# A comparative study of social media guidelines of media organizations

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## Abstract

This paper qualitatively analyzes social media guidelines of six media organizations: Indonesian Press Council, The Canadian Association of Journalists, Los Angeles Times, Mail & Guardian, Reuters, Associated Press. It presents the findings under social media account; political advocacy; tweets, retweets and reposts; news sourcing themes. The analysis shows, social media guidelines have various points of agreement as well as contradiction among them. They also need to elaborate more on several vague guidelines. For instance, Reuters leaves it to the discretion of its journalists to decide what constitutes matters of public importance. It points out various contradictions that the social media guidelines have. It also outlines a set of recommendations on social media use for media organizations to include in their guidelines.

**Keywords:** *Social media, ethics, media organizations, accounts, tweets, sourcing.*

## Introduction

Many media organizations across the world have their own set of ethics codes for their journalists to follow. For instance, the Associated Press has a set of ethics codes for its employees ("AP news," 2016). Many journalists' associations and press councils have their own ethics guidelines that are not binding on reporters but serve as a guiding light for them. For instance, the Press Council of India, which was set up in 1966 to improve reporting standards and preserve press freedom in the country (Sawant, 2003), has a set of guidelines for journalists that are not binding on them ("Press

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Council," 2013).

However, due to the influence of culture media best practices differ from country to country (Brossard, Shanahan & McComas, 2004). For instance, a cultural phenomenon called Guanxi in China refers to personal relationships that encourage some reporters in the country to consider receiving gifts from their interviewees (Tsetsura &Zuo, 2009). Such a practice would, however, be considered unethical in many nations. Brossard, Shanahan and McComas (2004) studied the impact of cultural practices on news gathering in different nations across the globe. They argued that more international and macro-level studies should be carried out to understand the interaction of media practices with national culture.

While media have moved on to include social media in its realm, issues of ethics in social media have also been incorporated in many ethics codes of media organizations. Wright and Hinson (2010) argue that people expect honesty and truth telling on social media with 50% of their respondents answering positively in 2010, up from 41% the previous year. The use of social media by journalists and media organizations raises many ethical concerns. For instance, a tweet by a journalist can be considered either his personal opinion or that of his organization or both. Journalists using social media raise questions of ethical implications for both the message conveyed to the audience as well as the medium used to do so. For example, how much of editorial oversight do blogs penned by journalists have?Journalists using social media for reporting purposes bringthe focus on media accountability. For instance, journalists have on many occasions used images and comments

from social media accounts of children without seeking their permission (Gordon, 2016).The advent of social media has led to changes in the way gathering and dissemination of news occurs. For instance, new accountability systems like newsroom blogs are available online (Loit, Lang & Kadakas, 2012). However, little, if any, research is available comparing the new accountability systems with more traditional accountability systems, for example, ombudsman. Just as media ethics guidelines vary across organizations, social media guidelines vary as well, ranging from their complete absence, for instance, in Press Council of India codes of ethics ("Press Council," 2013), to well defined ones, for example, in the Associated Press ethics codes ("AP news," 2016).

This paper is a qualitative study of social media guidelines of six mediaorganizations from as many countries using the theoretical framework of ethics. The aim of the study is to find common themes in social media ethics guidelines for journalists.

**Literature Review**

**Interactive Nature of Social Media**

According to Weber (2009) social media is an online platform where people from various regions across the world with common views share their thoughts and opinions on a variety of issues. Mandelli and Accoto (2010) categorized social media into nine categories:community/forum and podcast, blog (e.g. Blogger, Technorati), microblog (e.g. Twitter), virtual world (e.g. SecondLife), wiki (e.g. Wikipedia), social network (e.g. Facebook), media sharing (e.g. Flickr), social bookmark (e.g. Digg).Media organizationshave used social media to increase interaction and

collaboration with their audience so much that the audience are increasingly considered part of the organization (Mandelli&Vianello, 2010). Sharing of content using social media is now a two-way process between journalists and their audience. In this process the audience plays an active role by interacting with journalists through comments and sharing content on social media platforms. The horizontality of Web 2.0 has brought about changes in the gathering and dissemination of news content, with audience causing decentralization of news production in media organizations (Heinrich, 2010). The media landscape has become more competitive due to an increase in the number of people, apart from journalists and reporters, gathering news from a variety of sources.According to McNair (2003), the traditional ways of gathering and dissemination of news by media organizations have changed with the advent of social media. News flow is no longer top down from journalists and media organizations to the audience. It now involves several channels of communication interacting with each other in a way that transparency of reporting procedures has trumped opacity, access to news prevails over exclusivity, competition among media organizations for audience attention has replaced monopoly and audience interaction has replaced passivity among the audience (McNair, 2003).

