

Journalistic use of social media: A case study of *the Assam Tribune*

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ABSTRACT

Social media has changed the broad spectrum of journalism. The very nature of newsgathering by the print journalists has changed owing to growing impact of social media. The lead for a story could be found now on social media sites and this has been experienced everywhere. While User Generated Contents have become useful for journalists, lack of gatekeeping and credibility, the emergence of fake news and the likes have become challenges for journalists. Using a case study research method this paper examines the impact of social media use on journalistic practices in Assam. An analysis of data collected through a sample survey conducted among the journalists associated with *The Assam Tribune*, the highest circulated English daily suggests that although extensive use of social media for news lead and information gathering has changed some of the traditional journalistic practices, the importance of traditional sources has not diminished as they are still used as cross-verification tools for ensuring reliability of social media news stories.

Keywords: Social Media ,Print Journalism, User Generated Contents, Fake News

INTRODUCTION

Harcup says:

Social media is a broad term covering a growing range of peer to peer and many to many forms of communication conducted via computers and, increasingly, mobile devices. Social media include Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and countless other forums, and in just a few years they have become as important a way for journalists to find stories and sources as they are for news organizations to promote their brands. Social media have allowed for more direct communication and interaction between journalists and audience, with information and comment flowing in both ways.(282).

The growing influence of social media has

changed the broad spectrum of media. Particularly the interactive features of it have transformed journalism into a forum where exchange of views is primarily taken place. With the advent of social media the style of newsgathering has undergone a vast change everywhere. While social media as well as social networks offer great opportunities to journalists in case of news sources, they could use it for research as well. Social networks as well as social media also enable journalists to collaborate with fellow journalists and audiences. This is no surprise today that a lead for a news story may originate on Facebook or Twitter.

A survey done in 2015 on social media use by journalists, finds that most of the journalists

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read news and search for news sources on social media. They also use social media to disseminate news stories. Journalists have public profiles on social networking sites as part of their professional role. (Tamara L. Gillis).

Indian journalists also have been using social media in their professional work not only to build relationship with the audience but also to find information helpful for news reporting.

In a 2014 survey titled *How Indian journalists use social media*, it is found that 28 percent of them use Facebook, whereas 11 percent use the Twitter. Both Facebook and Twitter are used by 57 percent of journalists and 04 percent of them use none of the social media platforms. While 68 percent use Facebook as news source, 61 percent use Twitter for the same purpose. 62 percent use Facebook to follow others, for which 43 percent use the Twitter. For sharing other links, 49 percent use Facebook as against 55 percent using Twitter. 48 percent of journalists each use Facebook and Twitter for disseminating personal work. (Choudhury).

With technical tools in hand, journalists are now able to produce more and faster. Emphasis has shifted from research and content to production and form. Audience empowerment has re-defined authorship to an extent that, today journalists and audiences act as partners in news making. Although analysing User Generated Contents (UGC) as useful information and playing the role of Gatekeepers simultaneously is a challenge for journalists, social media tools also help journalists many ways while performing their job more effectively.

Exploring the question of how the integration of UGC into news work helps and hinders the role of a journalist, Johnston is of the opinion that the rise of user-generated content has made journalists harness a variety of new skills. Johnston concludes, "Being capable of processing user-generated content and being able to navigate social media platforms which audiences inhabit are

becoming core skills which journalists need to possess and maintain". (Johnston).

OBJECTIVES

While discussing the impact of social media on mainstream journalism around the globe the very aspect of the journalistic practices by Assamese journalists has been left out totally which could reveal a lot about the impact on the professional shifts and about the ever changing journalistic practices in Assam as well. Against this backdrop, this paper explores the issue of social media use by Assamese journalists and the impact on various aspects of journalism. In particular, there are three specific objectives of the study. *First*, it makes an attempt to identify the social media platforms and tools used by Assamese journalists and the purposes of their usage. *Second*, it examines the impacts of social media on journalistic practices. *Finally*, it tries to identify the challenges and opportunities of social media in Assam. Using a case study method, this paper finds that Assamese journalists have been using social media for journalistic purposes. Further, they have faced certain challenges like Fake news, lack of credibility, lack of gatekeeping while using social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a substantial literature on social media. *India Connected: Mapping the Impact of New Media* by Sunetra Sen Narayan and Shalini Narayanan (2016) is an analysis of the growth of new media in India from a broad communications and interdisciplinary perspective. Providing answers to some of the most relevant questions, this book critically examines the growth of new media in India. It looks at the opportunities and challenges posed by digital media to governance, development, and businesses as well as in social marketing efforts. With the government and the corporate sector's growing emphasis on 'Digital India', *India Connected* goes into various aspects such as digitiza-

