

VETTING SOURCES IN SOCIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS: STRATEGIES  
EMPLOYED BY JOURNALISTS OF *THE PALM BEACH POST*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
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Master of Arts

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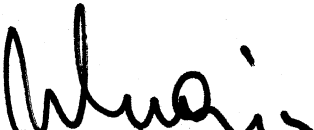
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. James Tracy, School of Communication & Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

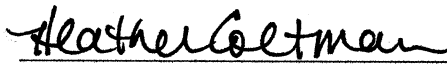
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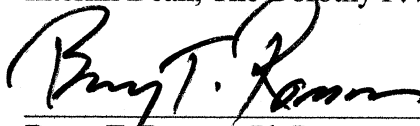
  
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I wish to acknowledge my mother, Hilda T. Brown, and my father, Mitchell Brown, for inspiring me to work toward my goals and achieve my dreams. They are wonderful examples of hard work, perseverance, and love.

## ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research study explores the relationship between reducing uncertainty and assigning source credibility in the context of social media sites (SMS) and examines the effect of uncertainty reduction within the social media environment on the development of relationships between journalists and their sources.

For this study, interviews were conducted with professional journalists to determine whether uncertainty was reduced and credibility was established with sources via SMS (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) and what theoretical strategies journalists used to reduce their uncertainty. The study also aims to determine if correlations exist between a reporter's age, beat, and/or personal adoption of SMS and the reporter's usage of SMS for source development.

The interviews were conducted with 15 journalists of *The Palm Beach Post* (West Palm Beach, Florida), using a standardized interview protocol.

Subjects were asked to voluntarily participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. Reporters were selected based upon their gender and cultural ethnicity, which was representative of the newsroom demographics of *The Palm Beach Post* at that time.

This research aims to contribute to the uncertainty reduction theory in the realm of computer-mediated communications, specifically with regard to the use of SMS in forming and maintaining journalist-source relationships.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the enduring spirit and integrity of *The Palm Beach Post* journalists who, despite the transformative changes within their industry and workplace, have maintained their vision and mission of providing information to a public that may or may not appreciate their efforts. As when I was a cub reporter, they write to the nameless, faceless persons who need to know, who should know what is happening in the world around them. They write to help, to reveal, to serve, and I am proud to know them.

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## CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At the basis of most relationships in their initial stages is the need to establish a connection with another person based on accurate and reliable information. To dispel the uncertainty regarding a stranger and to assign credibility to the stranger's persona, one uses a set of strategies set forth in Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT).

Formulated by Berger and Calabrese (1975), URT maintains that there is a human drive to reduce uncertainty to explain the world and to render it predictable (Bradac, 2001).

The strategies employed by a reporter to determine credibility and to reduce the uncertainty of a new source is at the heart of this study. Two strangers interact for the first time – one is a reporter, the other is a source for a story. The reporter has a defined motivation to establish trust with the source in order to use the source's information to complete a work-related task and maintain a professional reputation for reporting accurate news.

However, in a society where relationships are growing more dependent upon web-based tools, an increasing number of journalists are not meeting their sources face-to-face (FtF), but rather through computer-mediated platforms that are enhanced with multi-media interactivity, called social media sites (SMS). How does a journalist reduce uncertainty about a source gained via SMS, and are these strategies in alignment with the strategies set forth in URT, a theory which presupposes the strangers are meeting face-to-face?

In order to answer these questions, a comprehensive definition of URT and its axioms is required.

### **Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT)**

In constructing URT, Berger and Calabrese (1975) focus specifically on the initial phases of interaction between strangers, which they outlined as taking place in stages that determine whether communication will continue.

#### **Developmental Stages**

In what they referred to as the developmental stages of a relationship, the researchers labeled the first stage of the transaction the entry stage. During the entry stage, people greet strangers with varying degrees of protocol and politeness that they have learned through direct instruction or social modeling. Thus, the entry stage is not uniform for all individuals. During the latter phases of the entry stage, persons are expected to begin to explore each other's attitudes and opinions.

The second phase of the communication transaction is labeled the personal phase. This phase begins when the strangers engage in communication about central attitudinal issues, personal problems, and basic values. In the most informal communication situations, the personal phase does not appear until the individuals involved have interacted on repeated occasions (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

The final phase of the transaction is referred to as the exit phase. Frequently, during this phase, decisions are discussed and plans for future interaction are made.

Central to URT is the assumption that when strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction, or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction. "This assumption is consistent with

Heider's (1958) notion that man seeks to 'make sense' out of an event he perceives in his environment. By uncertainty, we mean at least two things. First, at the very beginning of a particular encounter, there are a number of alternative ways in which each interactant might behave. Thus, one task for each interactant is to attempt to predict the most likely alternative actions the other person might take. Moreover, the individual interactant must then select from his own available response alternatives those which might be most appropriate to the predicted action of the other" (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 100).

Before such selection can occur, the individual must reduce uncertainty about the other by narrowing the range of alternatives about the other's probable future behavior. This is referred to as the proactive process of creating predictions.

The second sense of uncertainty concerns the problem of retroactively explaining the other's behavior, such as asking oneself about a stranger, "I wonder what she meant by that?" Thus, uncertainty reduction involves both prediction and explanation.

Generally, the foundational researchers that Berger and Calabrese (1975) reference took the view that people strive to make their own behavior and the behavior of others predictable, and try to develop casual structures that provide explanations for their own behavior as well as the behavior of others.

URT attempts to develop predictions about and explanations for a person's own as well as others' communication behavior. Second, communication behavior is one vehicle through which such predictions and explanations themselves are formulated. Attribution theorists have been quick to point out that such predictions and explanations

generally yield imperfect knowledge of others and ourselves. “However, it is significant that such imperfect knowledge does guide our total behavior toward others” (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 101), meaning despite their flawed results, initial perceptions based on communication strategies do continually mold how and whether people form relationships.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) determined that at the beginning of the entry phase, uncertainty is relatively high and subsequently is reduced as a function of time. They set forth seven axioms, or determinations, of how strangers manage, dispel, or increase uncertainty, based on available data in face-to-face interactions.

**Axiom 1**

Given the high level of uncertainty present at the onset of the entry phase, as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty for each person in the relationship will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase. Simplified, the axiom states the more we talk, the more we tend to trust each other if the information provided is in line with predictions. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 101)

This axiom posits a reciprocal causal relationship between the amount of verbal communication and the level of uncertainty reduction; i.e., reduction in uncertainty level feeds back to determine the amount of verbal communication. When applied to journalism, a journalist may determine how much a source actually knows about a subject by conducting a conversational interview. As the conversation continues and the source reveals their level of expertise, a journalist can begin to assign a corresponding

level of credibility and relevance to the source and decide whether to build upon the initial relationship.

The level of uncertainty a person has about a stranger also can be mediated by the communication situation itself. In situations where uncertainty levels are reduced by the situation itself, conversations are likely to begin by focusing on content areas related to the situation. For example, if a reporter meets a source at a political rally, uncertainty is likely to be reduced by conversing about the rally, which is what the two people have in common.

### **Axiom 2**

As nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease in an initial interaction situation. In addition, decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

Affiliative behaviors can be labeled as total statements per minute, percent duration of eye contact, head nods per minute, positive verbal content, head and arm gestures per minute, and pleasantness of vocal expressions.

In face-to-face interactions, this axiom suggests that a person can reduce uncertainty by “reading” the other person’s gestures, facial expressions, and manner of friendliness, thus creating a cycle of acceptance that grows with prolonged exposure to one another. Within an SMS environment, affiliative expressiveness may be replaced with other ‘media rich’ computer-mediated components, as explained later in research conducted by Fichera (2009).

**Axiom 3**

High levels of uncertainty cause increases in information seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information seeking behavior decreases. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

Given the relatively high level of uncertainty existing at the onset of the entry phase, one would expect persons in the situation to interrogate each other to gain information that might be instrumental in uncertainty reduction.

**Axiom 4**

High levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. Low levels of uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

Relating this axiom to the relatively high level of uncertainty existing at the beginning of the entry phase, one might ask what is the least disruptive way of reducing uncertainty about another? Berger and Calabrese (1975) suggested a productive strategy would be to ask for and to provide biographical and demographic information during the entry phase. By providing such basic information, people can locate similarities and dissimilarities in background characteristics that might lead to the development of predictions of similarity or dissimilarity on more critical issues. Thus, not only might uncertainty be reduced, predicted similarities or differences also might determine whether the interaction-communication will continue and/or whether the discussions will become more intimate in nature.

**Axiom 5**

High levels of uncertainty produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low reciprocity rates. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

It seems reasonable to assume that the easiest way in which to reduce mutual uncertainty would be to ask for and to give the same kinds of information at the same rate of exchange. In this way, no one would be able to gain information power over the other. Researchers (Altman, Taylor & Wheeler, 1973; Cozby, 1972; Ehrlich & Greaven, 1971; Jourard, 1960; Sermat & Smyth, 1973; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969) found studies that support Axiom 5 and suggest that early in a relationship it is crucial for people to convey information evenly and at a fairly rapid rate and to disclose information that is at approximately the same intimacy level. Violation of one or more of these rules raises the probability of dissolution of the relationship.

**Axiom 6**

Similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 106)

**Axiom 7**

Increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty level produce increases in liking. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 107)

Berger and Calabrese (1975) cited evidence to demonstrate a positive relationship between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction, including studies (Festinger, 1954; Schachter, 1959) that support a positive relationship between similarity of conceptual structure and friendship formation. In their view, both types of similarity act to reduce the level of uncertainty in a relationship. They stated that as



dissimilarity between persons increases, uncertainty in terms of number of alternative explanations for behavior also increases. Similarity reduces the necessity for the generation of a large number of alternatives for explaining behavior. Stated simply, “if we like each other or think along the same lines, I don’t have to work as hard to predict your behavior.”