Journalists use social media to both inform people about news as well as to get story ideas for the media organization they are working with (Ochman, 2002).The interactions between journalists and their audience have made the audience act as a watchdog over news organizations and journalists. The audience is now active and

able to react to news through comments on social media as well as sharing content. For instance, in Africa, where the reach of the Internet is less than in any other part of the world, bloggers link to online news reports of newspapers, thus empowering people through news sharing (Oteku et al., 2010). The traditional news media in Africa get news leads from members of the audience. However, journalists at times breach media ethics online. Often, media organizations republish audience blog articles on newspaper social media sites without permission from the original authors (Goldstein &Rotich 2008).

The interactive nature of social media has, however, made journalists less visible to their audience that can be viewed as a threat to journalists' professional identity. An individual journalist's autonomy is important for seeking the truth (Merrill, 1989). Researchers suggest that convergence of media accountability, transparency and journalistic autonomy is difficult to achieve. They argue that while media organizations seek to break free from governmental regulations and control, individual journalists often give up their autonomy (Singer, 2007). Journalists are also susceptible to pressures from their media organizations about the way they present their views on important events on social media. According to Domingo and Heinonen (2008) blogs set up by citizens challenge journalism practices from outside of media organizations, without the restrictions those media outlets would impose on reporters working with them. They also argue that blogs set up by journalists and media organizations help to transform media best practices, for instance, publishing corrections online to enhance

media credibility among their audience (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008).

Social media is influenced by environmental and behavioral factors, which are partly dependent on each other. Among the environmental factors two issues are of prime importance. First, individuals must have freedom to freely discuss any topic without fear. Therefore, public sphere must be free from state control (Dahlberg in Poor, 2006). Freedom of speech of every citizen of all countries across the globe must be protected by both the law and the government, and should never be curtailed (Habermas, 2006). Second, people should have equal access to networked public sphere, which in turn depends on people's access to digitally-networked technologiesavailable in their countries. Access to public sphere is also dependent on the penetration of and literacy about the Internet (Thornton, 2001).Access to networked public sphere is different across the urban gradient in underdeveloped nations, for instance in Africa (Hilbert, 2011).

**Media Ethics Codes**

Ethics codes have been published by media outlets, press councils, among other media-related organizations, since the 19th century (Marzolf, 1991). The ethics codes reflect the values and ideals of media organizations publishing them. Besides codes of ethics brought out by media organizations, many new media accountability initiatives have been put in place in this digital age, for instance media blogs (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008).Recent research regarding social media ethics has grounded blogging in Habermas's concept of the public sphere (Smith, 2011). Habermas

(1990) argues that the public sphere includes every dialogue where participation of people forms a public.

A major criticism of media ethics codes is that they are grounded in public relations (Brennan, 1996). Fink (1995) found the ethics codes not efficient for journalists on the ground that they were not enforceable. Merrill and Odell (1983) argue that media ethics codes are superficial and rhetorical, and do not reflect the styles of functioning of journalists and media outlets. Breecher (1996) conducted a study of 84 newspaper codes and seven ethics codes of professional organizations. He argues that the codes of ethics had minimal standards, besides failing to reveal the implications when journalists and news outlets would not adhere to them. According to Shah (1999) while there are differences in media best practices across nations, some researchers contend that globalization has ushered in homogenization in media best practices related to news gathering. Many scholars say that it is necessary to have a universal code of ethics guiding media best practices in news gathering across the globe (Callahan, 2003). However, there has been no convergence of opinion among journalists and owners of media organizations on having universal codes of ethics binding on all journalists. Achieving a broad consensus on the issue would also be difficult, because ethics codes of different media outlets are grounded in the socio-cultural values of a society and nation. For example, a socio-cultural basis for such ethics codes is evident in the Press Council of India codes that have clauses for promoting religious harmony and goodwill, and removing social ills such as superstitions among people in society (Bertrand, 1997).