tion, convergence, interactivity and ubiquity, which are affecting the Indian media landscape. (Narayan and Narayanan). In *Journalism in the Age of Social Media* by Jennifer Alejandro(2010) the impact of social media on journalists of international news organizations are discussed. The challenges faced by the journalists in the fast developing world due to newer technologies and systems have been discussed in it in details. The behavioral changes due to the use of social media platforms, the changes due to news sources found on social media sites, the overall impact of this sort of media on the journalists have been discussed thoroughly in it. Further, studies like *News 2.0: The Future of News in an Age of Social Media* by Ira Basen (2009) has discussed about how social media has become a challenge before the news. According to the author in this 21st century the tools of production now belong to just about everyone and the tools of journalism are no longer the exclusive assets of journalists. The so called "mainstream media" has lost its control over the tools of its trade, and its importance as a centre of social and political influence. The business and philosophical model both appear to be broken, perhaps irrevocably as the writer has analysed it. Lauren Fisher(2011) in *Social media is everywhere, but is print still valuable?* says that growth of social media isn't in doubt. But according to the author digital publications have problems as well. While social media may be seen as a popular platform that one can't afford to ignore, it's losing out to print media when it comes to being trustworthy and authentic. The study has quoted a survey, in which 62% of key opinion formers said they would react to a negative story if it was printed in the paper, while only 21% would react to it if it happened in social media. How social media challenges have been faced is well discussed in a study titled *The rise of social media and its impact on mainstream journalism*. This study by Nic Newman(2009) shows how newspapers and broadcasters in the UK and US are responding to a wave of

participatory social media. The study examines how journalists at leading news organizations in the UK and USA are increasingly involving audiences in the way they research and tell stories. It also has investigated how mainstream media coverage of breaking news events is changing. Likewise, a report titled *Print VS Digital Media: The Death of Print?* says print and digital media triumph in areas where the other is lacking. In general they would complement the failings and strengths of each medium. *Social Media Versus Print Advertising: Is Print Really Dead?* by Trish O'Loughlin(2018) also says about social media utilization for print media content and the different means of popularizing them through social media platforms are discussed in it. The advantages social media has brought to business also have been discussed in it. Despite of social media expansion print still holds a certain prestige and even in some instances print trumps digital media. The writer advocates for the harmonization of the these two media for a better result. In *The development of journalism in the face of social media*, by Cheney Thomas(2013) social media's impact on a journalist's role, method and relationship to the audience is discussed. Different aspects of the overall impact of social media on journalism have been analyzed in details. In the research paper *The Double Edged Sword: The Effects of Journalists' Social Media Activities on Audience Perceptions of Journalists and Their News Products*, Jayeon Lee(2015) addresses how journalists' self disclosure and interaction affect audience perceptions, hypothesizing positive effects in personal dimension perceptions and negative effects in professional dimension perceptions. The results of the research work shows that journalists' social media activities significantly affect perceptions of young audiences. Comparing the two mediums in *Social media versus print media*, Rochelle Beighton(2016) says that for almost a decade, social media has been the catalyst of change in the way we communicate and spread news throughout the world. Social media's rise to

internet domination has seen a large chunk of news organizations incorporate online into its readership. As some have even made the full switch from print to online journalism.