Similar to the view of the similarities of individuals reducing uncertainty, there is the tendency to seek out similar others to reduce uncertainty, and reduction of uncertainty by such means should tend to produce liking, i.e., “I like you because you’re similar to me.”

Taken together, Axioms 6 and 7 suggest that uncertainty level mediates between similarity and liking. Thus, an observed relationship between uncertainty level and liking may be due to similarity and/or the amount of communication that two persons have had with each other.

URT is not without its critics and detractors. Bradac (2001) determined the shortcomings of URT lie in its concrete and limited structure; it operates within a very narrow domain of application – the interaction of strangers, and therefore its axioms are confined to this domain. However, in terms of its applicability of studying the interpersonal relationship development between journalists and new sources for information, it is a positive and relevant fit.

#### Uncertainty Reduction Strategies Compared to Investigative Journalistic Methods

According to URT, people employ three forms of information-seeking strategies – active, passive, and interactive – when seeking to reduce uncertainty of unknown and unpredictable targets (Berger et. al, 1976). Passive strategies are those in which an

informant unobtrusively observes the target person; for example, in situations in which the target person reacts to or interacts with others. Active strategies involve proactive efforts to get to know the target person, without confronting the person. A common active strategy consists of asking others about the target person. Finally, interactive strategies require a direct interaction between the communication partners. One interactive strategy is direct questioning and another is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure usually elicits self-disclosure from the target partner. In this way, self-disclosure can be seen as an information-seeking strategy (Antheunis et al., 2010).

These strategies mimic investigative journalism strategies of establishing source credibility, which is done continually over the course of a reporter's training and career. During the research phase of this study, reporters interviewed would refer to these strategies as "sizing a person up," "looking for clues," or "just asking [questions]."

To gauge the reactions of individuals to a situation, reporters employ the passive strategies of watching individuals, such as documenting an audience member's response to a performer or a mother's reaction to her child's sentencing, to help inform readers of the current news. Active strategies of URT, which also are applicable to news reporting, include looking up documents and official records that either corroborate or dispute a source's information.

Finally, the interactive strategy of URT from a journalistic perspective is conducting a face-to-face (FtF) interview, in which the reporter reduces or increases uncertainty by drawing conclusions from body language, facial expressions, verbal exchanges, and environmental contextual cues.

## **The Role URT Plays in Establishing Relationships in Computer-Mediated Communications (CMC) and Social Media Site (SMS) Environments**

In studying how people sought to reduce uncertainty in computer-mediated communications (CMC), Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank (2002) stated that the theoretical perspectives of social information process theory (SIPT) and the hyper-personal perspective determined that individuals engage in strategic cognitive deliberation and communicative behavior to compensate for media limitations. They found the hyper-personal perspective, in particular, focused more explicitly on the processing of information sought and given online, and proposed that receivers engage in attributional processes to reduce uncertainty. In doing so, receivers are susceptible to making exaggerated attributions based on limited information (Ramirez et al., 2002).

The hyper-personal perspective also addresses how sender, receiver, channel, and feedback processes jointly endow CMC with the potential to produce “hyper-personal” effects or outcomes surpassing those achieved through face-to-face interaction (Ramirez et al., 2002). The inherent danger for journalists in using this perspective is the potential of assigning more credibility to online sources than what actually exists.

Similar to URT, social information process theory (SIPT) research in computer-mediated communications (CMC) examines the effects of anticipated future interaction as a motivator of information seeking online (Walther, 1994). In doing so, the research found that CMC interactants are even more sensitive to variations in anticipated longevity than FtF partners. Summarily, the SIPT and the hyper-personal perspective both assume that minimal information about partners is over-attributed and can lead to

exaggerated perceptions of online partners (Ramirez et al., 2002). As part of their research, Ramirez et al. (2002) developed a conceptual model of social information seeking to reduce uncertainty in CMC that was based on three central assumptions: information-seeking is a goal-driven activity, information-seeking is multifaceted, and CMC liberates a communicator to seek information in new and unique ways.

One of the new ways that CMC allows information seeking is the ability to extract information from the Internet. In addition to URT's three information-seeking strategies of passive, active, and interactive, Ramirez et al. (2002) introduced the extractive strategy, which is unique to CMC and new media. Extractive strategies include searches of electronic list postings, Usenet newsgroup messages, and archives, drawing upon a vast storehouse of written comments generated by people.

“These strategies represent a unique manifestation of information seeking that is unavailable in face to face communications ... Because these postings reflect statements enacted in social settings – in many cases made without the target suspecting that they would be stored for years and available for public consumption beyond the group for which they were originally intended – they may offer particularly valuable insights to information seekers, especially because the information can be collected covertly and without the target's knowledge” (Ramirez et al., 2002, p. 219-220).

The extractive strategy of URT is especially applicable to journalist-source relationship development since it allows the journalist to investigate and vet the source unobtrusively and reduce uncertainty through information gathering via Internet news sites, including SMS.

Additional research conducted by Fichera (2009) narrowed the work of Ramirez et al. (2002) by evaluating URT only within social media sites (SMS). She determined that SMS, by being media-rich environments, add another dimension of information, even more so than the standard computer-mediated environment of email and newsgroups evaluated by Ramirez et al. (2002).

Fichera's (2009) study explored whether specific-enriching cues such as multi-media tools, including blogs, pictures, and videos, on social media sites serve to reduce uncertainty and influence communicators' behavior with respect to future interaction. She found that, within Facebook, the additional multi-media tools can mimic the turn-taking roles of FtF communications and that these interactive tools allow for appropriate levels of self-disclosure, although there is a danger of exaggerated representation of self to others, as Ramirez et al. (2002) have suggested.

Fichera (2009) framed her thesis research on the technological characteristics of media richness theory, which states that communication across media differs based on the bandwidth and cue systems available to deliver a message. She found that, through the use of photographs, links, and videos, social media sites are "media rich" and can transmit to a communicator through online interaction cues similar to facial expressions, posture, style, and vocal cues, what Berger and Calabrese (1975) referred to as affiliative expressions. These cues, in turn, aid in uncertainty reduction and increase the likelihood of positive relational forecasts, resulting in a greater likelihood of anticipated future interaction (AFI), also referred to as positive outcome value (Fichera, 2009).

Strangers in a "media rich" SMS forum, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter, also employ "warranting" to reduce uncertainty. Warranting refers to the capacity to

draw a reliable connection between a presented persona online and a corporeally anchored person in the physical world (Gibbs et al., 2011; Walther et al., 2009). The warranting principle suggests that users will privilege information that is not subject to manipulation, such as information provided by third-party parties; this is supported by research on social network sites that find that third-party information has a significant impact on perceptions of the profile owner (Gibbs et al., 2011; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). The warranting principle can be identified when social media users say things such as “I looked at his network, and I recognized some people,” or when other people “like,” “share,” or “re-tweet” information posted by the SMS user, which simulates a third-party endorsement of their views.

The warranting principle also comes into play when evaluating how many ‘Friends’ a person has on Facebook, how many ‘Followers’ they have on Twitter, and/or how many ‘Connections’ they have on LinkedIn. It stands to reason that the higher the number of people, the larger the third-party endorsement and the greater the warranting at play in reducing uncertainty about a persona.

Research on interpersonal relationship development via computer-mediated communications and the use of uncertainty reduction strategies has been demonstrated in email communication, e-commerce, and social network sites (Gibbs et al., 2011). However, limited research has been conducted on communication strategies and URT in SMS as it pertains to news-gathering and source development for journalism, even though a majority of news organizations use SMS to collect, analyze, and disseminate information to audiences.

This study will attempt to narrow the theoretical and research focus even further by adjusting the lens of URT as it applies specifically to how news journalists vet, or establish, the credibility and trustworthiness of their sources within SMS environments.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The influence of social media sites (SMS) upon the traditional structure of journalism and within the print newsroom, in particular, has been the subject of a growing body of research as more communications and media academics begin to investigate the different perspectives of this phenomenon. This literature review seeks to provide a detailed sample of some of the research that has been conducted over the past four years as the impact of SMS has grown ever present in the news world.

Underlying this area of study is work conducted by Mark Deuze (2007) of Indiana University, who has mapped some of the ways in which convergence, or the melding of the cultures of production and consumption of media via the Internet, has shaped the continuum of changes within creative industries. Deuze notes that this convergence must be seen as recombinantly driven by an industry desperate for strong customer relationships, technologies that are increasingly cheap and easy to use, and a media culture that privileges an active audience (Deuze, 2007).

Deuze (2007) referred to the new, emerging roles of media producers and media consumers as a “blurring of the real or perceived boundaries between making and using media by professionals, as well as amateurs” (p. 245). This blurring has become accelerated due to the omnipresence and visibility of the online world. The upside of this convergence is the transparency



of information production, which gives users more access; however, the convergence culture has exacted a toll on the historical “gatekeeper” role of journalism. Instead of keeping the gate, journalists’ roles are better described as watching the gate, “monitoring rather than reporting news, managing rather than filtering information” (p. 247).

The convergence culture involves participatory media production and individualized media consumption, creating what Deuze (2007) called “an emerging media ecology,” where media behavior involves some level of participation, co-creation, and collaboration. SMS are a large part of the convergence culture, enabling audience members to become contributors by posting their opinions and additions to news stories, adding their amateur video to TV broadcasts, and linking their pages to online forums. According to Deuze, this environment enables people to enact some kind of agency regarding the omnipresent messages and commodities of the cultural/media industries and flattens previously held hierarchies that put journalists in control of the information.

Building from Deuze’s ground work, researchers have studied the convergence culture and its implications, including how SMS are being used and perceived by business journalists for major news outlets; how PR professionals view the impact of SMS on media relations and their interactions with reporters; the new news product being produced by journalists and citizen reporters via SMS; how this new news product is changing the labor dynamics within a newspaper newsroom; and how the global curriculum should be revised within universities to produce a more social media-adept journalist, ready to produce news within these mediated environments.

