

Now Hiring Social Media Editors: An Analysis of Newsroom Job Advertisements

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Abstract

Many news organizations have created a new position within the newsroom, the social media editor (SME). SMEs can take on a wide variety of titles (including community manager, digital editor, engagement editors, and so on), but they share a common role. Specifically, SMEs are tasked with being intermediaries between newsrooms and audiences. In this way, they mediate between journalism and marketing departments. Typically, their job includes repackaging news stories for distribution on social media, tracking social media engagement with these stories, responding to and moderating reader comments on social media, training fellow reporters on how to package stories and interact with users for maximum engagement, and briefing newsroom leadership on the latest social media engagement metrics regarding the reach and impact of editorial output. In this sense, SMEs work at the nexus between news consumers, journalists in the newsroom, and marketing departments within the organization. The ambiguous position and role of SMEs and their increasing profile in the newsroom raise a series of important questions for journalism scholars and educators, such as: what formal qualifications, skills, and types of experience do employers value in candidates for SME positions? And, what impacts might these positions have on the organisation of newsrooms and journalistic practice? In this paper I will present the preliminary findings from a content analysis of job listings for SME positions.

Key terms: Social Media, Engagement, Marketing, Job Advertisements, Journalism

Presentation

This project investigates relatively new roles within newsrooms, which have important implications for the future of journalism and what our graduates need to succeed in the profession. It is still in its early stages, as I am in the process of collecting and analysing job advertisements for Social Media Editors and other similar roles in New Zealand, Australia, and the US. So, I will limit myself to speaking about the reasons behind this project and some of the research that explores Social Media Editor (SME) roles. I will begin with some definitions of SMEs, indicate some of the implications of these positions in the context of journalism education, then describe my method.

Newsroom positions dedicated to engagement with online audiences have become common place over the past decade. These roles have been discussed in industry publications and are gaining scholarly attention. The names for these roles differ across news outlets and national markets. The titles include: social media editor, director, or strategist; community manager; digital or web editor; audience or engagement editor; and, so on. The titles and their definitions are likely to continue to change along with shifts in the goals and strategies of news organizations.

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In 2013, Ben Wasike suggested that the role of the “social media editor” (SME) is in its infancy, but it could broadly be defined as “tech savvy journalists appointed by news agencies to act as the newsroom liaisons to the digital world” (6). He argued their primary task is to “increase traffic to the parent site and thus increase readership” and they do so by: 1) monitoring social media trends and gathering material for editors; 2) posting links to news articles; and, 3) interacting with readers.

More recently, Raul Ferrer-Conill and Edson Tandoc (2018, 437) use the term “audience-oriented editor” to encompass a number of job titles tasked with “acting as an intermediary between audience data and the newsroom.” Like Wasike, they suggest these roles are united by their focuses on “informing the newsroom about audience engagement with the news and providing insight to the editorial team about how to make decisions about content in ways that may be received more favorably by the audience” (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc 2018, 437). One important distinction is that they acknowledge substantive differences amongst these job titles. 5 years passed between these two studies, and this time may have seen the consolidation of job descriptions for each role around standard tasks. For instance, from my observations digital or web editor positions are quite distinct from social media or engagement editors, and social media or content producer are often different again.

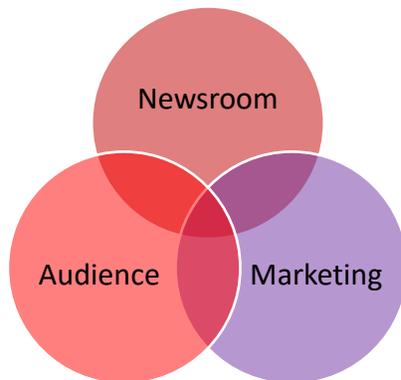
I do not intend to provide a conclusive definition for SMEs, because this area is still in flux and because I have a lot more work to do. Yet, I can make some distinctions based on my work so far:

- First, digital and web editors are often similar to front page editors; they make editorial decisions about story ideas and placement on the organisation’s web properties. For instance, their website.
- Second, the term producer has different meanings from medium to medium. In radio and television, it often means someone with managerial oversight, who makes programing decisions. This meaning is transferred to some online positions. Yet, many digital, content, or even social media producer roles are entry-level positions and primarily entail creating or rewriting stories for digital platforms.
- Third, there are also social media specific positions within marketing departments. These include “paid social” positions, which run advertising campaigns for clients and are expressly *not* part of the newsroom.

So, when I speak of SMEs I mean positions that involve decision making and management regarding off-platform distribution and interaction (social media sites) and are part of the editorial newsroom staff.

I will shift from definitions to some of the implications of these positions for journalism and journalism education. The context for the creation of these positions, quite obviously, includes the disruptions to the news industry precipitated through digital technologies, changing revenue models and cuts to public funding, as well as changing audience habits and interests. I can’t do justice to any of these structural changes in the allotted time and I hope that we’re already familiar with these debates. Yet, SME’s have been established in response to these changes. To date, research has focused on their role in facilitating change in newsrooms, and mediating between newsrooms, audiences, and marketing departments.

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Figure 1: Intermediaries



Audience

According to Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, these roles are evidence of the shift toward an “audience-oriented reconfiguration” in newsrooms around the world (2018, 448). On the one hand, SMEs can be important *representatives for news outlets*: they curate content for different platforms; and, interact with audience members by directly responding to questions and criticisms often in real time. On the other hand, they are tasked with collating and making sense of *information about audiences*. Then, they convey this information to others within the organization.

Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, worry that this second function promotes an overuse of quantitative metrics in editorial decisions and that this may influence news making decisions in unintended ways. Counting engagement statistics can tell us somethings about audiences, but will miss other aspects. Further, SMEs contend with opaque and everchanging ranking algorithms. This means a story that did well last week may not do well next week. What counts one week, may not count the next.

Another concern is that the quantitative logic of getting clicks, retweets, and likes may conflict with journalistic standards and goals. This is part of a much longer debate about “lowest common denominator,” “yellow,” or “tabloid” news. And, of course, “clickbait.” It is associated with the too-simple dichotomy between giving audiences what they want and what the need.

Newsroom

In addition to communicating audience analytics, SMEs are often charged with establishing best practices and providing social media training to newsroom staff. Karin Assmann and Nicholas Diakopoulos (2017) suggest that, because they identify as journalists, audience engagement editors are effective “change agents.” This insider position allows them to coach other reporters and initiate changes that may seem at odds with traditional professional values or practices.

In their interviews with audience engagement editors working in the U.S., the majority of the interviewees discussed their role in terms of broader institutional change: “re-organization, downsizing and a shortage

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of staff” (Assmann and Diakopoulos, 2017). These positions are not only symptomatic of changes in the industry, they also play an important part in directing change within newsrooms.

Marketing

In an earlier study, Edison Tandoc and Tim Vos (2016, 958) found “a reworking of traditional journalistic routines” and evidence of a “collapse of the traditional wall between editorial and marketing down to the individual level of online editors.” To provide an example from a 2010 Adweek article, a social media coordinator named Stephanie Romanski spoke directly about the relationship between the editorial and marketing aspects of her role. She observed “my job has seeped into our advertising department as we experiment with ways to harness tools like Twitter and make money. This involves occasionally going on sales calls with ad reps and explaining the benefits of social media for businesses.” The move to marketing roles for editorial staff is likely a response to the economic challenges facing journalism.

In my investigations, thus far, the language in job advertisements refers to working across departments, promoting content, and driving traffic. This language avoids direct references to marketing and advertising. Likewise, interviewees have been careful to describe their cooperation with marketing projects as limited and highly regulated. This is a difficult issue to broach, so we need to continue to raise questions about the ways these roles may redraw distinctions between editorial and marketing.

Methodology

The ambiguous position and role of SMEs and their increasing profile in the newsroom raise a series of important questions for journalism scholars and educators, such as: what formal qualifications, skills, and types of experience do SME’s need? And, what impacts do these positions have on the organisation of newsrooms and journalistic practice?

Figure 2: Analysis

Social Media Producer (Auckland) - Mediaworks	
Job Reference No: RR1042	
Newshub prides itself on breaking news stories, it's your go to news source from here at home and around the globe. Our digital team output content that engages audiences across multiple channels and are responsible for achieving high social media engagement.	Organisation self-description
Our Digital Social Producer creates and publishes audience-centric content on social media, focusing on driving audience to our digital and broadcast platforms. They do this by producing compelling daily social media posts/promotions for Newshub programmes that drive engagement and viewing.	Job description
We're looking for a someone who has the ability to delve into "up to the minute" socially emerging content and turn it into multi platform gold! You don't have to be a digital native but you do understand video and image editing, how to create and aggregate digital content, and the bounds of the Broadcasting Act. Fully engaged in the social world, you know how to transform news and entertainment stories into compelling social media teasers and create audience flow from social platforms to broadcast programmes and websites.	Desired skills, knowledge, experience, qualifications and characteristics.
You are an experienced digital/multimedia journalist and content provider and you are comfortable with image editing experience (Photoshop preferred), and the appropriate technology needed to create/source/aggregate and publish digital media content.	

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As I noted earlier, I'm collecting job advertisements for SME positions to continue answering these questions. A few studies have analyzed job interviews to investigate changes to work and professional values in journalism. Sally Young and Andrea Carson studied job ads to investigate what digital skills are expected of journalists. They justify their approach by suggestion that "Journalism employers are powerful determinants, in a very practical sense, of what journalism is" (2018, 453). Deb Halpern Wenger and Lynn Owens (2012, 11) argue that "employment advertisements are a genre of organizational communication that can provide insight into the characteristics of a company and its employees." And, Brian Massey (2010) observes that job advertisements represent employers' understanding of what a job entails. In short, job advertisements provide insight into the profession, characteristics of specific employers and positions, as well as the skills, experience, and characteristics that are preferred by employers.

I am collecting the adverts bi-monthly from Indeed, Seek, JournalismJobs.com and from media company websites using the search terms: social media, engagement, community, audience and digital, paired with editor, strategist, manager, director and producer. I started data collection on July 1st and will finish on Saturday.

I have started to analyse the NZ ads using Nvivo, by coding them and then aggregating codes into themes. I wanted to present some findings based on the pilot I am running, but before that I need to better clean the data set. I may also have to extend my collection period. There are also limitations to what job listings will tell us. They do not reveal the full scope of these roles. Ads are also promotional material or, at the least idealized descriptions, so they are likely to present a favourable self-image. As such, my colleague Dr Tim Gibson at George Mason University and me are in the process of interviewing SMEs.

Based on my initial analysis, other research and industry papers, these jobs involve news gathering functions, writing copy for social media and blogs, interacting with audiences, designing and implementing digital strategies within the newsroom, and training other reporters and editors. These are the types of positions that are available to our students as they move up through news organizations. They are also reshaping newsrooms that require a renewed focus on journalistic standards and ethics.

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