

Saying 'I won't use twitter'...it's like saying 'I won't use the Library'
Interview with Simon Hinde, Programme director, journalism and publishing at LCC

Joe Easeman: What do you think is important in your industry in regards to an online presence both for students and graduates?

Simon Hinde: For a journalist it's pretty key to have an online presence, particularly on Twitter. It's more or less an absolute requirement now a days for a journalist and hence for a journalism student. Partly because it is a very useful research tool, it is a way of keeping abreast of what is going on, finding out what journalists are saying or doing, making contacts, all the stuff journalists need to be doing. It's also a way of building your own presence, making yourself known to potential employers, promoting your own work online. I would expect any serious journalist now to be on twitter.

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And is that [twitter] used as a networking tool, as much as it is used for promotion?

It can be used as a networking tool, it can be used for research, and it can be used for publishing stories. Some people and organization tweet their stories, for some twitter is the main way in which story are told, it's a very important way of getting an audience to your work. If you're a journalist and you've got 10,000 twitter followers then that makes you very attractive to employers, because they know that you'll tweet your stories and you'll bring that audience to the website or publication.

So is that something that you encourage with the students or your course from the start?

Yes.

And is it something that they take up?

Yes, I think so. I mean a lot of them are on twitter already. They use it in different ways. I mean some people use it just as a social tool, so there is a thing about thinking about how you use it, and what you are using it for. I don't know for an actual fact how many students are actually on twitter, but we make the case, and a lot of them will sign up. And then, certainly into the second year, we teach them about things like Storify and so forth.

In regards to websites and blogs, how are these used by students?

All the students set up a WordPress blog on the university WordPress system, pretty much on day one. Quite a lot of the assessment is done through the blog, they do stories and things, on the blog, and they are accessed on the blog, and we encourage them to use it, and some do and some don't. A lot of them are already enthusiastic bloggers and I find that when I'm interviewing student applicants they say I've got a blog on fashion, or film, or sports, or whatever they do, so it is increasing becoming a thing that they do.

As far as a website goes, is that something that is important in the industry, like a specific showcase website?

It can be, yes. Particularly freelance journalists will often have a website, where they will set out their credentials and show examples of their work, and that sort of thing, so yes that is a thing that people do. But often people just do it through twitter, and tweet a link to their article. I think for a freelancer it's very useful, because it's a way of being found.

What tools or skills exchange, do you think the university could provide for students, staff and graduates to help them develop their professional online presence?

Well, I think, amongst the staff, the awareness of social media is patchy, some are very good, and some are not so good. Digital literacy among the staff is at different levels, so I think if staff aren't doing it themselves, then they are unlikely to be able to put across a convincing case as to why students should be doing it, because they don't understand it. So I think that's probably one of the key things, which is that staff have to understand it and embrace this stuff to start with. Tools wise, you know yourself, the tools you need most people have them, a laptop, your phone, a tablet, so there's nothing inherently very sophisticated relative to what the average person has these days, so I don't think it's a tool question as much as it is a skill and awareness question.

Do you think that the university community needs tools to facilitate those skills learning, like a place they can go to learn about these things?

To be honest I think it should be up to the individual. Because again, there's not a lot to learn, if you go on twitter there's not a lot to learn, it's wanting to do it, and being aware of doing it, and what you're doing it. I think that has to come from an individual. I doubt the efficiency of getting a load of academics into a room and teaching them about twitter and why they should use it. I mean it might work for some people but I think broadly, it's a question about your engagement with the world, and why wouldn't you use it. Saying 'I won't use twitter' certainly in my field, it's like saying 'I won't use the library' or something, its arbitrarily cutting yourself off from an important source of information, so

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why would you want to do that. now it may be different in different fields, you know social media may not be so central in other field, I speaking from a perspective of journalist, I would expect that anybody who is active in journalism to have a very full appreciation of the centrality of these things, to the way journalism is conducted in 2014.

From what you just said, would it be right to conclude that in your industry the tool that your students or graduates should be using are ones that are already set up, like social media sites, as opposed to needing that knowledge in coding and such like?

Well I think coding is useful. I think it is becoming increasingly useful. There are opportunities available in journalism to people who can code, that are not available to people who can't and there is a growing field of data journalism, where people do visualizations and get stories through the manipulation of data, and the more digitally literate you are the better. But that's a particular field, I would say that social media is essential for anyone in journalism, but I think there are opportunities for people who are so minded, who maybe have an interest in figures or are comfortable with excel and that sort of kind, who can build on and develop that. I think that is an opportunity as well. Coding can be very useful, you do see opportunities for journalist who code, or journalist who have an awareness of how software development is done, journalist that are

familiar with (and these are all things we are teaching on the course) analytics, management systems, all that sorts of stuff. I would expect anybody going back to when I was running journalistic organization, increasingly you would expect people to come along and be comfortable for you to put them in front of a contact management system and they would be able to pick it up, they would understand how analytics work, they would understand how information spreads through the social web. All those sorts of things, that we do teach, but increasingly you kind of expect student to come with at least some understanding of that stuff, because its stuff that a lot of them will spend a lot of their time doing anyway. So I think the challenge can sometimes be for the staff, that they are less aware of this stuff, sometimes, than students are.