## **How Social Media Sites Are Being Used and Perceived in the Newsroom**

In late 2008, Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, and Howes (2009) surveyed journalists via telephone to determine their reliance upon social media tools to do their work. They specifically explored the use, extent of use, and perceived value of various SMS as sources contributing to agenda building. Their reasoning was “if journalists are regularly monitoring blogs and chat rooms for story ideas and information, it behooves if not compels public relations persons within each industry to carefully monitor the information placed there and perhaps engage content producers” (Lariscy et al., 2009, p. 315). The researchers were witnessing a shift in the dissemination of news information from more traditional forms of media such as newspapers and TV to eyewitness accounts of happenings via SMS such as blogs and Twitter.

The basis of their research, as it related to public relations (PR) professionals, was that “scholars have argued for the case that such SMS can be used for agenda building, as journalists look to these third-party ‘general population’ sources in writing their stories...” (Lariscy et al., 2009, p. 314). They also acknowledged that at the time of their study, very few academic studies focused on how journalists use, or do not use, SMS as a whole.

The study consisted of 200 business journalists – a majority from publications like the Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, and Business Week – who participated in structured telephone interviews. Lariscy et al. (2009) found, in part, that only 7.5% of journalists indicated that social media is ‘very important’ to their work. Of the 200 journalists, 37 (18.5%) identified a social media tool they first utilize when writing a story. Of those 37, the majority of journalists (n=22 or 59%) first sought blogs as a

source; Facebook and MySpace were the second most popular media tools as first sources of information.

Other noteworthy survey findings were as follows: A third of the journalists indicated they spend no time on SMS in their daily professional lives; the most common function of SMS for journalists was surveillance; and, in all cases, journalists did not feel SMS improved their work.

Lariscy et al. (2009) determined that journalists embrace the concept of SMS more than they practice their professional craft using it; however, they recognized that conclusion could be an adoption gap based on learning. In short, as journalists came to use SMS tools more, they eventually would find them more useful. Lariscy et al. appeared prescient in their conclusion four years ago that “while it appears that journalists are not using social media in droves yet, resulting in an agenda-building process, they do not appear opposed to it. As such, and given the responses to desire to work with practitioners using social media, it behooves public relations practitioners to begin engaging social media in preparation for the day social media may contribute to agenda-building” (Lariscy et al., 2009, p. 316).

The following year, Bajkiewicz, Kraus, and Hong (2011) conducted progressive research evaluating how newsroom changes and social media were affecting media relations from the perspective of public relations professionals. Unlike Lariscy et al. (2009), Bajkiewicz et al. took a narrow qualitative-based approach and conducted in-depth interviews with a small group of 12 PR practitioners to gain the perceptions of social media’s influence. What was evident from one study to the next was the growing

role of SMS tools amid an environment of “shrinking newsrooms and the pressure to publish online immediately” (Bajkiewicz et al., 2011, p. 329).

With regard to media relations and SMS, the Bajkiewicz et al. (2011) findings included that several PR professionals said they communicate more clearly with local and national reporters using SMS, whereas before SMS, interaction was low. Many PR professionals said SMS lets them skip traditional media relations channels, allowing them to disseminate client information unfiltered. Social media also is becoming a permanent fixture in media relations with PR professionals acknowledging that they have to use it. Placements or postings on SMS are being balanced with traditional media coverage, and PR professionals expressed that those who ignore the impact of social media on news are in for a ‘rude awakening.’

The Bajkiewicz et al. (2011) study concluded that the relationship between the journalists and the PR practitioner is being permanently altered, with SMS tools playing an increasingly more significant part in mediating and fostering communications between the two. They referred to SMS as allowing for a communication that takes on a richer dimension and that can take place on multiple levels that go beyond a press release. They encouraged PR professionals to look for online synergies with journalists, rather than attempting to form relationships. In the end, the changes speak to the devolvement of journalism’s influence as being perceived as the most credible and most accurate avenue for information. “The downward spiral of traditional news media is unraveling long-standing and mutually beneficial relationships between PR practitioners and journalists, relationships this research found as valued. However, those

relationships' long-term strategic value may no longer be as necessary" (Bajkiewicz et al., 2011, p. 331).

### **How SMS and Convergence Are Changing the News Product and Labor Process**

With the use of SMS, print journalists and citizen reporters – also referred to as sources and the audience, depending upon their actions – are producing a new collaborative news product, which is demanding an evolution in the labor dynamics of the newsroom. Since the end product is no longer a static published story, but an online beginning for a conversation among many audiences, researchers also began to look at journalism as a process, rather than a practice.

With regard to the new product begin created by journalists and their online audiences, Howe (2008) investigated changes brought about by the advent of SMS with his study on the continued use of crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is a product of the online environment and is defined as using many people to create a news story versus employing the lone talents of one reporter.

The rise of crowdsourcing, also referred to as citizen journalism, was expected to result in a sea of change in news reporting. Following the 2008 presidential elections, news managers and editors became convinced that the Internet voices that weighed in so consistently during the campaign would remain vocal and continual on other news topics. Instead of being the provider of news, the media's primary contribution was seen as being a forum in which people gathered to distribute information.

Newsrooms such as Gannett and Wired magazine re-engineered their news gathering strategies to accommodate citizen journalism, by providing Web-connected spaces and tools for volunteers to report the news as they saw it "with the ambition of

putting readers at the center” (Howe, 2008, p. 47). However, the end result yielded lessons, not success. According to the media’s business model, citizen journalists did not participate wholeheartedly in generating news. Instead, they abandoned the new platforms because the platforms did not fulfill their need to communicate on topics and in ways that they found understandable and beneficial.

Gannett adjusted its crowdsourcing model to address these needs and what was created is a collaborative, news-sharing model that still thrives today and has been replicated globally. Howe (2008) stated that “readers are content to leave the gritty aspects of reporting to journalists; they prefer to focus on content and storytelling that Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, once characterized in *The New Yorker* as being the equivalent of the contents of a church newsletter” (Howe, 2008, p. 47).

Recognizing that the popularity and growth of SMS was leading to increased citizen reporting, news outlets began offering volunteer correspondents targeted, but significant, roles to play in news reporting, rather than building open-ended forums for contributions. The new product played to the strengths of the journalist and the contributor, with the journalist taking the lead role in producing the core of the news story and overseeing the forum, and the citizen reporter-contributor lending details, photos, op-eds, and conversation-starters that allowed the story to live indefinitely. In his dissertation that studied how the two environments disseminated news together and separately following a major tragedy or disaster such as a college campus shooting, Gloviczki (2012) categorized this new relationship as being journalism-structured versus user-structured in SMS.

Following the model of melding journalists with users, but within a monitored setting, Gannett has launched interactive news forums in 80 markets that foster high levels of collaboration; each forum is overseen and operated online by a single journalist with the assignment of facilitating conversation, while also providing information (Howe, 2008). Howe's takeaway for journalists from these experiments is to adapt to changes and do so quickly.

Sue Robinson (2011), an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, delved deeper into what the new collaborative news product means to the defined labor roles of the journalist and audience within the newsroom. Rather than viewing journalism and its resulting news story as a "discrete product," she suggested in her monograph that news production is a shared, distributed action with multiple authors, complete with shifting institution-audience relationships and altered labor dynamics for everyone involved.

Robinson (2011) focused her research on the changes within one newspaper and its community of readers in Madison, Wisconsin when the observed newsroom discontinued its daily print product to concentrate on its online products. The staff and the audience had to be retrained from a print mindset to a digital work environment. Robinson conducted an ethnography, in-depth interviews, and a quasi quantitative-qualitative experiment in a natural setting over the course of one year.

The new news product that Howe (2008) investigated led a redefinition of journalism from a practice to a "process," since the newspaper industry is now viewed as facilitating an ongoing conversation online, rather than as a finite piece of news. Robinson (2011) defined this process as beginning when a reporter (or blogger or

commenter) writes an article or blogs a news tip, at which point the news story comprises not only the reporter's work, but also all the comments, blogs, and follow-up content sparked as a result of that original tidbit. Robinson explored this process from a labor perspective, "thinking about the relationships surrounding the production of news content – and especially the user-generated and participatory news interactions" (Robinson, 2011, p. 140).

The implications and conclusion of Robinson's (2008) research yielded the following:

- Journalists must conceive of their product – news generation – in a much different way, something "much more fluid." "In other words, their missions and essential routines, as well as their fundamental paradigm must be adapted for this new approach" (Robinson, 2011, p. 202). She suggested journalists try to abandon the notion of merely linking or posting in SMS so readers would go back to their newspaper's website and, instead, actively participate in SMS outside of the traditional homepage.
- Instead of viewing a news story as simply a news story, she recommended that any journalistic product itself must be a vehicle for the citizen that will fulfill people's transportive and transactional desires, adding to their knowledge while also bringing them somewhere worthwhile, relevant, and credible.
- For the audience/citizens, the process of journalism is a state in which they take in, interact, and process what they find according to a customized credibility gauge. "The information gets consumed and evaluated (and also



re-reported, re-worked, and re-published or disseminated) in consideration of its worth to that person's professional, social and civic needs" (Robinson, 2011, p. 203).

The results also led to a familiar refrain: as the newspaper industry and the traditional model of news media as gatekeepers erodes, people's reliance on the professional news media lessens and they identify other ways to capture information to construct knowledge.

Robinson (2011) concluded that "journalism as process" forces a rethinking of traditional media productivity. "Reporters must rethink the very nature of the news article for a multimodal, interactive world in which others can co-author their pieces. Citizens must develop civic skills such as a viable credibility gauge along with their willingness to 'dig deeper' and follow news links in search of information and knowledge" (Robinson, 2011, p. 204).

