

Media get training on social media reporting

 By Gregory Gondwe: @Kalipochi

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An American multimedia expert has been training with media practitioners in Malawi in social media, earning himself praise from the local media fraternity which describes the undertaking as very enlightening.

Jean Yves Chainon a graduate of Brown University, who has worked as a multimedia journalist at the World Association of Newspapers before becoming editor of their online news site Editors Weblog, conducted the trainings in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe under the sponsorship of the US Embassy's Africa Regional Services Bureau and the US Embassy in Lilongwe.

During the trainings, Chainon reminded the Malawi media that the web has not changed editorial principles of journalism.

Editorial quality remains the same

"In principle regarding editorial quality, nothing changes. A news site has the same ethical and journalistic responsibility to its readers. A journalist retains his duty to be honest, objective, and to verify published information, whichever the platform," said Chainon.

Likewise, he said if a journalist publishes a blog hosted by a news brand, the journalist carries the same journalistic responsibilities - and legal obligations even though the form and style may differ.

Chainon, who has also once worked for World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and other media houses as a media consultant, said social media reporting demands total responsibilities considering that legislation is more of a grey area concerning independent bloggers and authors.

The social media reporting expert also taught the Malawi media basic online writing tips which he said ought to be balanced with quality and speed.

The risk of mistakes

"Twitter has often proven extremely effective to break news including: the earthquakes in China, a commercial jet landing on the Hudson, Iranian protests, terrorist attacks in Mumbai," explained Chainon, who added that media and news outlets are increasingly judged based on their ability to react quickly to new bits of news - even more so because the public is informed of news events almost immediately.

He however warned that this comes with a cost as "Speed and fewer editorial checks increase the risk of mistakes."

He educated the Malawi media that it is important then, to be able to measure how 'hot' a story is.

"For example," Chainon said "a financial news release may be published instantly, even if no new information is added. Or likewise if a reporter is covering a live event on Twitter, the audience can indulge some mistakes. But it's better to slightly postpone publishing a news articles rather than publishing inaccurate information."

Updates are necessary

For very big news, he said frequent updates are often necessary, but these should always put in context the credibility and reliability of the sources and new information.

"This simple precaution would have saved quite a few newspapers from having to retract embarrassing mistakes," said Chainon.

Other juicy topics the training exposed touched on how to use Wikipedia and what he called the 'Facebook revolution'.

Chainon said it is important to remain cautious, citing an incident involving a 22 year-old Irish student who inserted fake quotes after the death of music composer Maurice Jarre, which was then used by several newspapers leading to publications like *The Guardian* publishing a correction afterwards.

He recommended that journalists are supposed to only use Wikipedia for factual information which is verifiable.

"It is certain that Wikipedia and other emerging online sources shouldn't be used as the primary sources for an article," he said.

On Facebook revolution, he pointed out that social networks has become a daily activity for more than a billion users and it has since offered both by journalists and the public new opportunities and threats.

'Virality of information'

In what he called 'Virality of information' he said the popularity of the « Send by Email » function has long been surpassed: on social networks, shared bits of news are sent to entire groups; likewise for rumours and misinformation.

Chainon said until now, few 'criminal' instances where most often attempts by media observers who are pointing fingers at cracks in the editorial process due to failure to verify online news.

He then went on to list down what he called 'guidelines for social media and blogs' concerning the use of social media journalists'.

Among such guidelines is where he advised the Malawi media never to accept as friends, sources whose contact might put in question your objectivity.

"Do not promote one's articles through friends or relatives," he said. "Be open about your identity and the organization you represent when posting on the Web."

Chainon warned the local media that 'increased use of photos and video in online journalism pose threats for the verification of their authenticity, as well as for user-generated content on Facebook, Twitter, etc.'

He stressed that editorial rules remain that journalists and their media are responsible to verify the reliability of the sources and to disclose it to readers.

Under what he called 'ethics of audience', Chainon said online publication of 'soft' news that mostly tackles issues on celebrities, people, often tempts journalists to sensationalism and this is worsened by the fact that many news start-ups and blogs have limited training and professionalism.

Audience metrics

Chainon then also warned the Malawi media on what he called the race for 'eyeballs' - or clicks.

"Audience metrics can be used as a motivational tool for journalists - the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK constantly displays on the wall of its newsroom the metrics of most read articles on its site. Other newspapers have made that information available for journalists," he explained.

Chainon pointed out that there's a line not to cross which is rewarding or compensating journalists for the number of clicks they generate.

Online journalism vs. blogging

Chainon who has also ever worked on several projects with media consulting group Revsquare in New York, including a mobile marketing venture for Scandinavian media group Stampen said "Without financial freedom, press freedom is an illusion."

He said this is also true for online journalism although distribution costs are inferior, the costs of producing quality journalism remain high.

"This is even more challenging considering online advertising CPMs remain far below print or traditional advertising CPMs," said Chainon, who has since November 2011, has been evaluating Google's online advertising.

Chainon also raised the confusing question of bloggers and journalists. He said matter of factly that bloggers aren't necessarily journalists while on the other hand journalists can be bloggers.

Organising media media activities

He said this confusion fuels an increasing difficult to categorize new media.

Malawi has just recently drafted an E-bill which has attempted to reorganise its web media activities which is however not the same with what Chainon said on the Free Flow of Information Act in his country in the US.

He said the piece of law aims to protect journalists and their confidential sources, and it was amended to exclude bloggers, amateur journalists, journalism students and part-time journalists.

"Only journalists who make most of their revenue through their activity are protected," he said.

He said it would be conceivable to have a format which would identify recent online news which has been verified by professional journalists, news produced by users and ranked according to their reliability, measured by journalists and users.

Preventing journalistic mishaps

He said this could also go along way with news that is published but has not yet been vetted and this would have prevented some journalistic mishaps.

He advised in order to have a semblance of order each publication must define its editorial guidelines as well as ethics and

guidelines of user interaction especially on how to moderate comments and user contributions.

He said this has to be followed to the letter now that readers will increasingly contribute to the 'news conversation' in for of ideas, articles, expertise, verification, comments and context.

He told the Malawi media that the role of the journalist in the online world has evolved where besides being content producers; journalists are increasingly adopting a role as editorial moderators.

He said this is the reason why traditional media are more and more calling upon local bloggers to complement their news coverage.

Online media in Malawi

For online media to succeed in Malawi, Chainon advised the practitioners to knowing their audience considering that internet penetration rate in Malawi is less than 1%.

He said Malawi media also need to realise that online news targets a narrow range of users and therefore they can make use of web metrics which enable the tracking of users' news preferences and demographics to strategically position themselves.

Malawi has countable news websites and the major ones are owned by newspaper companies, Nation Publications Limited (NPL) and Blantyre Newspapers Limited. Radio stations like Zodiak Broadcasting Station also own a website.

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