



## “Using Their Own Voice”: Learning to Tell Stories with Instagram

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### Abstract

This study, through a student evaluation survey, examined whether Instagram storytelling can successfully be implemented into journalistic reporting courses. Much of the current research on incorporating social media in the university journalism classroom focuses on the use of Twitter. However, this study aims to add to that research by exploring the uses, outcomes, and benefits of incorporating Instagram storytelling into the journalism curriculum. Overall, students reported the assignment was successful in honing their journalistic skills in photography and interviewing — two important aspects of multimedia reporting necessary in today’s job market.

### Introduction

Instagram probably conjures thoughts of overly filtered selfies or copious snapshots of plate after plate of dishes from trendy restaurants. That is exactly how Instagram’s more than 600 million members use the social media platform on a daily basis. There is obviously an attraction to the storytelling capabilities of the site—capabilities that are more and more evident to journalism organizations all over the world. The *New York Times* has more than 2 million Instagram followers, NPR nearly 800,000 followers, and Buzz-Feed 2.6 million followers. When Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger founded the photo sharing application in 2010, they did not really expect Instagram to be the multi-million dollar venture that it is today (Bruner, 2016).

According to the Instagram About Us page, the application designer, Systrom, focuses on “inspiring creativity through solving problems with thoughtful product design. As a result, Instagram has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone from

celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to teens, musicians and anyone with a creative passion” (About Us, 2017). Instagram, like Twitter, also allows for the use of hashtags, which allows users to organize, find, and track posts related to specific topics; but unlike Twitter, Instagram captions are not limited to 140 characters, which allows for longer posts. The hallmark of Instagram is obviously the photo sharing, which allows for a more visual dimension than other social media applications.

Because of the popularity of all social media in news consumption, six in ten American adults use social media for news and information (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). It is more important than ever for journalists to learn to use social media as a means of engagement with consumers and as a platform for storytelling. Professional journalists have identified social media, photography, and multimedia storytelling as three areas where they need more training (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Instagram storytelling requires all three of those skills, making all three skills

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important for journalism curriculum to tackle. The purpose of this paper is to confirm whether Instagram storytelling can successfully be implemented into reporting courses. Much of the current research on incorporating social media in the university journalism classroom focuses on the use of Twitter. This research aims to add to that research by exploring the uses, outcomes, and benefits of incorporating Instagram storytelling into curriculum. The following section will explore existing literature on the role of social media in the journalism industry, social media in the classroom, and experiential learning theory.

### Literature Review

While an ever-growing body of work on the impact social media have on the journalism and the classroom exists, literature on the specific role of Instagram in the journalism classroom is sparse. The purpose of this paper is to help fill that void.

### Social media in journalism

Saying social media are now more than ever before an important part of the journalist's toolbox is an easy claim to support. Journalists use social media in various ways including reporting the news and information gathering. In 2014, 40% of journalists reported that social media are an important part of their work in news gathering, and nearly 35% reported spending between 30 to 60 minutes every day on a social networking site gathering news and information for their work (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Journalists use a variety of social media for news gathering purposes. The most popular social media platform, as of Willnat's and Weaver's 2014 study, *The American Journalist in the Digital Age: Key Findings*, are microblogs like Twitter (53.8%) followed by blogs by other journalists (23.6%), crowd-sourcing platforms like Wikipedia (22.2%), audio-visual sites like YouTube (20.2%), professional sites like LinkedIn (10.6%), and blogs by citizens (7.1%). Journalists listed checking for breaking news (78.5%), checking on competition (73.1%), finding ideas for stories (59.8%), keeping in touch with their audience (59.7%), finding additional information (56.2%), and finding sources (54.1%) as the top six tasks they used social media for to perform in their work (*ibid*). A large majority of journalists using social media also reported that social media help to promote their work, and nearly two-thirds of the journalists reported that social media help them to better engage with their audiences.

Although journalists see social media as a major factor in their work, not all seem confident in their skills to manage social media in their day-to-day tasks. Social media and multimedia skills account for five of the top ten areas journalists would like to receive more training. Video shooting and editing was first (30.5%), followed by social media engagement (28.4). Multimedia (25.6%), web coding and design (19.4%), and photojournalism (18.7%) were also in the top ten training areas (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Interestingly enough, the study did not include data on how journalists use social media as storytelling platforms—like live-tweeting an event with Twitter or using Instagram to post photos and videos. Given journalists seek training in all of those areas, the use of social media as a storytelling platform seems to be a salient issue in most newsrooms.