### **Creating the Next Generation of SMS-Adept Journalists**

The changes within the newsroom brought about by SMS news dissemination, interactivity, and convergence begged the question among journalism professors as to how to educate the next generation of journalists so they are prepared for and capable of producing news now and in the future.

At the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) in New Zealand, researchers and journalism teachers Martin Hirst and Greg Treadwell (2011) surveyed more than 100 journalism students in New Zealand to find out their use of SMS and their attitudes to its value as a tool for news work, in an effort to determine the best way to integrate

social media into the school's curriculum. They used a 10-question online survey employing Survey Monkey to gather data from April 2010 to May 2010.

One of the first questions they sought to answer was whether the prevailing notion of students as digital natives, or people who were extremely comfortable with new technology and tech savvy, is accurate. They found that while their students (average ages 19-23) at AUT were "avid consumers" of social media and participated consistently among the platforms, they were "less likely to be producers of news-like content through blogs, uploading video to YouTube or producing their own amateur news products" (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011, p. 450). This meant that adding some technical aspects of social media logistics and digital programming would need to be considered in a curriculum adjustment.

Some of the more noteworthy findings of the survey were:

- While students were comfortable with Facebook, YouTube, bookmarking sites (e.g., Reddit, Digg, de.li.ci.ous, etc.), and Bebo, most saw it as a way to remain in touch with friends and family and not as a news dissemination tool. However, Twitter was an outlier. "Far from being comfortable with Twitter, many respondents seem to retain fear or discomfort around using it ... It is similar to what is happening among journalists; some are constant tweeters and other scorn it" (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011, p. 453.)
- Even among students who regularly used Facebook, there was a distinction between Facebook "friends" and real friends, leading to questions about the credibility, trustworthiness, and adoption of Facebook-mediated sources for news reporting.

- Blogging indicated a very low level of production engagement. Some students were consistent bloggers if their topic had to do with a passion such as music or fashion, but most abandoned their blog following the conclusion of a class assignment and felt no need to blog for an audience.

In general, the researchers found that “our students are accomplished users of social networking and sharing content with their online friends and acquaintances; however, they are less engaged with producing news-like content for an audience outside their immediate peers” (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011, p. 455).

To address the need to educate journalism students for a career in which they will be expected to collaborate, manage, and communicate in a multimodal, interactive world in which news is fluid, AUT offers such an environment as part of its journalism program. The program has a partnership with an Internet-based news/commentary outlet called the Pacific Scoop that covers regional issues. The students participate in internships in which they collaborate with journalists and audience members.

Acknowledging the global, boundless nature of online news, AUT also began a collaboration with Ryerson University in Toronto and Napier University in Edinburgh in 2010 to build an international and sustainable news outlet that focus on issues of a “global city.” These are but two of many strategies and programs being investigated by AUT in order to educate a new age reporter.

Hirst and Treadwell (2011) concluded that social media must be integrated into the curriculum and inform the content of lectures, seminars, and workshops, as they recognized that the tools and techniques that empower digital storytelling now are critical skills for an SMS-enabled reporter. So for example, in one class, students are

required to source one of their online stories through the use of social media and explain briefly how they achieved this. They also concluded that social media activity and discussion should be incorporated into the learning process alongside the content of the curriculum – to engage students and to reinforce, support, and enable the learning of skills and critical engagement with SMS.

This current study seeks to add to the body of research by closely examining journalists' perception of their online sources, collaborators, and audience, and how this online audience is deemed credible, relevant, and trustworthy enough to be used for news making. It is a foregone conclusion that SMS and their usage is a permanent fixture. As new models for their use are being formulated and the next generation of reporters are being prepared to use them, the questions this study poses are: What strategies are journalists employing to vet their online resources? How are they using the strategies of uncertainty reduction to form relationships that determine what, how, and if online source material will be sought out and used? Is the success of these strategies likely to carry over into the next evolution of journalist-source relationships as the newsroom continues to change?

### CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study will analyze the perceptions, actions, and beliefs of a specific group of people as they relate to the phenomenon of social media usage within a professional environment. As such, the research design will be defined as a phenomenological, or traditional, qualitative study, with the individual journalist as the study's unit of analysis. A phenomenology is defined as a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world; that is, their "everyday life and social action" (Schram, 2003). As the phenomenologist of the study, this researcher is charged with accurately depicting from the journalist's perspective the essence, or basic structure, of what it is to form source relationships via social media (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews with journalists will be the primary method of data collection. Additionally, in order to be able to triangulate the data for a more comprehensive depiction, on-site observations of the journalists in their professional environment and document analysis of professional publications also will be employed in this study.

The specific purposes of the research will be to determine how frequently journalists use social media tools; how journalists define a credible source; how journalists perceive the characteristics of sources established via social media platforms, via face-to-face meetings, and via email; and whether their social media usage is affected by age or length of professional journalism career.

## Site and Sample Selection

The research site selected for this study was the newsroom of *The Palm Beach Post*, 2751 South Dixie Highway, West Palm Beach, Florida. The site was selected because the researcher could gain access due to the fact that she was employed previously at *The Palm Beach Post* from 1990 to 1994 as a reporter on the Business and South County Metro desks and has maintained professional and personal relationships with the editors, journalists, and management. Publisher Tim Burke granted permission to work on this study within his newsroom and with his staff on May 8, 2012.

*The Palm Beach Post* began as *The Palm Beach County*, a weekly newspaper established in 1908. In January 1916, the weekly became a daily morning publication known as *The Palm Beach Post*; it had a sister evening daily publication, called *The Palm Beach Times*. The papers, along with the Palm Beach publication, *The Palm Beach Daily News*, belonged to John Perry, who inherited the budding chain from his father, John H. Perry. (Kleinberg, 2009)

In June 1969, Cox Enterprises, Inc., based in Atlanta, purchased all three newspapers and formed Palm Beach Newspapers, Inc. Cox was founded by James M. Cox, former Ohio governor and the 1920 Democratic presidential candidate, who built a media company that today includes daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, radio and television stations, U.S. cable TV systems, local Internet media sites, Valpak, AutoTrader.com, and Mannheim Auto Auction.

In 1979, *The Palm Beach Times* was renamed *The Evening Times*, and in 1987, merged with The Post to form a single newspaper: *The Palm Beach Post* (“About Us,” n.d.).

*The Palm Beach Post*, along with its family of products, is the leading media producer in the West Palm Beach-Ft. Pierce, Florida demographic-marketing area, reaching more adults each month than any other local media source. Its family of print and digital products reach an audience of 700,400 adults each week. Combined, *The Palm Beach Post* family of web sites averages more than 33 million page views and nearly 2.5 million unique visitors each month. (The Palm Beach Post)

*The Palm Beach Post* and its staff maintain several social media personas, which include but are not limited to:

- Facebook
  - <https://www.facebook.com/palmbeachpost>
  - <https://www.facebook.com/eyeonthestorm>
- Foursquare
  - <https://foursquare.com/v/palm-beach-post/4b3d2b4ef964a520728f25e3?ref=atw>
- Twitter
  - <https://twitter.com/#!/pbpost>
  - <https://twitter.com/#!/pbpsports>
  - <https://twitter.com/#!/postonpolitics>
  - <https://twitter.com/#!/pbpostrealtime>

As of June 2012, Tami Tolley, administrative assistant to the publisher of *The Palm Beach Post*, reported that 58 reporters were employed in *The Palm Beach Post*'s main office in West Palm Beach. The gender composition is 31 males and 27 females; the racial/ethnicity composition is 26 White males, 19 White females, 1 Asian female, 2

Black males, 3 Black females, 3 Hispanic males, and 4 Hispanic females (email interview, June 7, 2012).

A sample selection of 15 interviewees, or approximately one third of the reporter population, will be asked to participate in the research study, and the selection will be chosen to most accurately reflect the gender and ethnic composition of *The Palm Beach Post's* main office newsroom (see Appendix A).

### **Interview Research Questions**

In all forms of qualitative research, part or all of the data are collected through interviews, with the main purpose of the interviews being to obtain a special kind of information designed to learn more about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative study employs the use of a structured interview protocol that is used with each research subject for consistency and accuracy of data analysis. The questions developed for this study will consist of experience and behavior questions, which determine a person's behaviors, activities, and actions; opinion and values questions, which determine a person's beliefs or opinions; knowledge questions, which determine a person's factual knowledge about a situation; and background/demographic questions, which refer to the person's demographics relevant to the study (Merriam, 2009).

The protocol (Appendix B) poses a primary research question, which is established and supported by sub-categorical questions, which are supported further by a series of directive questions. The primary research question for this study is "How are journalists assigning credibility and trustworthiness to sources they interact with and vet via social media site platforms?"

The sub-questions are as follows:



- How would you describe your adoption of/comfort level with/frequency of social media usage?
- How would you define what makes a source “good” or credible?
- What are your perceptions of sources via social media?
- What are your perceptions of sources via face-to-face meetings, email, and phone interaction?
- What are demographics of the newsroom in which you work?

Recruitment for interview participation will take place with the use of a written script explaining the study, which was emailed to potential interviewees, followed by a phone call for verbal explanation (Appendix C). Upon agreement, but prior to the first interview meeting, the subjects will be presented with the consent document for adult volunteers (Appendix D) and they will be given an appropriate amount of time to read and sign the form.

At the beginning of each interview, a verbal consent script was read, which again explains the nature and ethical usage of the participant’s voluntarily supplied answers.

### **Study Weaknesses and Limitations**

Despite all attempts to the contrary, each study is subject to weaknesses and limitations that are inherent in the study design; they should be acknowledged as a form of full disclosure. Following are the weaknesses and limitations that the researcher believes are specific to this study and will be managed or set-aside to the best of the researcher’s ability.

