individual agencies. Apart from companies like AP or Reuters, which follow a very straightforward course when it comes to news publishing on social media platforms, there are cases like CTK or EFE which have their own news portals or publish at least short news updates on their main websites. These agencies are able to post links to the stories via Facebook or Twitter. For agencies which primarily rely on a B2B model this is much more difficult as their customers have to get the stories first. One option could be to link to the agency's content on their customer's platforms, as Eric Carvin suggests - "though you need to be careful that you're not making one customer happy at the expense of another."¹¹⁶

The fight for attention in the online environment is a fierce one, also because users seem to rely only on a certain amount of news sources they regularly visit. "According to various 'ratings' reports of online use, most of the online news audience spends most of their time with a small number of websites, mostly in the guise of news aggregators", which according to Paterson mostly provide news from the same few sources.¹¹⁷ Therefore social media could play an important role to turn around user habits or simply get users to click on a link to a different news source provided by a friend.

Another common goal for the news agencies to use social media is credibility, image and brand strengthening. It's as simple as this: news media have to be where the audience is. For news agencies this includes their media customers as well as many of those are on social media platforms. On the other hand social media can be a way for news agencies to interact with the end user – something that had been difficult before the rise of this communication technology. But again, very different approaches are taken when it comes to direct interaction with the users, signalling that especially smaller agencies still have a hard time to find the right procedure.

¹¹⁴ Carvin, email interview

¹¹⁵ Steven Livingston; W. Lance Bennett, "Gatekeeping, indexing, and live-events news: Is technology altering the construction of news?", in: Howard Tumber, *Journalism. Critical concepts in media and cultural studies*, Volume IV, Routledge, 2008

¹¹⁶ Carvin, email interview

¹¹⁷ Paterson, p. 58

In general, the move onto social media can be explained with the popularity and sheer availability of these tools. It can be assumed that some agencies waited for others to test the ground before they adopted social media platforms themselves. A certain amount of peer pressure from other media outlets can't be denied. But overall, the need to make use of this market in terms of newsgathering simply is too big to neglect.

The **second research question** addressed what kind of information and communication works best on social media platforms. As the findings have not been completely satisfying the answer lacks significance. Nonetheless, big agencies like AP show that they do very well with hard news. But all interviewees agreed that the wire services still are the most important feature for the agencies. News values don't change because of a different distribution format, but the way the articles and postings are made can define the reach. "We feel strongly about hand-curating our social accounts", says Carvin, "and we craft individual tweets differently from the headline that may appear on the story."¹¹⁸

He sees interactivity as a key to success, whereas Henrik Ornebring also defines a one-way communication as successful. "@Reuters on Twitter has 2.2 million followers and they almost exclusively just use it as a one-way feed, and 2.2 million people [...] seem to be totally fine with it. I think it has to do with what one expects from a particular actor, and I guess many people would expect news agencies to be exactly that: largely non-interactive feeds of top daily news."¹¹⁹

But if an agency due to its business model is not able to publish news stories, there are other possibilities. STT for example has a Twitter account which provides links to its website for press releases. Social media is therefore an additional tool for its customer service.

And to gain worldwide attention, there is just no way that this is possible without publishing in one of the world languages like English or Spanish. This may also be a reason why the Twitter account of the Spanish agency EFE has more followers than the account of AFP – though being one of the most important agencies. So the language barrier can be a problem and has to be kept in mind when defining potential new markets and audiences.

The **third and last research question** dug deeper into the topic of success on these platforms. The currency of social media platforms could be defined with attention, followers, fans or interaction. But it's important to distinguish between what global players can achieve and what smaller markets offer for news companies. For AP, service improvement could be identified as the prime success factor. Whether it is by newsgathering, feedback from users, information from citizen journalists or just click-rates that indicate which stories work best – social media can give a news company a pretty good idea of what the audience thinks and what it can contribute to the journalistic process. Or as Nic Newman puts it: "The real value and challenge of social media for news agencies I assume is on the input/newsgathering side - because citizens are at one sense a rival as providers of news but also an opportunity to help monetise those stories."¹²⁰

The success can only be measured if the goals are neatly defined beforehand. It depends very much on what an agency wants to achieve and which audience it wants to address. Still, an automated feed

¹¹⁸ Carvin, email interview

¹¹⁹ Henrik Ornebring, email interview, 30th November 2012

¹²⁰ Nic Newman, email interview, 13th November 2012

that just carries stories or headlines into the world of social media is probably not good enough, as Carvin reminds us. “I suppose it’s better than nothing. But it’s not great.”¹²¹

6.2 Trends and Recommendations

For news agencies there seems to be no way around social media – whether to use it as a news source, to connect with the audience, clients and experts, to share information about new developments and services within the company or simply to distribute stories, images or videos – although social media maintains some uncertainties and risks for news media. “You can’t ignore it but you need to use it sensibly and manage the risks, which means guidelines and training”, as Newman puts it concerning clashing norms of personal commentary and journalistic values on these platforms.¹²² Also Scott Maier addresses this problem: “That blogs and other social media resemble talk radio in temperament and content does not undermine public discourse if they are used primarily to extend debate or articulate a shared point of view. But their idiosyncratic personal agendas are worrisome if social media become a person’s primary, if not sole, source of news.”¹²³ For news agencies and journalists in general this means to be very aware of the boundaries they should keep in mind as professionals. Journalistic values and ethics should always remain a number one priority, no matter how informal a discussion seems to be.