Studies like *Social media revolution - The new digital frontiers of Journalism* by Kaveri Devi Mishra (2017) has analysed and explored the role, growth and challenges of digital and social media with a case study approach on Indian Media Industry. In a research paper *Reshaping newsrooms in the age of social media: A study on reliability, verification of user-generated content for journalistic use* by Safiya Naeem(2019) has analysed the impact of social media on the journalists of Karnataka. The researcher has analysed it in relation to utilisation of user-generated contents of social media, authenticity of the, ethical and legal issues related to it. In another research paper titled *Advancement of Social Media and Future of Newspaper Industry* by Koustav Mukherjee (2016) investigates the perspectives of the journalists on social media effects on their profession, and also performance. “Interactivity with the people, and the rise of blogs and bloggers, as well as the journalist’s preferences for working with social media”, are examined and implemented in the study. In *A study on Journalistic use of Social Media*, Dr. Pitabas Pradhan and Niky Kumari(2018) have found that keeping pace with the global trends, Indian journalists have embraced social media services in a big way both in personal and professional life. Twitter is mostly used for professional purposes followed by Facebook. YouTube use is more common among TV Journalists compared to Print and Web Journalists. Another finding of the study is that Web Journalists more frequently use the social media services professionally compared to journalists in print media. Journalists mostly use Facebook followed by WhatsApp for personal purposes. Regarding personal matters they use YouTube and Instagram more frequently compared to Twitter. Another important finding is that getting information and build relationship are

the primary reasons behind the use of social media in personal life by Indian journalists. (Pradhan and Kumari).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the impacts of social media on traditional media. To the best of my knowledge, none of these studies focuses on Assamese journalists or newspapers of Assam. Therefore, there is a special need to study the phenomenon that has certainly impacted journalism in Assam which has a history of more than 170 years. With the advent of social media as well as social networking sites, journalists in Assam also have become interested in the sites that they sometimes use as sources or leads for reporting. Press in Assam has seen a vast change in every sphere of it over the years. From language to technology, the changes in the newspapers of Assam are quite visible. The rapid growth of social media has expanded its feet into newspapers of Assam as well and therefore the study on the impact of social media on the print journalism in Assam is very important.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a Case Study on *The Assam Tribune*. Qualitative method of Case Study has been taken for this research work. A case could be an individual, a group, a community, an instance, an episode ,an event ,a subgroup of a population, a town or a city. To be called a case study it is important to treat the total study population as one entity (Kumar 155). According to Kumar(156) besides using a single method ,in depth interviewing ,multiple methods of data collecting such as obtaining information from secondary records ,gathering data through observations and collecting information through focus group and group interviews can be used in a case study but at the time of analysis the case must be considered as a single entity. Tools like Questionnaires have been used for primary data collection for this research work.

Sample

For this study Purposive or Judgmental sampling method has been taken.

Purposive sampling which is also known as judgment, selective or subjective sampling is a sampling technique in which researcher relies on his or her own judgment for choosing samples from population for a study. The researcher has selected *The Assam Tribune*, the highest circulated as well as the oldest running English daily. All the journalists (engaged with both editing and reporting) of this newspaper here are the population and samples have been drawn from editing section and reporting section. There are around 34 journalists (as per the norms defined by the Working Journalists Act 1955) in *The Assam Tribune* head office and they are chosen as samples for this study. For this purpose a specific questionnaire was prepared using multiple options (having both close and open ended questions) which were given to them. But 30 of them returned the filled up questionnaires.

Rationale for Sample Selection

The Assam Tribune is presently the oldest running English daily published simultaneously from Guwahati and Dibrugarh, Assam. *The Assam Tribune* is the highest circulated (93,942 copies daily) regional English newspaper in Assam (INS Press Handbook 2016-2017, 2017). The newspaper was founded way back in 1939 in Gauhati. First published on 4 August 1939 in Gauhati by Radha Govinda Baruah as a weekly newspaper under the editorship of Lakshminath Phookan, it is now published simultaneously from Guwahati and Dibrugarh as a daily. It has a huge readership in Assam and is the most popular newspaper in the North-East India. *The Assam Tribune* has a wide reach in terms of circulation figures as well as the reliability of the news matter. In 2014 it celebrated the Platinum Jubilee in the presence of India's Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi.

It has been playing important roles in

moulding public opinion on different crucial occasions like Assam Agitation in 80s. In case of journalists' welfare and job security *Assam Tribune* group wrote history by being the first media organisation in India to implement Justice Majithia Wage Board Recommendations for Journalists and Non-Journalists in 2011. It has always played the role of a active sentinel on the frontiers in order to keep the true character of journalism while maintaining journalistic integrity and media ethics. Moreover, it has a pan Assam presence as well.