## **Researcher Background**

During and after earning a degree in journalism from the University of Florida in 1990, the researcher was employed as newspaper reporter with *The Gainesville Sun* (1988-1989), *The Bradenton Herald* (1990), and *The Palm Beach Post* (1990-1994). Since the researcher learned the craft of journalism prior to the advent of social media, she is predisposed to conducting interviews face-to-face. Her tools of the trade were a pad, pen, and computer; she and her contemporary reporters were held accountable with their careers through the quality and credibility of their sources. However, as a practicing public relations/media relations professional from 1998 to present day, the researcher has witnessed the change that was the idea for this study and felt concern and consternation for the current state of journalism. The study is an attempt to set aside this concern and approach the subject from an objective and research-based perspective, seeking to understand how modern-day journalists perceive the phenomena.

## **One-site Limitation**

A limitation of the study is the small sample of working journalists within the singular environment of *The Palm Beach Post*. The perceptions, actions, and beliefs of *The Palm Beach Post* reporters cannot be directly applied to reporters of other major daily newspapers, but only indirectly assumed to be applicable and representative of the industry as a whole. Specifically, each journalist interviewed was asked to speak only to his or her professional and personal experience and perceptions, as it relates to his or her usage of social media tools. As a result, the responses are individual to each interviewee.

However, correlations and relationships can be drawn from *The Palm Beach Post* reporters to the newsroom dynamics of other major daily newspapers, due to the fact that a majority of the industry continues to cope with and manage the effects of the Internet; is attempting to engage with its audiences to maintain market share and relevance; and relies upon sources to find and generate news stories. It can be inferred from these factors that other newspaper journalists at major newspapers are employing similar techniques to navigate sourcing via SMS.

Another weakness of the study is its focus on newspaper journalists, so the results are limited to major, daily newspaper reporters and do not extend to the experiences of television reporters, radio reporters, internet-based reporters and/or bloggers, or reporters who work for weeklies, monthly magazines, or trade/specialized publications.

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For ease and clarity, the results and discussion generated from the reporters' interviews have been broken down into three categories:

1. Journalists' experiences with source relationship development in SMS environments and how these experiences align with the axioms of the uncertainty reduction theory (URT);
2. Correlations that can be drawn from a journalist's experience to his or her usage of SMS for developing source relationships; and
3. Correlations that can be drawn from a journalist's experience to his or her perception of SMS sources.

How the journalists' experiences with source relationship development in SMS environments align with the axioms of the uncertainty reduction theory (URT)

In applying each of the seven axioms of URT, which attempt to organize and predict how strangers assign credibility and trustworthiness to each other, to *The Palm Beach Post* journalists' responses, their responses sometimes fell in direct alignment with the theory's constructs and, at other times, fell far outside the rules. When evaluating how they managed uncertainty with SMS sources they had never met before, the reporters' answers yielded compelling distinctions that both corroborated and clashed with Berger and Calabrese's (1975) predictions of the strategies people employ in FtF meetings.

### **Axiom 1**

Given the high level of uncertainty present at the onset of the entry phase, as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the level of uncertainty for each interactant in the relationship will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 101)

Simplified, the axiom states the more we talk, the more we tend to trust each other, if the information provided is in line with predictions.

Journalists stated repeatedly that they can determine the credibility and trustworthiness of a source by talking to them. However, a clear distinction was made between “talking” online in SMS environments and “talking” FtF, with FtF being the clear preference for reducing uncertainty. This axiom holds true in the FtF realm much more so than in the SMS realm, as journalists perceive greater authenticity with a source that they can meet or speak with and place within a physical or verbal context. As the FtF relationship continues, uncertainty decreases, and it is then that the reporter transfers his or her comfort with the source by communicating freely with the source in an SMS realm.

- JS said about his perception of SMS sources, “I need to connect with people because theoretically anybody could be anybody; anybody could be pretending to be anybody. You could log in under someone else’s Facebook account, and you could make up a name and an email, I guess, and be anybody. It’s a little extreme conspiracy theory, but it’s certainly possible.”

- LK said, “Online, unless I know them or know what they do or have seen them or met them personally, I don’t trust them, or unless they are a figure head in the wine industry.”
- AA made a distinction of a source he had used via Facebook, but only after establishing a FtF relationship: “You know Facebook would be better than email; you can have a live chat. I did that recently. I was kind of Facebook chatting with him. I was like this is kind of like the first time I’ve done this with a source ... yeah, I do know this person anyway, so it’s a little bit different ... I’ve met this person face to face and talked to him, so I guess that was a little bit different.”

### **Axiom 2**

As nonverbal affiliative expressiveness increases, uncertainty levels will decrease in an initial interaction situation. In addition, decreases in uncertainty level will cause increases in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

In cue-rich SMS environments, nonverbal affiliative expressiveness can be duplicated with pictures, posts, friends, and other indicative information about the person’s nature. While reporters use this information to form opinions, those who do not use SMS regularly express their suspicion of the information, recognizing that it may be curated and mediated information, posted to place the source in the best light, indicative of social information process theory (Ramirez et al., 2002).

JM said: “... Facebook, I think they’re putting a good face on bad business.”

WH described SMS as being a tool that “people use it to advertise themselves in a way that could be accurate and might not be accurate.”

Others reporters, such as AA and LS, who use SMS continually perceive the cues to represent real identities; as such, they do reduce AA’s and LS’ uncertainty.

- AA stated, “If I was to use a source on Facebook, I think the good thing is you see who these people really are, they are real people. I mean, of course, anyone can put up a fake page. ... It seems pretty easy to figure out if someone is real or not. So that right away, that’s a real person with photos... I think if they’re contacting you on Facebook, giving up that personal side of them, I think that it would be pretty safe to talk to the person.”
- LS attributes characteristics of engagement to sources because they are active in SMS. She said Facebook users are “enthusiastic because they’ve gone out of their way to volunteer for this ... most of the time, they’re cooperative, enthusiastic.”

### **Axiom 3**

High levels of uncertainty cause increases in information seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information seeking behavior decreases. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

In SMS, journalists default to the URT strategies of passive and extractive processing, seeking to determine if the person is who he or she says they are, which is in alignment with the Ramirez et al. (2002) findings. Reporters who have both adopted and rejected SMS usage in their personal lives still inquire “who are you?” of online sources for professional usage.

- CE said, “I’m a member of LinkedIn and Facebook basically so I can get onto those things and find out about people. And that can tell me, often they’ll have a resume history there, which can be very useful. You wouldn’t necessarily rely on it in an ironclad way in a story, but it gives you clues.”
- WH said, “And then occasionally, I’ll use Facebook on a candidate, for instance, if I want to get some background. I don’t like to use Facebook for anything I would actually take off of Facebook and put in the newspaper. Occasionally, we can use it as a cross-check.”

They also tend to make their determination based not only on the media richness of the source’s SMS persona, but also on the source’s ability to answer questions accurately and expertly – a standard applied to sources in FtF environments.

- LK sets source criteria as “if they are published, if they are a source that’s been on local or state or national program, where I think the people who are producing these programs have vetted these people, then I can use them as a source. But unless I know about their background personally, I won’t use them; (it) doesn’t matter where I find them.”
- SE’s criteria for a good source for a “serious story” included “someone with some authority about that person (who he is writing about) or that person’s field, you know. A critical authority, moral authority, some sort of objective viewpoint. That’s what works for me.”



#### **Axiom 4**

High levels of uncertainty in a relationship cause decreases in the intimacy level of communication content. Low levels of uncertainty produce high levels of intimacy. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

In SMS environments, a level of “intimacy,” or personal sharing, rarely is achieved because journalists’ uncertainty levels remain very high. Despite their different levels of personal adoption of SMS, a majority of the reporters felt there should be a finite separation between their professional and personal lives online. For some journalists, the threat of sources perceiving or seeking a greater level of intimacy from them via SMS has caused them to take down or disengage from certain SMS sites such as Facebook.

- JS said, “And my personal one, yeah, cause you know how it is, people out there, they like up people that you quote in a story, they look up personal information. I don’t want people who I’m dealing with for work to be able to look up stuff on my friends and my family and like harass them. I got into this life; they didn’t. So I don’t want them harassed.”
- EK: “In fact, I got rid of my personal Facebook because I can’t have city commissioners going on my Facebook page and seeing a picture of me mugging with my cousins at a Christmas party. It’s awkward. It’s not appropriate.”
- ES: “I don’t really like Facebook. I found myself friending people who I’m not really friends with. Like I go through my friends on Facebook, and I don’t know who half of them are because people who follow me on Twitter,

who then found me on Facebook. But I don't really want them seeing pictures of my wife and I at a wedding. ... worlds collide. ... may just kill my Facebook account honestly, but for now I still have it.”

### **Axiom 5**

High levels of uncertainty produce high rates of reciprocity. Low levels of uncertainty produce low reciprocity rates. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 103)

In the SMS environment, reciprocity of information sharing is equivalent to a reporter sharing photos, links, stories, and blogs at the same rate as the online sources share their information, keeping their Facebook, Twitter, and/or LinkedIn personas current with updated data. This reciprocity allows for each person to apply the passive and extractive strategies of distilling and gathering information based on what is featured. While some reporters such as AA and LS, both of whom use SMS frequently, express a value in reciprocity in order to lower uncertainty on the source's end, other reporters do not see the same value in sharing their information in order to facilitate online relationships. In fact, some reporters do not reciprocate at all, refusing to post any part of their lives or personas in any online environment. Correspondingly, their uncertainty of online sources and mediums remains consistently high.

- WH: “Maybe once a month, I go on Facebook ... Never used Twitter, never been on it, never seen a Twitter, a tweet. Don't care if I ever do either [Laughter.]”
- JF: Regarding LinkedIn, she said, “You know I probably need to get more linked in to that. I'm not a joiner; that's my problem, and I will

look on there to find if the person I'm writing about like has a bio or a resume ... but I won't ask them to join my network.”