Social media use by news consumers would also support the need for more information and training on using social media as a platform for storytelling. According to the Pew Research Center's *Social Media Update 2016*, nearly 68% of adults in the United States use Facebook, 28% use Instagram, and 21% use Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). In addition, 62% of adults in the United States get news on social media, 18% often, 26% sometimes, 18% hardly ever (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Facebook leads as the source of choice for most American adults with 44% of American adults getting at least some of their news from Facebook feeds. Youtube (10%), Twitter (9%), Instagram (4%), and LinkedIn (4%) followed. Instagram users who are also social media news seekers tend to be younger (58% are 18-29), non-white (57%), and female (65%). Instagram also saw a 10% increase in use as a news source from 2013 (13%) to 2016 (23%), which was second only to Facebook's 19% increase.

Despite the popularity of social media outlets among news consumers, and a large number of journalists, many journalists saw social media as potentially harmful to their credibility (Jordaan, 2013), and possibly lead the audience to question the reporter's objectivity (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Some journalists also feared that social media reporting could create situations where information is shared solely through social media with the vetting, reporting, and writing skills that are historical benchmarks of journalism taken out of the equation (Auxier, 2012). Willnat and Weaver (2014) found that nearly 60% of journalists thought journalism in the United

States was headed in the wrong direction. Journalists who participated in the study cited declining profits (20.4%), threats to profession from online media (11.4%), job cuts and downsizing (11.3%), need for a new business model (10.8%), and hasty reporting (9.9%).

### Social media in the classroom

Social media classrooms allow for student exploration of news ideas in new ways, while learning important and practical media skills, and students find material more captivating when they are allowed to actively produce rather than passively consume information (Searls, 2000). Social media usage in the classroom may also provide students with experience in the production and sharing of information quickly and clearly (Locker & Kienzler, 2012), and training in “search, filtering, and distillation skills” that allows students to better control the information they are producing. In addition, social media-based interactions can encourage rich and meaningful dialogue and critical discussions of various topics (Moody, 2010). Additionally, using social media in the classroom nurtures an increased sense of community among students working on similar social media projects because the social media interaction allows students to engage on a more personal level (Kinsky & Bruce, 2016). Students reported they were forced to think more quickly on their feet when completing social media assignments, engaging students in critical thinking (*ibid*). Along with critical thinking skills, social media use in the classroom is useful for honing students’ writing skills (Kurtz, 2009; Vázquez-Cano, 2012; Moody, 2010).

This paper aims to add a better understanding of what impact Instagram may have to the classroom because much of the current literature on social media in the classroom looks specifically at Twitter. Twitter use in and out of the classroom can be beneficial to both students and faculty (Hull & Dodd, 2017). Because of the interactive nature of Twitter, for example, both students and faculty who use Twitter in the classroom report being more actively engaged in the learning process (Bowen, 2012; Virtanen, Myllärniemi, & Wallander, 2013). Also, Twitter users reported a higher grade point average at the end of the semester than non-Twitter users (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010). Twitter, because of its easy accessibility, makes course content, instructors, and other educational resources more available to students (Van Rooyen, 2015). Hull and Dodd (2017) argued the incorporation of Twit-

ter into assignments and discussions makes learning interactive, which allows students to see knowledge “as dynamic rather than being based on the fixed materials of textbook” (p. 94). Fraustino, Briones, and Janoske (2015) found that Twitter chats, a discussion on Twitter where participants chat back and forth using a predetermined hashtag, in the classroom provided an experience that may benefit students with varying learning styles because each student has the opportunity to individually and effectively process information in their own way. Aside from reaching diverse learners, Twitter chats also provided students with the opportunity to network with students and instructors that they may otherwise never have met in person. These critical networking skills give students experience in navigating, building, and maintaining relationships in a social media environment (Fraustino *et al.*, 2015).