Do you think there needs to be more staff awareness?

Completely. I think in my area certainly any new hire I make; I would expect them to be very comfortable and familiar with those sorts of thing. It's gone from being, in the last ten years, from being a nice thing to have, to being essential. Things like coding, and data awareness are nice things to have now, but they may become essential, it depends on how things develop. I could well imagine that some basic familiarity with coding could become a key thing for journalist to have. It's not at the moment, but it does open doors if you have that.

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In your experience is the learning around online presence something that the staff would like to find themselves if it was made available?

I think that there might well be an interest in a small amount of people in some sort of coding course; I can see how that would be relevant to some people.

So more of a course than a database of information that they can go to?

I don't know, it depends on the individual. the advantages of a course are that people will engage with it, because they have set time a side to do it, and if its something like lydia.com then its something that you generally put off until later, and it's harder to engage with, but that depends on the individual.

Do you think that training into developing an online presence should be something that is integrated into the course, or something that can be developed alongside the course for the students to find themselves?

I think journalism might be a slightly special case, because of the way it (the online environment) is used as a tool within the journalism business, it may not be used as a tool within say the fine art industry, I don't know, so I think that we need to teach from a journalist perspective. There are specific journalistic things, about the use of twitter, and other social media that we would always teach as part of journalism, because you couldn't teach it as a generic thing, it would make no sense. I can imagine that would also be true on the PR courses, or the advertising course, but whether it's true on the design course, etc. I simply don't know. We are teaching the use of these tools in a journalistic context.

Can I ask about your online presence and how that developed?

I was a very early adopter, so in the early 90's when CompuServe came along, I had a CompuServe account and an email account, before the web, and then when the web came along I was interested in that. I was working at the Sunday Times at the time, and I got interested in it, because I wrote some stories about it, so it seemed like an interesting area, and I've always been involved since then. Like everyone else I'm on Facebook, twitter and LinkedIn. As new things come along I at least try them out, and some stick with me and some don't. Pinterest or Instagram don't do anything for me, but I familiarize myself with them. I use them in my life, but I also familiarize myself with them as potential journalist tools, I've used them in my journalism to some degree. I have always worked in businesses where they are the forefront, because I've always worked in digital businesses. It was a core of what we did, so it's been something in my life for 20 years.

And what is your online presence at the moment?

I have Facebook, twitter and LinkedIn, and I try to use them. I think like a lot of people, your use of these sort of grows in a slightly incoherent way. So I have friends on Facebook, who aren't really friends, so I'm trying to get rid of them and put them on LinkedIn, and then twitter is my sort of personal face to the world, but I do use it to interact with friends as well. And Facebook is just about my friends. So I'm trying to try and cull my Facebook to people who are actually my friend, and people I want to hear from and then build my twitter, as being a sort of, a professional profile and research tool. And then LinkedIn is just my CV and business contacts and all that sort of stuff. But inevitably there is overlap between them. At the moment that's enough for me. I'm on google+ but I don't really use it. As I say when new things come along, I get an account and try them out, so I'm at least familiar with them, and then if they're interesting to me, they're interesting to me. There's not enough time in my life to be manipulating a presence on dozens of different social platforms, so for the time being I stick with those three, and I may change as new things come along.

And is that advice you would give to the students, to try things out and see what works?

Yes, definitely to try things out, and see what's useful and what works. But also to see what you are using them for, what are the characteristics of Facebook, and twitter and LinkedIn, that make them useful for one thing and not for another. What sort of presence do you want to have; you might be more relaxed about the way you come across on Facebook, with a smaller group of people who might be friends, with the right privacy settings. On twitter you are broadcasting to the world, everyone can see you; future employers can see you so you might want to think about that. Think about what these

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networks are, what you are using them for and how you present yourself on these networks, bearing in mind that this stuff doesn't go away. I look on twitter a lot and I see people putting things on twitter that I think really are not the most sensible things to do, given that employers look at it and so on, so forth. Whereas on Facebook you can put things not here, put them behind privacy settings and be a bit more relaxed

about it. LinkedIn you need to be more careful, because it's the first place employers go. It is difficult talking to the perspective of an 18 year old, who may not be thinking about employers and what employers think of you and the rest of it, but the nature of these things is that it doesn't really go away and potentially people can see it. We've all seen examples of people doing daft things on twitter that do actually blight their futures, and rightly or wrongly people need to be vigilant about it. but that's sort of the negative side, and the positive side is that particularly with twitter you can build a presence and a profiles, or a 'brand' as people like to say these day, that can be enormously valuable in terms of future employment and getting yourself out there. There are people in journalism who have created themselves on twitter, quite younger people, who have become quite big figures, in large parts through their social media community, so it's a big opportunity. You have to think about it and what you are doing, and the people who really succeed are the people who have a very clear view of what they are doing and why they are doing it.