### **Axioms 6 and 7**

Axiom 6. Similarities between persons reduce uncertainty, while dissimilarities produce increases in uncertainty. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 106)

Axiom 7. Increases in uncertainty level produce decreases in liking; decreases in uncertainty level produce increases in liking. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 107)

With SMS, some reporters viewed sources who use SMS as much as they do as being similar; i.e., “You use Twitter, and I use Twitter, so we are similar.” With some reporters, such as ER, LS, AA, and AR, this reduced uncertainty. Other reporters who did not use SMS or did not view SMS with the same level of trustworthiness had high levels of uncertainty with sources who did adopt SMS as a means of communication. Reporters AC, AR, SE, JF, WH, JM, and CF perceived Facebook as a “waste of time,” and therefore did not view themselves as similar to sources who communicated with them in this way.

A theme throughout the interviews was of reporters inquiring why sources would want to “link” or “friend” them when they had no personal connection or no documented similarities. As a consequence, sources were viewed as dissimilar and uncertainty remained high.

- JF: I'm shocked at the number of linked messages I get, 'please join my...' And I don't even know who you are. Where did you get my name? So I don't know why all these people want to be linked to me when I don't know who they are.”

- ER: Well, I have a LinkedIn account, and I occasionally add people, and I occasionally accept. But now that I'm back on the reporting side of things, I get a lot requests from people who to be LinkedIn to me, and I honestly don't do it unless it's someone I have actually worked with. I find it odd sometimes the people who, you know, it's supposed to be a networking tool. I don't see the value, to me, to link to someone I don't know.”

### **Correlations That Can Be Drawn from a Journalist's Experience to His or Her Usage of SMS for Developing Source Relationships**

Adoption of SMS in a journalist's personal life has a direct, positive correlation to his or her usage of SMS for professional reasons and source development. It can be inferred from the following responses that journalists who use SMS daily, and in some cases minute-to-minute, trust the SMS platforms and that trustworthy attribute is more readily transferred to SMS sources. (The researcher noted that this transfer is not wholehearted or comprehensive. Most of the journalists expressed some level of suspicion of SMS source information, but those who use SMS frequently and consistently did tend to “trust” the medium more than journalists who do not use it daily, occasionally, or not at all.)

- LS has two pages on Facebook and 3,100 followers of her professional fan page; LS posts regularly to both and views the audience as a mix of personal and professional relationships.
- LS describes Facebook sources as “cooperative, who do not have to be convinced or coerced” into divulging information for a story.

- AA views Facebook as a personal dependency, which cannot be left unattended for more than a few minutes a day. AA views his own Facebook presence as humanizing his reporter persona to readers. AA has been on Facebook since its inception and began using it as a college reporter.
- CE, WH, SE, and EK do not regularly use SMS in their personal lives; usage ranges from once a month to never. Correspondingly, they do not regularly use SMS for source development. They rely upon more traditional forms of uncertainty reduction strategies/investigative journalism techniques of FtF observation, source referral, and interviewing to lower uncertainty and gauge credibility.
- SE, in particular, has no SMS persona on any platform and a great disdain for the tools, even though SE does not use them. SE referred to Twitter as “monkey chatter.” SE, however, does use Google for background research and does understand the growing reliance and importance of SMS in the newsroom.

Responses indicated that distrust of SMS and sources via SMS have a correlation to the age and career length of the journalist. Older journalists, quantified as those 45 and older, who have a stronger recollection of non-technological journalism techniques and the strength of journalism’s previous authority as “information gatekeeper” prior to the advent of the Internet and SMS, have a greater suspicion and distrust of social media sites in general.

While acknowledging SMS’ use and usefulness in the newsroom, older journalists referred to SMS – specifically Facebook and Twitter – in derogatory terms

as self-promotional tools, showed disdain for helping Facebook succeed as a corporation/company and candidly wondered about how these tools were collecting and using the information people provided, and felt SMS were a poor investment of time.

- WH (55): Referred to Facebook as “not a great information bargain.”  
“People use it to advertise themselves in a way that could be accurate or might not be accurate.”
- SE (61): Regarding Facebook, “I suspect I’m an outlier on ... Facebook, I get it, I understand it, but I’m not really interested in what you had for breakfast this morning ... I just don’t care ... I think it’s a kind of bogus intimacy, and I’m not interested.”
- EK (56): “My problem with Facebook is that it wastes an incredible amount of time that could be used for more productive uses.” “... there are people on TV who just jaw for 20 minutes about who knows what with no consequence about whether they got anything wrong, and Twitter and Facebook are just an extension of that...”
- AC (48): Referred to Facebook as “Face-waste. I find that it’s an incredible avenue of distraction ...and so, I don’t rely on it for my reporting, and I don’t use it to find sources or put queries out.”
- JM (56): Even though JM said she would use and has used Facebook for source information when no other information was readily available, referred to the SMS as a “big time suck.” “I don’t think it’s very reliable information. First of all, I know how people I know [emphasis added] use it, and the world is wonderful. I think a lot of lies go out on Facebook.”

- JF (56): I think it's a huge waste of time, and I don't find it a dependable source of information.

Adoption of specific SMS for source relationship development appeared to have a relationship to the beat the journalist covers. Journalists who cover more socially-oriented beats such as features, art/culture, entertainment, retail, and social trends viewed sources via Facebook more favorably than reporters who covered business, education, and metro-related beats.

- ER, who covers retail businesses, described businesses that are on Facebook as more “aggressive in their marketing stance,” and views them positively for having an SMS presence.
- LS, who covers entertainment, media and pop culture, said that “since I write about pop culture, they're (audience members) on my page, they tend to be interested in some aspect of pop culture or entertainment or social issues.” LS referred to finding “good sources” via Facebook, as well as via press releases, PR services, and other journalist referrals.
- LK, who covers the wine industry as a “Swirl Girl” columnist in the Food section, has used Twitter with positive results to hold TasteLive, an interactive, global wine-tasting event. She explained, “every wine gets 15 minutes, and it's a running scroll (on Twitter). You taste the wine and then tweet what you think about the wine. Participants have said they found the comments by the Swirl Girls to be interesting, relevant and amusing.”
- The exception to this correlation was SE, who is a book editor for the Arts & Entertainment section. SE does not have a SMS profile and refuses to

participate in SMS realms. It should be noted that LK is his spouse, and she shares her personal SMS experiences with him on occasion.

Journalists who cover more business- and government-oriented beats such as city government, insurance, and industry viewed sources and information on LinkedIn, a professional networking SMS, more favorably and more trustworthy than reporters who covered more socially-oriented beats. Within LinkedIn, users share recommendations, referrals, resources and resume information to build their careers by linking them to colleagues, business partners and others they have done business with. Working like a vast, online networking function, LinkedIn allows users to mix and match with networks of people from previous jobs, schools, professional organizations and client relationships. As of March 31, 2012, LinkedIn operates the world's largest professional network on the Internet with 161 million members in more than 200 countries and territories. (LinkedIn)

AA, who covers local politics and city government, was an outlier; he views LinkedIn as “useless.” AA is an avid Facebook user.

- CE, who covers business, politics, and legislation, referred to LinkedIn as: “a way to get people’s resumes and effects. You can find timelines, and clues to ask about. So, again, the value for me is in gathering information about subjects.”
- WH, who covers city government, indicated that high-consequence stories about safety, health, and money demanded the highest credible source possible and, therefore, WH does not quote any information about any topic directly from SMS, which WH views with low credibility. “If you’re talking



about people's money, for instance or something that could affect their safety – their health and safety – that's where I'd want the top-notch, solid gold sources the most.”

- AC covers legal and commerce issues and acknowledged that she needed to learn more about LinkedIn. “I'm trying to more about LinkedIn because at first I thought it was a grown up's version of Facebook. But as I'm learning more, uh, evidently professionals do rely on LinkedIn's networks as verification and for individuals, as well as identifying individuals through groups or associations. And so I'm trying to learn more about it. I recently signed up for several LinkedIn groups pertaining to my profession, as writers, journalists, public relations, marketing, cause I'm trying to determine whether or not being more involved in LinkedIn would help me do my job or teach me more about my profession.”

The reliability and credibility of sources and/or source information via LinkedIn seem to be mitigated, or reduced, by the type of information the online persona provides – one of a businesslike nature, and therefore was deemed more objective and easily verifiable than that of Facebook or Twitter, which were viewed by journalists as more social/PR and more susceptible to manipulation.

One of the most active SMS/journalist/source dynamics was with ES' experience as a sports journalist using Twitter. Not viewed as a tool for identification, queries, or verification but as a self-sustaining realm, Twitter is “lived in 24-7” by sports journalists, who are required to ascribe to a different set of journalistic strategies

than those employed by journalists covering other beats, due to the special demands of their audience, according to ES.

In characterizing the distinctive nature of modern-day sports coverage, ES stated “sports has a reputation of being a toy department. It is by far, especially in this climate, it’s not even close ... It’s the most challenging of all the, and I’ll say that to anybody, is the most challenging of all the mediums, not because it’s the most important – because it’s not – but because it is, nobody, like I said, nobody is demanding constant information minute to minute about what’s going on with school board members. They’re just not.”

ES has the added layer of complexity and urgency to his beat because he covers the globally popular National Basketball Association franchise of the Miami Heat, which is a regular topic of discussion in national and international sports media outlets.

The immediacy and inherent fast nature of Twitter, as described by other journalists, matches the constant demand for information from sports audiences who are following their passion. No other news department can claim as passionate a reader as a sports reader. Twitter and sports have a kismet-communication destiny as the medium’s speed matches the urgent nature of the sports audience to which it appeals. According to ES, no other news feature or SMS platform match each other so well. The interview with ES uncovered another topic of possible future research – how Twitter and the sports media audiences feed each other, each driving demand for the other.