In contrast, three major social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have been chosen. Although there are several other social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, it would not be feasible to include all of them.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

An analysis of the data obtained from survey questionnaires reveals that most of the journalists (54%) of *The Assam Tribune* frequently use social media for journalistic purposes. While some of them (27%) use them occasionally, only a few (7%) use it rarely. This is an interesting finding of the study that 12% of the journalists don't use social media for journalistic purposes and they are mostly related to editing job.

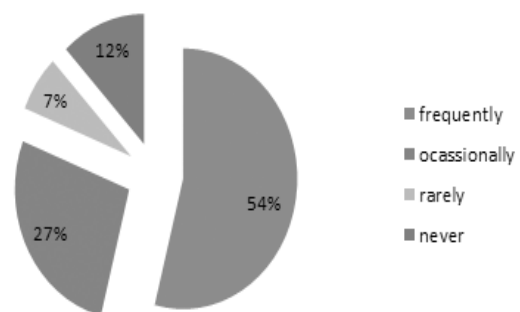


Figure 1. Use of social media for journalistic purposes
Source: Authors' creation on the basis of primary survey data

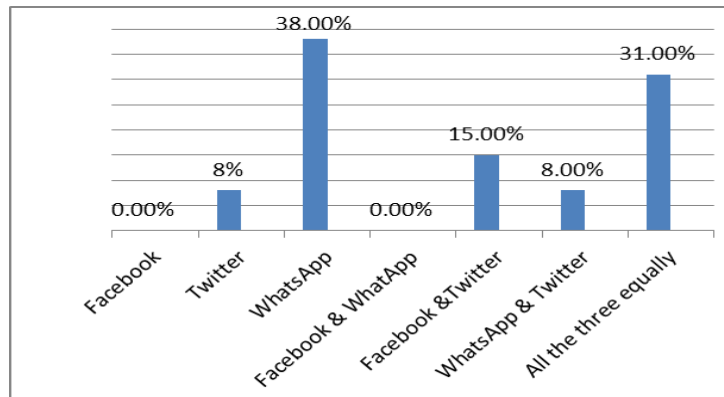


Figure 2. Use of different social media platforms for journalistic purposes

Source: Authors' creation on the basis of primary survey data

Among the social media user journalists about a third (38%) use only WhatsApp but 31 % use Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp equally. While about a tenth (15%) use both Facebook and Twitter. Some of them (8%) use only Twitter and some of them(8%) use Whatsapp and Twitter together. But no one use only Facebook.

Being journalists of an English daily most journalists(88%) of *The Assam tribune* use English on social media for posting, tweeting and messaging. Only a handful of (12%) use both Assamese and English. Regarding the use of social media as news sources, most journalists (70%) use social media sources as secondary news sources. The remaining 30% use them as both primary and secondary sources. About nine tenths (93%) of the survey participants (including both users and non users) think that social media sources are not as reliable as traditional sources. Among the users almost all of them cross-verify the social media sources before using them. About eight tenths (84%) of these journalists (who use social media) verify social media sources with the help of traditional sources (e.g. reporters on location), only 8% take the help of factchecker apps/websites, and the remaining 8% use both these tools. Thus, there are 7% of the journalists who are completely oblivious of

whether social media sources are reliable or not.

While most journalists(69%) use social media occasionally for promotion of their personal work, 27% of them use it several times a week. Only a few (4%) never do so. While 58% of them use it occasionally for sharing other important links, 23% do it rarely and 4% never use it for this purpose. In contrast 15% do it frequently.

Most journalists use social media tools for various professional purposes. While they use Facebook as a source of various news stories, they often use WhatsApp for receiving government press releases and other information. They also share information with fellow journalists on WhatsApp. They use Twitter primarily for information communicated through tweets by important government officials, politicians, celebrities, activists and government Twitter handles. Some journalists use Facebook for increasing visibility of their news reports and other write ups. Some journalists also use Facebook to get knowledge about the mood of the audience/readers so that they can cope up with the growing challenges in their respective fields. These social media platforms are useful for sharing important information with fellow journalists in particular and general public at large.

