MOTION:

“SOCIAL MEDIA IMPROVES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF MAJOR WORLD EVENTS”
THINK BIG.
THEN THINK BIGGER.

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

The democratisation of the media

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

One citizen journalist, convinced of the capacity for social media to enlighten, argued that during the Arab Spring, social media became a place ‘to shape and discuss articles of the constitution, build mass awareness campaigns, and have entire Facebook-based news agencies with millions of worldwide subscribers’ [Ref: The European]. Others were less convinced of social media’s political role [Ref: Huffington Post].

A medium for falsehood

Discussing the rise of citizen journalism, the Economist notes that the use of social media in reporting world events has done away with editors and highlighted precisely why they are necessary [Ref: Economist]. In the absence of editorial standards, social media allows half-truths, conspiracy theories and wild rumours to flourish. Hyunjin Seo, a Kansas University professor of journalism, even calls social media ‘an amplifier of misinformation’ [Ref: Topeka-Capital Journal]. Another writer describes its effects as playing to our desire to feel good ‘in return for not doing very much’, creating a situation where: ‘Facts get lost, vanity goes viral’ [Ref: Independent]. Though mainstream news outlets can use social media for leads, trawling through the scale of information is a gargantuan task [Ref: BBC News]. The example of tweets by “Boya Dee”, immediately after the Woolwich attacks in south London, illustrate how social media can beat mainstream outlets to the story, though the extent to which this ensures reliable information is questionable [Ref: The Week]. This problem, evident in the Boston Bombings where Reddit users were scouring relevant photos looking to identify the bombers, resulted in several people being misidentified as the culprits [Ref: Wired]. Even US president Barack Obama felt it necessary to warn against ‘jumping to conclusions’ ‘in this age of instant reporting, tweets and blogs’ [Ref: Huffington Post]. As one commentator complained, ‘We have more information, but it’s a morass of truths, half-truths, and what we used to call libel.'
It’s fast, but it’s bad. And bad information is a cancer that just keeps growing.’ Even the social media coverage of the Arab Spring was criticised for exaggeration and inaccuracy. Marc Lynch, in particular, criticised the hype and mistruths peddled during the Egyptian uprising. ‘I still remember the first time I was driving around a perfectly calm, absolutely normal Cairo’, he writes, ‘while reading a Twitter feed describing apocalyptic clashes and mayhem’ [Ref: Foreign Policy].

Worst of all, the potential speed in which social media can report world events gives a dangerous competition to mainstream media outlets, creating an incentive for journalistic standards to slip, as they did with numerous false reports of Nelson Mandela’s death [Ref: International Business Times].

A deeper understanding?
Some suggest that social media has the capacity to improve our understanding of world events by raising awareness of events and stories that other mainstream outlets have ignored. A well-known example of this was the Kony 2012 video, which attempted to focus public attention on the use of child soldiers by Uganda’s Joseph Kony in his paramilitary group, the Lord’s Resistance Army. Some have sought to praise this style of campaigning journalism: ‘The millions who watched the “Kony 2012” video — and donated or contacted a legislator — acting individually and however naively, might collectively force some big decisions’ [Ref: New York Times]. However, the backlash against the Kony campaign by mainstream media outlets, and its subsequent demise, raise important questions about the dangers of the partial take on events promoted by such campaigns. Arguably the shift away from reliable media outlets to social media, especially blogs, jeopardises our access to reliable facts. Traditional media outlets “can fund in-depth reporting and research. They can underwrite projects that can take months or years to reach fruition... They can employ editors and proofreaders and other unsung protectors of quality work” [Ref: Rough Type]. None of this is possible with a simple blog, and their lack of accountability frequently leads to neglect of basic journalistic standards like verification of sources [Ref: Wordpress]. It is also questionable whether a medium in which acts of “trolling” fellow users, public figures and celebrities is consistent with producing accurate, reliable information. As one academic puts it, ‘the anonymity and dynamic, playful quality of the [internet] has a powerful disinhibiting effect on behaviour’ and therefore it may not be one conducive to developing a considered understanding of any unfolding events [Ref: Independent]. Others warn of a stifling conformity on Twitter which drowns out discussion on certain issues once the ‘collective spite and collective bile’ of a Twittermob is unleashed [Ref: Telegraph].
ESSENTIAL READING

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

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

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

FOR

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

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

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

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

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

AGAINST

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

Twitter Devolutions
Marc Lynch Foreign Policy 7 February 2013

IN DEPTH

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

The people formerly known as the audience
Economist 7 July 2011

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

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

What are we losing in the Web’s images of suffering and schadenfreude?
Philip Kennicott Washington Post 27 December 2012

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

Newspapers vs. Bloggers: The New News Process
Jeff Jarvis Seeking Alpha 8 June 2009
Social Media’s Role in Turkey’s Dissent
Karin Alexander New Internationalist 4 July 2013

Woolwich Attack: Social Media Reaction
BBC News 23 May 2013

Social Media’s Rush To Judgment In The Boston Bombings
Steve Henn National Public Radio 23 April 2013

Is Your Social Media Editor Destroying Your News Organisation Today?
Choire Sicha Awl 19 April 2013

What the Boston bombings taught me about journalism
Chris Cillizza Washington Post 19 April 2013

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

Citizen Journalism is Reshaping the World
TEDxTalks 17 December 2012

How Social Media Affected Newtown Coverage
New York Times 17 December 2012

A Video Campaign and the Power of Simplicity

The future of video: democratisation of creativity and production
Guardian 23 February 2012

A Twitter Revolution for Journalists
Joel Simon Huffington Post 14 February 2012

Citizen Journalism Paves the Way in Egypt
Pulitzer Centre 16 November 2011

Digital first: what it means for journalism
Jeff Jarvis Guardian 26 June 2011

Is Egypt about to have a Facebook revolution?
Abigail Hauslohner TIME 24 January 2011

Authentic journalism: weapon of the people
Al Giordano openDemocracy 19 November 2010

Why the News Media Became Irrelevant - And How Social Media Can Help
Michael Skolar Nieman Reports 2009

Evan Williams on what’s behind Twitter’s explosive growth
TEDxTalks 27 February 2009

The Amorality of Web 2.0
Rough Type 3 October 2005

Kony 2012
Handbook of Journalism
Reuters

Anonymous
Associated Press
National Union Journalists
Reddit
Reuters
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

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  *International Business Times* 26 June 2013
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  *MSN News* 25 May 2013
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  *MSN News* 25 May 2013

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**The Week**

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