Correlations can be drawn from a journalist’s experience to their perception of SMS sources

Despite age, beat, and personal adoption of SMS, most journalists recognized a growing dependency on SMS sources, but also were consistently in agreement that FtF interaction was the best way to determine source credibility. Given a choice, conducting an interview FtF is the most highly preferred method of determining a source's worth and establishing a source relationship that would continue into the future. Phone interviews are the second most preferred method, followed by email.

A majority of the reporters said they could "size up" and "feel out" a good source FtF, referring to contextual cues, body language, source expertise, and environmental verification as keys to determining source credibility.

- LS made reference to an interview with singer/entertainer Ike Turner, which made her re-evaluate her pre-conceived opinion of him as an abuser to a "genius" after meeting with him FtF.
- AA spoke to the critical element of meeting or "having coffee" with his political sources before they would trust him – not the other way around.
- WH was most ardent in the belief that FtF interaction (interactive URT) not only was the best method of source verification but also led to better interviews and questioning. "You get a feel for their facial expressions, they show you the environment they work in. If you go to somebody's office, half the story could be what their office looks like. How would you know, how would you know certain questions if you didn't see what was inside their office, for instance? That's the disadvantage of just taking something off the computer. You're losing a lot of that texture and the questions you might come up with by being in a place."

SMS are transitioning slowly from “background only” tools – or an environment where uncertainty is reduced using passive or extractive strategies – to environments of active and interactive strategies where there is engagement for story ideas, story idea verification, source location, and ongoing or temporary source interaction, even when that interaction is not always sought out by the journalist.

- ER uses Twitter to crowdsource, describing the option of having immediate, online access to thousands of anonymous sources as “fun.”
- LK uses Twitter to gather source opinions on wine tastings and wine events in real time, but also admits the value in having a printed publication, such as the physical *Palm Beach Post*, to communicate her socially oriented news.
- AA stated as a goal to increase his Facebook reach by growing his number of friends in order to humanize his reporter persona to his readers.
- JS considers his education beat blog one of the most interactive elements of his job, one that allows him to connect with parents, teachers, and students on breaking issues.

Over the last 5 to 10 years, the most noted trend in the newsroom by the reporters has been a smaller workforce. Whether they attributed the change to economics, the Internet, or a combination of both, all of the reporters acknowledged marked change in the number of personnel, which have led some to work remotely in greater isolation and/or to develop a greater reliance on technology to source their stories. Reactions and perceived consequences of this trend varied greatly.

- LS: “I work from home a couple days a week, which is good because I’m out doing stuff for work. But I like being here too, you know. It’s ah, just the culture has changed. The culture of the newsroom has changed.”
- CE: “Well, obviously, it’s smaller from the number of people. Just the function of, just the reality of our business.”
- EK: “We’re doing everything too fast. And journalism is suffering for it. We’re doing it. We’re doing more work with fewer people, which would be bad enough, but because we’re on the internet now, instead of making sure everything gets done by the end of the day, so it gets in tomorrow’s print edition, we’re now expected to have everything done in the next 10 minutes. And accuracy and fairness and comprehensiveness have suffered mightily.”

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

“It’s unrecognizable. There is no newsroom. There is NO newsroom.”

When asked how the newsroom has changed over the past five to 10 years, *Palm Beach Post* writer ES responded with those words. During the past decade, ES has witnessed a sweeping transformation of the newsroom, which he no longer considers a physical workplace. Instead, to him, it is a maintenance area where he takes his laptop for repair and upgrades so he can remain in a virtual office, where other sports writers are his colleagues, and where his sources travel with him via Twitter and his blog.

As the news environment continues to morph, ES’ perception of the newsroom could be a prediction for future generations of reporters. A confluence of changes, accelerated by the growth and ubiquity of the Internet, has altered permanently the print media newsroom, affecting every element of news production, including the relationship between journalists and their sources. The convergence of readily accessible technology, data, and ideas has empowered the average person, who once was simply referred to as “the reader,” and endowed him or her with the authority and ability to contribute to, disseminate, and mediate the news alongside the professional journalist (Deuze, 2007).

Not only the means but also the methods by which journalists communicate with sources has changed forever. Online, immediate, media-cue rich environs supplied by SMS are supplanting FtF interactions with the use of photography, videography, blogs, and other links that create a multi-dimensional experience (Fichera, 2009). Journalists

are beginning to rely on SMS tools more heavily, in part, because time to travel and conduct such interviews is in shorter supply.

Taken as an example of nationwide changes affecting newsrooms such as *The Palm Beach Post*, a study on “The State of Health Journalism in the U.S.” found that many outlets are cutting staff and resources drastically (Schwitzer, 2009). In the same report, a survey of newspaper editors conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism found that in the past three years, 85% of large daily newspapers and more than half of smaller ones have reduced their staffs. Drops in staff ranged from 5% or more at dailies and almost 10% at network TV news stations.

At the same time, the number of stories that have to be generated to feed the printed product, blogs, and web feeds has increased. In a 2008 Kaiser Family Foundation/Association of Health Care Journalists survey 17% of respondents said the “proliferation of news platforms on the Internet has had a mostly negative impact on the quality of health reporting” (Schwitzer, 2009, p. 7)

In “The State of Health Journalism in the U.S.,” one long-time newspaper reporter who left the industry in 2008 said, “they wanted us to file online often and beat other media all the time. In many cases, I was putting stuff out there that wasn’t newsworthy, and it took time away from more important work” (Schwitzer, 2009, p. 7.)

*Palm Beach Post* reporter EK concurred with the constant – and in his opinion, counterproductive – pace that journalists are expected to maintain to remain competitive with their TV and internet-based counterparts “There’s [sic] not as many people looking at what you’re writing. You’re not taking as much time to make sure you have it right. And you’re not taking as much time to write it in the first place. And you’re under

tremendous pressure, I mean you've got people standing there saying we need this on the web right now. TV already has it up or our competition already has it up or some blogger already has it up," EK said. "And I've actually had people say, 'Just get it up there; if there's something wrong, we'll fix it later.' And that's fine, but that's very unnerving. Just that whole concept – get it online, we'll fix it later. You know, from an immediacy standpoint, OK, I get it. From an old-style journalist, it really bugs me."

But if time is an increasingly luxurious commodity, journalists are able to get some of it back by working through the Internet. The convenience and accessibility of the Internet allow journalists to work against incompatible time zones, "talk" with sources who will not return phone calls, and get answers to closed-ended questions such as "how many employees did your company lay off last year?" with relative ease (Duke, 2000).

SMS such as Twitter magnify that ease by enabling journalists to "crowd source," or collect potentially thousands of responses to an inquiry, quickly outpacing what could be done one interview at a time (Taylor, 2009). *Palm Beach Post* reporter ER corroborates on the efficiency and ease of crowdsourcing on a smaller scale and on a more localized basis. "I did stories on Steve Jobs when he first stepped down from Apple. And I actually did Twitter searches to find people who were talking about Steve Jobs and contacted them to see if they'd talk to me," ER said. "And I found a couple of people to talk to me that were local cause [sic] you can narrow down a Twitter search to just a local Twitter search. So, it's, you know, for interesting little things like that, I can localize national issues by looking for local people who are talking about the topic."

Despite these forces and their combined pressures, the journalists of this study



are still resisting the wholehearted adoption of sourcing online. The URT strategies of establishing credibility and building relationships in FtF settings (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) are not fulfilling the journalists' desire for accuracy and reliability from their sources in order to report serious news or information that could affect readers' money, health, and/or safety. URT's passive, active, interactive, and extractive strategies of information-gathering on CMC sources are not proving sufficient to overcome a majority of *The Palm Beach Post* reporters' misgivings about SMS platforms. But, as evidenced by the interviews, that too is changing.

A new guard of reporters, in their 20s and 30s who have used SMS for years, are beginning to inherit *The Palm Beach Post* newsroom, and with them comes an adoption of SMS for sourcing that is greater and an uncertainty of these online sources' credibility that is lower.

In order to create a balance between news production urgency, which is driving greater CMC sourcing, while maintaining a level of journalistic integrity when using these sources, this researcher recommends the following strategies be instituted by newsroom staff and management:

- A greater awareness of SMS sourcing trends in the newsroom needs to be developed by editors and management. When this study initially was proposed to *Palm Beach Post* publisher Tim Burke, he operated under the impression that Post reporters would use appropriate journalistic methods to properly vet and fact-check any information garnered via SMS sources, just as they would with FtF sources. His assumption of journalistic ability and skill was proven correct with a majority of reporters who participated in this

study. However, in the face of such continual change and with a younger, more SMS-adept workforce entering the newsroom, such assumptions should not be left uninvestigated. The younger and more SMS-adept the reporter, the lower his or her uncertainty of trustworthiness and credibility of SMS sources and platforms for professional usage.

- To that end, this researcher believes a training procedure should be created that applies URT strategies, traditional news gathering, and vetting techniques of the “old guard” of journalism to the SMS environments in which the “new guard” are more apt to operate and manage their professional source relationships. The training should incorporate a sharing and collaboration of the intellectual intelligence of the more established journalists with the more junior reporters, a task that will grow harder as the veterans retire and newsroom personnel continues to shrink. To address the concerns of SIPT, the hyper-personal perspective, and the influence of public relations’ agenda-builders (Ramirez et al. 2002), the training would need to assist younger journalists or those not adept at SMS with how to determine the best methods for recognizing and counteracting the “exaggerated perceptions” that can be formed of online personas; how to form FtF relationships and employ interactive and active URT strategies to reduce uncertainty of new sources; and how to verify source information using other forms of investigative techniques. More established journalists also seem to maintain a stronger “professional suspicion” of SMS or source information that is unverified, a learned mindset that has helped them

develop honed interviewing techniques, discovery methods, and intuition, which they refer to as “gut.” It is the impression of this researcher that because the size of newsroom personnel is shrinking at such a rapid and continual rate, and the newsroom in its previous vibrant, collaborative form is dissipating, the opportunity for journalists to learn from each other is reduced markedly. The learned experience of one generation of journalists should be captured and inherited by the next generation, so that a practice of integrity and verification within news reporting – irrespective of the influence of the Internet – is preserved. The training also should acknowledge and include methods to better defend against what ES referred to as the “break neck” pace of news, which, without time caveats for editing and fact checking, is cultivating a “culture of misinformation” (Farhi, 2010).