According to all journalists, fake news on social media platforms is the primary challenge for using these tools for journalistic purposes. They are of the opinion that it is important to fight against fake news. While verification, cross check and authentication are some of the ways to fight against it, some of the journalists want social media to be regulated to some extent because of the menace. Awareness creation is another way to fight against it. Some of them want to expose the fake news sources and defeat them in their own game. Among all participants (users and non users) 87% believe that fake news has not affected the credibility either of their own work or of the newspaper. Among the users, all are of the opinion that they have been benefitted by social media directly or indirectly.

Moreover, paid news, fabricated news, disinformation and misinformation pose serious challenges. A majority of the journalists are of the opinion that social media also pose challenges by rumor mongering that has the potential of creating mistrust among various groups and eventually leading to communal and ethnic clashes. Due to a lack of gatekeeping, anyone and everyone can create almost anything and such User Generated Contents may be challenging for the journalists in terms of authenticity and credibility of news. The violation of privacy rights in the name of information sharing on social media sites is another challenge. It is primarily because of the inadequacy of the existing legal framework to protect such rights on the merging media platforms. While click-baits have been a challenge before the journalists, satire/parody accounts on Facebook or Twitter sometimes create confusions in confirming sources if the journalist is not well aware of such nuances of social media mechanism. Propaganda is another challenge as political leaders or parties often take it as a tool to gain political benefits.

While most journalists are aware of these challenges, almost all of them acknowledge the benefits they gain from the use of social media one way or the other. According to the survey

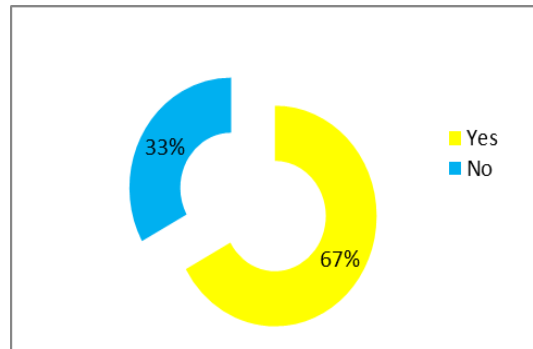


Figure 3. Threat to print media/newspapers

Source: Authors' creation on the basis of primary survey data

Among all the participants (users and non users) about two thirds (67%) are of the opinion that extensive use of social media poses a threat to newspapers /print media in the long run, while about one third (33%) do not perceive it to be a threat. Interestingly some of them opine that the process of affecting the circulation and readership has already begun. A few of them even say that overuse of social media may make it a Frankenstein some day. According to some journalists, the speed at which news get transmitted on social media is a challenge to the print media. Further, growing acceptability and popularity of social media are putting pressure on the overall production of print media. However, it is the lack of credibility and authenticity of social media that is preventing them from taking the place of print media. Unless some of the issues are addressed, social media could be a real threat in the long run. However, some of them are of the opinion that both the mediums can complement each other without ceating a division. Although there is not any written guidelines regarding social media in the newspaper, but the universal journalaistic principles compel them to adhere to the basics of authenticity, credibilty, ethics and truthfulness.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the research work have

shown light on various aspects of present day print journalism in Assam. The study has established the fact that most of the journalists use social media frequently for journalistic purposes. The use of social media sites among the journalists vary according to their convenience and needs. The outcomes of the study prove that social media has immense impact on day to day affairs of the journalists in print media. The growing impact has been seen in the basic news gathering practices of the journalists and in the overall production of the newspaper as well. While writing news reports for the newspaper they have to have a close eye on the happenings on social media so that they don't lose any lead or so called breaking news updates. They now have to compete with social media while performing their daily job. The menace of fake news in different forms are confronted while performing their duties as fake news in different forms sometimes even create confusions in reporting the facts and doing analysis. When some User Generated Content becomes viral on social media the print journalists can not sit idle as other media outlets begin to follow them quickly. But being associated with a responsible media organisation like *The Assam Tribune*, the journalists of it can not report them without proper verification of the facts. But this process of verification is painstaking and time consuming. So the journalists face the challenge of deadlines while verifying the facts of a social media source.

While growing popularity of social media for infotainment has threatened the very existence of the newspapers in general, some of the journalists of *The Assam Tribune* are of the opinion that there must be some mechanism in which these concerns could be addressed at the earliest.

Although the results of the study give us a crystal clear picture on the journalistic use of social media as well as the impact of social media on the print journalists in Assam, there is always a scope for further studies in this regard.

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