In a bid to find common themes in media ethics codes across the world, the UNESCO in 1973 reached out to its member states through letters seeking ethics codes of media organizations in those nations. An analysis of the media ethics codes from 48 countries revealed that there were several common themes in the ethics codes: rights of the audience, solidarity among journalists, among other themes (Bruun, 1979). According to Bertrand (1997), even if journalists across the world agreed to set up common codes of ethics for both journalists as well as media organizations to adhere, there would be practical problems in implementing them because of different political situations prevailing in different countries. For instance, objective reporting can sustain itself in a democratic country like the U.S. but may not survive in a totalitarian country such as Syria.

Roberts (2012) studied codes of ethics of different media organizations. He found that the codes were full of values of universalism and benevolence, while they reflected less of power and achievement. Benevolence and universalism comprise at least 50% of the values in each media codes of ethics included in the research —69.9% of values identified in news codes of ethics and 91.7% of values in the bloggers' codes of ethics. Roberts (2012) found that universalism had maximum score in the value-type category for blogging and media ethics codes. Using Rohan's (2000) definition the study defined universalism as "understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature (p. 261). Roberts (2012) argues that media organizations grounded conformity in the values of politeness and

self-disciple. He contends that only media ethics codes asked journalists to be accountable as well as holds to account individuals and media organizations.

Hafez (2002) compared media ethics codes of European countries with Islamic nations in Africa, Middle East and Asia. He found that all the media ethics codes laid emphasis on truth telling and objectivity. According to Ward and Wasserman (2010) traditional media ethics codes were of a closed type. They argue that the intended targets of media ethics were a small group of professionals and outlets ─journalists at dailies and major media organizations. Therefore media ethics was more about self-regulation of media. For the most part of the 20th Century, the media ethics discourse was in-house, with the codes being discussed at conferences and other events in which journalists would participate. Some journalists are afraid that allowing the audience to take part in the discussion on media ethics would disturb the autonomy of journalists. Other journalists contend that the audience would not be able to properly discuss editorial matters due to their lack of newsroom experience. However, they argue, the advent of social media has transformed the media ethics discourse into open type in which the intended users, level of participation and content are different from the closed type. The open type media ethics codes are more accommodating of audience and are more inclusive, initiating a global media discourse (Ward & Wasserman, 2010).

Laitila (1995) researched 30 media codes of ethics in European countries and found that reporting the truth to audience, employing fair methods in gathering news, source integrity and that of

journalists, and freedom to express oneself were the common features in the ethics codes. However, the study did not find any difference in media ethics codes based on different geographical regions of the world. Research into the ethics of social media will help in codifying media best practices to protect the importance of a free public sphere and its digitally accessible feature for both journalists and their audience. Research data obtained from academic and professional studies are important to increase knowledge about the level and quality of ethics training among professionals using social media, for instance journalists (Langett, 2013). Cooper(1989) argues that comparing codes of ethics from media organizations from different parts of the world has its own limitations because words and phrases used in such codes may have different meanings due to differences in cultural context across countries. For instance, the word "guru" in the U.S. stands for an expert as in advertising guru. However, the same word in India refers to a teacher or a seer.

According to Garbowicz (2011), as journalists and media organizations take to social media, there is lack of understanding among media organizations about the role journalists should play on the social media sites of media outlets, for instance organizational blogs. Also, the degree of control journalists should have on social media sites of media organizations is yet to be agreed upon by media outlets. This confusion comes despite most media organizations having accepted social media as part of the newsroom culture (Grabowicz, 2011). Few research has until now looked at common themes emerging from social media guidelines of media

organizations and press councils. The present study builds on aforementioned literature to search for common themes in the social media guidelines.

