

Regional

Social media's undeniable impact on journalism

Mass communications is a field that is evolving so rapidly that a textbook on the subject can become obsolete in a matter of months. That is, in part, due to changes not only in the technology, but also how people use that technology. Someone who studies and teaches on these topics is Mark Poepsel, an assistant professor in the department of mass communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A native of Washington, Mo., he received his bachelor's degree in journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia, his master's in Latin American studies at the University of Arizona and his doctorate in journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Although he seemed to have taken a detour in his graduate studies toward Latin American issues he has a good explanation.

"It's that the Latin American studies program had the closest relationship to the journalism program at Arizona State of any program that still offered a master's degree," explained Poepsel. "At that time, they were not offering a master's in journalism, so after the undergraduate degree I was convinced that if I wanted to teach I needed to pursue higher education beyond the undergraduate degree, beyond my bachelor's in journalism."

As is the case with many journalism students, he started out being interested in a career in broadcast journalism but then became interested in understanding social media and participatory journalism.

"I started out thinking I was going to teach broadcast journalism and that I would teach students everything I knew about how to make television news," he said. "It has morphed into attempting to understand social media and participatory journalism practices and then turn around and teach them. When we go to conferences and talk to other people who teach digital media, many of whom come from backgrounds where they have worked with online communications, and they have kind of converted themselves into journalists," he said. "But there is definitely a meeting in the middle where we get interested in making news online and teaching participatory journalism and where they want to learn about the history of journalism and the



Dr. Poepsel in a recent visit to the Tower of London.

practice."

That concern is particularly true in these days of the 24-hours news cycle. After all, long gone are the days when if you wanted to learn about the news you bought a newspaper or watched the evening television news. These changes have impacted not only the way news is delivered, but also how people select the news they want.

"That is absolutely of concern," said Poepsel. "We used to talk about the three networks, and we used to talk about a couple of newspapers of record and in most cities there were one or two major metro-

politan daily newspapers with a morning and afternoon edition. And with atomization of news, people can consume what they want to hear and when they want to hear it." This choice, he added, has also created a new level of bias in the media.

"It has become very partisan," he said. "It creates the issue of people only consuming media in their own eco-chamber and only hearing what they already want to hear. And there are plenty of large news corporations that are interested in feeding people only what they want to hear because that can be profitable. So the challenge is to cut

across with types of stories that are going to influence people, the kind that they can't ignore. Or we can look back at history and look back at media when there was more of a partisan press and what happened looking from a cross-cultural comparative perspective." Poepsel said that when using a comparative approach, there are many countries in which a partisan press is still thriving, still very much a reality.

"So you look at how that happens and what the best practices are for still trying to inform society in places where that is the norm," he said. There is also the issue of

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trivialization of news, with more emphasis on celebrities than actual news or on the state of the economy, politics, health, or anything of that nature.

"I guess I just operate from the assumption that there's entropy, to steal from biological terms," Poepsel said. "Anything that looks great has the potential for entropy and for it to fall apart and for it to be not as good as it used to be." One example he pointed out is CNN.

"On the whole I think that there's plenty of very good journalism being done," he said. "It's just a question of how hard people have to look for it and how we work as educators to bring the good journalism to the forefront. CNN's 'Headline News' has turned from being very informative to being celebrity, entertainment focused, much like the 'Today Show.' In large part a lot of what happens on 'CBS Sunday Morning' is promotion for other products that CBS produces." And this is where Poepsel sees the problem – at the corporate level.

"When you start to conglomeratize media companies you start to have them talking about other media products," he said. "So this book or that movie suddenly becomes newsworthy. And that was a process we saw happening I think from the mid-80s up until now, and it's pretty much rampant." Poepsel said that he thinks the same can happen with social media.

"There are also things like Upworthy on Facebook where you see something that is sort of progressively minded and presents a sort of critical thinking approach to news and information that didn't exist before," he said. "Sure there are things that may entropy and turn into less good things later on, but I would tend to just steer people's attention to things that are critically driven."

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Photo by Gaby Poepsel