- A final conclusion drawn from this study is the consistent refrain that the time devoted to conceiving, investigating, crafting, and perfecting a news story for public consumption is a lost resource for journalists and one that cannot be recovered. Widely recognized and solemnly accepted among the interviewed reporters is the inherent value of time and how little of it they now have at their disposal. Veteran reporters CE, AC, WH, JM, SE, and EK bemoaned the lack of time available to produce a worthy news item and considered themselves lucky for having beats or earning the right as valued writers to invest days, and sometimes weeks, in their craft. The shortage of time is a result of many factors – economic pressures that have led to reduced staff, convergence pressures that have led to increased audience

demands, competitive pressures that have led to shortened production times, and technological pressures that have led to more news mediums that must be maintained. Without time, journalists simply do not have the opportunity to forge reliable source relationships, and the resulting reliance on other methods of sourcing and reporting ultimately will lead to the production of a news product that may be more mediated by unverified voices, public relations professionals, and other agenda-builders. On the other hand, however, it also may be a product more reflective of the modern news arenas, in which the public at large is welcomed and encouraged to participate in the news-building process, a practice that is redefining the essence of news.

#### **Possible Areas of Future Study**

The limitations of this study are its specificity to *the Palm Beach Post* and to the print newsroom. Possible areas of future study could investigate what uncertainty reduction strategies are employed to determine credibility of SMS sources by journalists in other media arenas, including but not limited to community newspapers, television stations, radio stations, magazines, and online publications. The study could be replicated with journalists from print newsrooms in other markets or with student journalists to determine if trends exist industry-wide or from a generational standpoint.

As the SMS environs become richer and wider, their uses will become broader and more meaningful, and their impact upon the newsroom and news production as a whole will present a number of interesting avenues for research into journalism and interpersonal communications.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Participant Information

Table A1

*Participant Information*

	<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Participant criteria pertaining to study criteria</b>
1	AA	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
2	CE	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
3	WH	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
4	EK	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
5	SE	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
6	JS	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
7	ES	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
8	AC	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
9	JM	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media as part of his/her work.
10	ER	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media tools as part of his/her work.
11	LK	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media tools as part of his/her work.
12	JK	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media tools as part of his/her work.
13	LS	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media tools as part of his/her work.
14	CF	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media tools as part of his/her work.
15	AR	<i>Palm Beach Post</i> reporter, who uses social media tools as part of his/her work.

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Protocol**

Table B1

*Interview Protocol*

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Stakeholder Group: *Palm Beach Post* Journalists

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<u>Data Category</u>	<u>Interview Questions</u>	<u>Sub Questions</u>
Experience and behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the frequency with which you use or depend upon social media tools to perform your work.</li> <li>• What drives your usage of social media tools for work?</li> <li>• How would you describe your usage of social media tools for work?</li> <li>• What words would you use to describe Facebook?</li> <li>• What words would you use to describe Twitter?</li> <li>• What words would you use to describe LinkedIn?</li> </ul>	Describe your adoption of/comfort level with/frequency of social media usage.
Experience and behavior; Opinions and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What characteristics define a “good” source?</li> <li>• How do you determine if a source has these characteristics?</li> <li>• What methods do you use to normally find such sources?</li> <li>• Under what circumstances would you use a source without these characteristics?</li> </ul>	Define what makes a source “good” or credible.

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Table B1 *continued*

Stakeholder Group: <i>Palm Beach Post</i> Journalists		
<u>Data Category</u>	<u>Interview Questions</u>	<u>Sub Questions</u>
Opinions and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you describe your usage of Facebook for work?</li> <li>• What words would you use to describe the sources you use via Facebook?</li> <li>• How often do you use Facebook for personal reasons?</li> <li>• What methods do you use to determine if Facebook sources for information are “good” sources, as you defined a “good” source earlier?</li> <li>• [Repeat questions for Twitter and LinkedIn social media applications]</li> </ul>	What are your perceptions of sources via social media?
Opinions and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you describe your usage of face-to-face meetings for work?</li> <li>• How would you compare meeting a source in person versus via social media or via email?</li> <li>• What methods do you use to determine if sources you meet in person for information are “good” sources, as you defined a “good” source earlier?</li> <li>• [Repeat questions for phone and email interactions]</li> </ul>	What are your perceptions of sources via face-to-face meetings, email and phone interaction?



Table B1 *continued*

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Stakeholder Group: *Palm Beach Post* Journalists

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<u>Data Category</u>	<u>Interview Questions</u>	<u>Sub Questions</u>
Background/ demographic information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How old are you?</li> <li>• How long have you worked for <i>The Palm Beach Post</i>?</li> <li>• How long have you been a professional journalist?</li> <li>• How long have you been a member of Facebook?</li> <li>• How long have you been a member of Twitter?</li> <li>• How long have you been a member of LinkedIn?</li> <li>- How would you describe how the newsroom has changed over the past 5-10 years, in general?</li> </ul>	Demographics of the newsroom.

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**Appendix C**  
**Verbal Consent Script**

Hello,

I'm Michelle Brown, a former *Palm Beach Post* reporter and Florida Atlantic University Master's student working on my thesis project. I am conducting a research study on how social media usage affects the relationship between journalists and their sources. The research will help me understand how journalists assign relevance and credibility to source relationships established and maintained via social media platforms and how this may affect future source relationships.

Today, you will be participating in an interview, which should take approximately 30 minutes. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, you may stop at any time. Responses will be responses will be completely anonymous and your name will not appear anywhere in the final write up. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer.

I will be using a digital recorder to transcribe the interviews. The audiotapes will be stored on the recorder until transcribed, and then they will be erased and destroyed. All tapes will be destroyed at the end of this year, when my thesis is complete. You will be able to review your interview transcript before the information is used in my report.

If you would like a copy of this letter for your records, please let me know and I will email it to you. If you have any questions regarding the research, contact Dr. James Tracy, my thesis advisor, at [jftracy@fau.edu](mailto:jftracy@fau.edu). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Florida Atlantic University Division of Research at (561) 297-0777. Thank you again for your help.

Sincerely, Michelle Brown

## Appendix D

### Adult Consent Form

#### ADULT CONSENT FORM TEMPLATE

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**1) Title of Research Study:** The impact of social media usage on journalist-source interpersonal relationships.

**2) Investigator(s):** Michelle Brown, Master's Candidate, Florida Atlantic University  
Dr. James Tracy, Thesis Chair, Associate Professor, Florida Atlantic University

**3) Purpose:** The purpose of this research study is to examine how social media usage affects the relationship between journalists and their sources. The research will investigate how journalists assign relevance and credibility to source relationships established and maintained via social media platforms, in order to establish how their usage may affect future source relationships.

**4) Procedures:** As a participant in this research project, you will be asked if you would like to voluntarily answer interview questions about the way you use social media tools, as part of your job as a print journalist.

The interviews should take about 30 minutes and will be conducted twice, over the course of two months. The interviews will be held in a meeting room at The Palm Beach Post for your convenience. Your interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. You will have an opportunity to review the transcription and talk with me, the interviewer/researcher, about any portions you feel do not properly represent your answers.

Only your initials will be used to identify you, and no other reviewer outside of the researcher will know your identification. Interviews answers will be stored on a password-protected computer and not shared with other research participants. The interview transcriptions may be used in my continued research, such as a dissertation, on this subject in the future.

On two separate occasions, I will be in the newsroom, observing how you and other members of the newsroom staff collect information, interact with sources and use the tools at your disposal to produce the daily news reports. I will not interact with you or your co-workers, but will be an observer only, taking notes and attempting to glean information on my research subject from watching how you perform your professional duties. I will be in the newsroom for one hour on each occasion.

This is a voluntary research project, and no compensation will be offered for your participation.

**5) Risks:**

The risks involved with participation in interview portion of this study are no more than you would experience in regular daily activities. It is unlikely you will experience any harm or discomfort.

Appendix D *continued*

I understand that during my observations, there is an increased opportunity for potential discomfort or decreased confidentiality on the part of the participants who are being observed. While conducting the observations, I will attempt to minimize the impact of my presence and your discomfort by not interacting with staff, not conversing with staff and selecting an unobtrusive location in the newsroom to conduct my observation.

To minimize decreased confidentiality, in my notes, reporters and their co-workers will only be identified by race and gender (a black man, a white woman, etc.) No names or other identifying information will be used in the notes, which will be transcribed in observation guides and presented as appendices in my final report.

**6) Benefits:**

We do not know if you will receive any direct benefits by taking part in this study. However, this research will contribute to a greater understanding of what values are assigned to social media personas and assist news providers in better managing this growing medium of source material.

**Initials** \_\_\_\_\_

**7) Data Collection & Storage:**

Any information collected about you will be kept confidential and secure and only the people working with the study will see your data, unless required by law. The data will be kept for three years in a password-protected computer in the investigator's office. After three years, paper copies will be destroyed by shredding and electronic data will be deleted. We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name/identity unless you give us permission.

**8) Contact Information:**

\*For questions or problems regarding your rights as a research subject, you can contact the Florida Atlantic University Division of Research at (561) 297-0777. For other questions about the study, you should call the principal investigator(s), Michelle Brown, Master's Candidate at 561-308-3382 or Dr. James Tracy, Thesis Chair, Associate Professor at 561-297-6265.

**9) Consent Statement:**

\*I have read or had read to me the preceding information describing this study. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am 18 years of age or older and freely consent to participate. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I agree \_\_\_\_ I do not agree \_\_\_\_ be audiotaped.

Signature of Subject: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of Subject: First Name \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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