**Method**

A Google search was conducted with the search term "social media guidelines" AND "newspaper," "press council," "newswire service," "television." A similar search was carried out using the search term "social media policies" AND "newspaper," "press council," "newswire service," "television." From the results returned by the searches, social media guidelines of the following organizations were downloaded: Indonesian Press Council ("Regulations and," 2012),The Canadian Association of Journalists ("Ethics guidelines," 2011), *Los Angeles Times* ("Los Angeles," 2010), *Mail & Guardian* ("Mail and," 2010), *Reuters* ("Reporting from," 2013),*Associated Press* ("Social media," 2013).The samples for the study comprised social media guidelines of a press council, a journalists' association, two newspapers and two newswire services. The author qualitatively studied using the theoretical framework of media ethics the social media guidelines of the samples.  Author presents the findings under the following themes: Social media account; political advocacy; tweets, retweets and reposts; news sourcing; privacy. The author gave a set of recommendations on social media use for media organizations and their journalists.

**Findings of the Study**

**Social Media Account**

The *Associated Press* encourages its employees to have social

media accounts --- a single account on every network for both professional and personal use. It asks its staff to identify themselves on those accounts as an employee of the organization. It also allows its employees to use their image as profile photos ("Social media," 2013).Besides identifying themselves as employees of *Reuters* on social media, *Reuters* wants its staff to make it clear to their audience that the views expressed are theirs and not those of the organization ("Reporting from," 2013). The newspaper *Mail & Guardian* asks its employees with private social media accounts to have a disclaimer stating that the views expressed on the account are personal and not related to the newspaper. It states that the distinction between a journalist's private and public persona online is blurred. It asks its employees to declare on their personal social media accounts their professional ties with the newspaper. It cautions its employees to not damage the newspaper's reputation using their personal accounts ("Mail and," 2010).However, it does not explain what type of action can damage its reputation. The *Associated Press* places restrictions on its employees on "trash talking" about any person or organization on the ground that doing so reflects badly on the *Associated Press* and its employees ("Social media," 2013, p. 2). Both, the *Associated Press* ("Social media," 2013) and *Reuters* ask their employees to not post confidential matters related to their respective organization on official social media accounts ("Reporting from," 2013).*Reuters* also wants its employees to be mindful of issues of public importance, but at the same time the newswire service remains ambiguous about what comprises matters of public importance ("Reporting from," 2013). Similarly,

the *Associated Press* prohibits its employees from airing online views on contentious issues. It, however, does not explain what "contentious issues" mean ("Social media," 2013, p. 1). It also asks its employees to not publish online any information that would endanger the lives of its employees ("Social media," 2013). While the *Associated Press* strongly recommends online interaction between its audience and employees, it prohibits its employees to like or comment on official AP-branded Facebook or Google Plus chats or posts, because the organization feels it will put off the audience ("Social media," 2013). *Reuters* prohibits its journalists to coax any person to "like" their posts or to friend them on Facebook or follow them on social media. It reminds its journalists that people trust their judgment and therefore they must use common sense while posting on social media ("Reporting from," 2013).

**Political Advocacy**

The *Associated Press, Los Angeles Times* and *Reuters* prohibit employees from posting their political affiliations and their political views on social media accounts ("Social media," 2013; "Los Angeles," 2010; "Reporting from," 2013).All but three of the samples included in the study ask journalists to not indulge in political advocacy and to not support political causes. The Canadian Association of Journalists suggests that if a journalist wants to engage in politics or wants to support a political cause or a campaign, the journalist must publicly make it clear on his social media accounts to prevent conflict of interest with his media organization and to stop the public from having a perception of bias ("Ethics guidelines," 2011). The *Mail & Guardian* allows journalists

to reveal their political leanings only if they are also able to convince their audience that it does not affect their professionalism to remain objective while reporting news ("Mail and," 2010). The Indonesian Press Council does not have guidelines on journalists declaring their political leanings online ("Regulations and," 2012).

**Tweets, Retweets and Reposts**

The *Associate Press* guidelines make a clear distinction between tweets and retweets. It asks employees to ensure that their retweets do not seem like endorsements. It, however, asks them to retweet with introductory words that make it clear that the journalist retweeting it is just reporting news and not endorsing it. It further cautions that many people will not see the Twitter bio saying that retweets are not endorsements. While the *Associated Press* forbids its employees to retweet rumors, it does not spell out the difference between rumors and news ("Social media," 2013). For instance, many journalists retweeted the rumor that journalist Piers Morgan had been sacked by CNN (Ingram, 2011).