For the future, one big issue will be the further integration of social media monitoring in the everyday workflow of single journalists. As most agencies already encourage their employees to do so, it is almost unimaginable that there could only be a handful of social media editors who try to cover everything that an agency has to offer. It may well be that social media editors will lead the way for their colleagues in the next few years, helping them to understand these new tools and to get the best out of them. But eventually, almost every journalist will have to face the question if and how he’s able to do so by himself.

Second, it will be crucial to define the audience you want to address and the goals you want to achieve by using social media platforms. There are many different ways to do so which means that also agencies with a B2B model will not be left out of this market. A possibility could be to directly address existing and potential customers with tailored feeds. Furthermore, specialised channels, whether they are provided by agencies in general or individual journalists, could create hubs to generate networks, get more attention, attract new clients or even produce niche audiences as Minds International has proven with its Facebook page on the climate summit.

This still leaves a question about possible new formats. As this research did not include a content analysis of postings by news agencies (or news media in general), there is no certain answer to this. But this case is probably pretty similar to what Richard van der Wurff wrote about news media and the Internet a few years ago. “By far the largest share of Internet content – most text, audio and video files that we can access – is content that could, actually is, or previously was presented in similar ways in old media. [...] New content, specifically made for the Internet – such as real-time stories that are updated during the day – is scarce, and new content formats – such as interactive

¹²¹ Carvin, email interview

¹²² Newman, email interview

¹²³ Scott Maier, *All the News fit to post? Comparing news content on the web to newspapers, television, and radio*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*; Autumn 2010; Vol. 87, No. 3/4 p. 558

reporting – are even scarcer. [...] The ease with which we can access this content is a remarkable and new phenomenon – the implications of which should not be underestimated. Yet, the content and in particular the content format are not ‘new’ or innovative.”¹²⁴ He already talks about blogs and social networking sites as a potential exception from this. But as hard as it is to really create new formats for the Internet, it surely is not easy to create and establish new formats within social media platforms. Although this doesn’t mean that news companies are not thinking about this right now – and they definitely should.

Last but not least agencies which use social media in one way or another should closely monitor new developments in the field and consequently update their trainings, workshops and guidelines. As probably all agencies have such a set of rules right now, this doesn’t mean that the way the game is played in the World Wide Web will not change every few months. With Facebook bringing in new rules on a pretty regular basis, it is crucial to be up to date with them and seriously ask yourself what this could mean for your agency and your journalists.

This can also mean that in only a few years’ time we are not dealing with Facebook and Twitter anymore, but new platforms. Right now these two platforms seem to be examples for a market phenomenon known as lock-in. “If, for whatever reason, the market focuses on one product – even one that may not be the most technologically efficient – economies of scale may well cause that to become dominant to the point where it would be very difficult and costly to switch to another system.”¹²⁵ But as other popular platforms have proofed in the past, the Internet is full of surprises. The predominant players eventually may change – and with them approved business models.

Therefore, a final answer is not only hard to express but presumably unnecessary – especially when we think about the new digital environment for the news media as a whole. “We are at the beginning of a transition. We are as far into the digital revolution as Europe was in the printing revolution in the late 15th Century. And it is not a critical juncture as much as a formative period. So there is time to shape this future environment.”¹²⁶ News agencies and news media have to be aware of this transition and must try to find or maintain a niche in this new environment where they can focus on their strengths – whether they are new or old. It is not the time to be rigid with fear, but to accept new challenges, try to understand new tools and new competitors and focus on what you can do best. The Internet or social media do not indicate the death of traditional wire services, as this research has shown. The question whether to make use of social media or not has different side aspects and indications for every news agency. And in the end, that should be the way to handle this problem: Not by rash decisions that only rely on copying other approaches, but analysing the whole situation and identifying the biggest potential for your company.

¹²⁴ Richard van der Wurff, “The Impact of the Internet on Media Content”, in: Küng, Picard, Towse, *The Internet and the Mass Media*, Sage, 2008, p. 66

¹²⁵ Lucy Küng, Robert Picard, Ruth Towse, “Conclusions”, in: Küng, Picard, Towse, *The Internet and the Mass Media*, Sage, 2008, p. 174

¹²⁶ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Ten Years that shook the Media World*, seminar at Green Templeton College, Oxford, 11 October 2012

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