The Canadian Association of Journalists seeks to define a rumor as one that lacks proper documentation to support source reliability. Or in other words a rumor is unverified news. It asks its employees to never repost a rumor. It calls for information collection online to be "confirmed, verified and properly sourced" ("Ethics guidelines," 2011). *Reuters* sets its employees free to tweet or post about a school play or movie, but at the same time asks them to be careful about matters of public importance. It, however, does not differentiate between matters that are of public importance and those that are not. It leaves it to the discretion of the journalist to decide what

constitutes matters of public importance ("Reporting from," 2013). The *Mail & Guardian* asks journalists to mark edited retweets as partial retweets in order to ensure transparency of reporting. It also asks reporters to give credit to the original author of the retweets and reposts. It holds its journalists accountable to its exacting social media ethics standards while posting or reposting. It reminds journalists that their posts and reposts are open to being interpreted differently by the audience. It tells journalists to take a stand on issues but only within the ambit of the ethics codes of the newspaper ("Mail and," 2010).

**News Sourcing**

The *Mail & Guardian* focuses its guidelines on news sourcing on credibility issues and gathering news from sources in an ethical manner. It cautions its journalists about the presence of disinformation on the internet. It asks them to take screenshots of pages that will form the basis of news reports. It also asks them to be upfront about their professional identity by identifying themselves and their publication to their online news sources. It also calls for attributing news gathered online to sources or platforms ("Mail and," 2010). The *Associated Press* guidelines on sourcing rest on verifying source credibility. It asks its journalists to confirm the authenticity of its online source through various means, for instance, calling up the company where the source works, before gathering news from him. It urges its employees to first confirm source authenticity, including the person handling the social media accounts of such sources, and then publish information from the online accounts of such sources. While its social media guidelines

encourage journalists to interact with audience for news gathering, at the same time the *Associated Press* restricts its journalists from contacting sources on social media if they feel their sources would face danger ("Social media," 2013).The *Los Angeles Times* stresses on objectivity in news sourcing using social media. For instance, it urges its journalists to join online groups espousing both sides of the divide on an issue instead of joining just one of them to get news ("Los Angeles," 2010). However, it has no clause related to use of material having copyright.

Both the *Associate Press* ("Social media," 2013) and the *Mail & Guardian* ("Mail and," 2010) lay stress on seeking permission from those having the copyright of images and videos, among other multimedia, before publishing them. Similarly, The Canadian Association of Journalists also urges journalists to seek permission for copyrighted videos, photos and multimedia. It allows for the use of such material for the purpose of informing people as well as in public interest. It stresses on the "permanency of digital media" while asking journalists to ensure outside links used in stories be carefully vetted for credibility and news authenticity ("Ethics guidelines," 2011, p. 6). The Indonesian Press Council puts the onus on the owner of the user-generated content to give written approval that the content does not contain lies, slander, obscenity and will not discriminate on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender, language, poverty and disability. It also authorizes its journalists to edit or delete such content as they deem fit. It urges journalists to distinguish between news and advertisements by flagging stories that have been paid for to be published online ("Regulations and,"

2012).

**Privacy**

The *Mail & Guardian*t asks its journalists in maintaining a distinction between their public and private profiles. It goes so far as to caution its journalists that if their online activities hamper their professional work, the newspaper will change their area of work or may discipline its employees as well. It further cautions journalists about revealing sensitive information in bits and pieces over social media. However, it makes it clear that public interest trumps privacy ("Mail and," 2010). The *Los Angeles Times* asks its journalists to use privacy tools to decide who would view online social media content. But it does not explain under what circumstances its journalists should restrict audience from viewing their online social media accounts and its contents ("Los Angeles," 2010).The *Associated Press* advises its journalists to customize its privacy settings on social media accounts to allow a restricted audience to view and share information even as it acknowledges that it's easy to get information from restricted pages of social media accounts. However, it does not explain the kind of audience that has to be kept away from viewing the social media accounts of its journalists. Also, it allows its journalists to decide with whom they would share news on social media ("Social media," 2013). The privacy guidelines of The Canadian Association of Journalists are based on ethics framework. The association says that information people post on their social media accounts are public and can be used only after the source of such information is verified. It also asks journalists to not use unethical means to get access to online data intended to be

private ("Ethics guidelines," 2011).

**Discussion**

While social media has increased the pace of journalistic reporting, the basic guidelines of truth telling and objectivity are equally applicable to traditional as well as online journalism. An important issue coming out of the social media guidelines in the study is whether journalists should have a single social media account on various platforms for both professional and personal use? If they have a single account, for instance, on Facebook, then they will not be able to use it without organizational constraints because it's both professional as well as personal. On the other hand *Mail & Guardian* makes it clear that the distinction between personal and professional is blurred. A way out may be for journalists is to have a disclaimer on both their professional and personal accounts saying the views expressed were their own and not of their respective organizations.

While there may be many shortcomings in the social media policies of media organizations, it is imperative for such organizations to have a social media policy for their employees. The social media guidelines in the study also are not clear about situations when a journalist should comment on incidents or events on social media. A consensus is needed on whether journalists should retweet or repost adding their own comments to them or should they just retweet or repost without their comments. Also, a clear distinction should be made between journalists posting comments on stories coming out of their reporting and journalists expressing their opinions.

Though most media organizations have asked their employees to not indulge in political advocacy, theyhave left it at the discretion of their journalists to decide what constitutes political advocacy. For instance, a news report may be an opinion piece in the garb of news. Another example could be a political news story on governmental corruption having the reporter posting comments criticizing corruption in high places. Such comments would be left to the audience to interpret as criticism aimed at a particular government or a general rebuke against corruption in high places.

*Reuters* in its social media guidelines does not define what constitutes matters of public importance. The organization has left it to its journalists to decide about it, while asking them to be careful about commenting on such important issues. This is again an example of a media organization being ambiguous on defining issues, while leaving the decision about it on its journalists. Matters of public importance would vary by region, time and audience. For instance, a political story in Nigeria may be relevant to just Nigeria and not in the U.S. Therefore, a U.S. based journalist may comment on the story on social media that may result in political consequences in Nigeria, but not the U.S. Another issue coming out of social media guidelines is the security of journalists working in adverse conditions, especially those reporting from areas where democracy does not prevail. Only the *Associated Press* has cautioned its employees to not post anything on social media that would jeopardize the lives of its journalists. Other samples in the study did not address the issue of safety of journalists being endangered through social media posts. Similarly, the *Associated Press* social

media guidelines present a trade-off to journalists between source protection and source authentication. It asks journalists to not contact sources on social media if doing so would endanger the safety of sources.

Social media has speeded up reporting, especially during crises, due to user-generated content. For instance, during the Arab Spring social media was used to get news out of the region and it helped shape the political debate in the region. During the week before then Egypt president Hosni Mubarak's resignation, the number of tweets from Egypt increased from 2300 a day to 230,000 (O'Donnell, 2011). However, many samples in the present study did not have guidelines about using user generated content. User-generated content have to be vetted for their authenticity and copyright. According to Shah (1999) there are differences in media best practices across nations. However, many scholars say that it is necessary to have a universal code of ethics guiding media best practices in news gathering across the globe (Callahan, 2003). Many media-related organizations do not have social media guidelines for journalists to follow, for instance the Press Council of India. Therefore, achieving a universal social media code of ethics for media organizations across the globe will take time to evolve.

## Recommendations

The following eight recommendations should be added to the social media guidelines of media organizations.

1. Journalists must have different professional and personal accounts.

2. Journalists should have a disclaimer on their social media accounts: Views expressed on this site are personal and do not reflect those of the media organization. Retweets or reposts are not endorsements.

3. Retweeting or reposting other's tweets and posts should not be accompanied with journalist's comments.

4. Political advocacy by journalists on social media is forbidden.

5. Journalists must mark edited retweets as partial retweets.

6. Journalists should not post any information on social media that will endanger a colleague's life.

7. Journalists must take as evidence screenshots of reporting material obtained from social media accounts of people.

8. User-generated content should be used only after the user has given a signed undertaking to the media organization that the content is genuine and authentic.

**Limitations**

For this qualitative study, six samples of social media guidelines were included. This was because they were in English language, while other guidelines were not in English. There is scope for more qualitative as well as quantitative research on social media guidelines of various media organizations across the world.

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