### Experiential learning

Many students in university classrooms may consider themselves to be expert social media users. Numbers alone tell us that more than 90% of college students use some form of social media (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). However, numbers and self-belief in social media skills do not always translate to actual professional skills (Melton & Hicks, 2011). This lack of connection between living in a digitally saturated environment and actual digital competency must be mitigated in the classroom with additional training and exposure to social media and other technologies (Toliver, 2011). Experiential learning in the classroom setting provides students with a structured space to gain “expertise using technology” and the skills necessary for the professional world (Madden, Winkler, Fraustino & Janoske, 2016, p. 203).

Experiential learning in journalism programs is standard. Whether it is students working at a university newspaper or an internship at a local broadcast news station or completing a class project, journalism students receive hands on training that applies the theories and concepts they learn in textbooks and in class. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) posits that learning is an ongoing proposition that requires re-learning, negotiating new or conflicting information, interacting with others and the environment, and constructing and reconstructing knowledge based on observations, experiences, and reflection (Kolb, 1984).

As such, students are given the space to play an active role in creating their own knowledge, which

can be a challenge for many students who may never have been given the opportunity to engage in this way previously. Students, according to ELT, will choose to process the situation in different ways (Kolb, 1984). Some students may begin work quickly without much prompting or instruction, while others may hold back to observe the environment before action. This type of learning environment allows for students with various learning styles, abilities, backgrounds, and personalities to maximize learning.

Given the literature and the gaps in the current literature with respect to Instagram use in journalism classrooms, the following research questions were posed:

RQ 1: What will students learn from using Instagram as a storytelling platform?

RQ 2: How will students react to the Instagram storytelling assignment?

RQ 3: Can Instagram successfully be integrated into journalism writing and reporting courses?

### Method

Participants for this project were undergraduate journalism students in both a reporting and an advanced reporting course at a mid-sized Southeastern U.S. university in 2016 (n=24). Both courses are upper-level writing and reporting courses in the department, which means most of the students were in their third or fourth year of the program.

### Procedure

Students were required to use Instagram as an outlet to report the public's perceptions of police and law enforcement in the city where the university is located. As a response to the Black Lives Matter Movement, the issue of police and law enforcement interactions with residents was chosen by the instructors to challenge students with the task of not only asking difficult questions, but to ask those questions of a diverse swath of sources. Diverse meant, for this assignment, race, age, ability, socioeconomic status, and gender. Each student was required to interview and photograph 12 sources for the Instagram story. Each source was interviewed using similar questions that were built around the base statement, "Tell me how you feel about police." Students were instructed to ask follow-up questions based on the sources' response to the initial question. The portraits were posted along with what we called "long form" captions of around 75-100 words that mostly consisted of direct quotes,

the sources name, age, occupation, and neighborhood. For the sake of consistency and better storytelling, all posts used the same hashtag.

After students completed the assignment, they were asked to complete an 11-question post-only survey via Qualtrics about their experiences. The survey link was distributed to students via direct email, and a post to the course Facebook page. Completion of the assignment was required for the course, but participation in the survey was completely voluntary and anonymous. Students were not offered any incentive for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach with constant comparative method to identify and establish themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in the students' responses to open ended questions in the survey. The post-only survey was completed by 27 of the 30 students enrolled in the course. The respondents tended to be female (74.07%) and upper level students, seniors (77.78%), juniors (14.81%), and sophomore (7.41%). The majority of students were journalism majors (85.19%) followed by public relations (11.11%), and non-mass communication (3.70%). Of the respondents, the majority plan to pursue careers in journalism, multimedia (33.33%), broadcast (18.52%), sports (11.11%), and radio (7.41%). Students pursuing careers in public relations (14.81%) and film (14.81%) rounded out the sample.

### Results

RQ 1: What will students learn from using Instagram as a storytelling platform?

When asked what they learned from completing the Instagram storytelling assignment, the most commonly mentioned theme in the constant comparison section of the data analysis related to interviewing people. One student reported, "I learned how to ask about sensitive subjects without being offensive," and another said, "That everyone has a voice and deserves to be heard, understood, and respected even when their opinion does not inline with yours." The second most common theme related to the difficulties they experienced when producing Instagram stories. One student reported, "It takes a lot of preparation to create an Instagram story that is presentable in 12 photos. Had I known it was this difficult to plan, I would have started a lot longer ago. It's a tough concept to grasp in such a short amount of time." Another stu-

dent wrote, “You have to be very organized when going out to interview people.”

Several students also mentioned the adjustment to being turned down by potential sources for various reasons. One student reported, “People freeze up with you ask about controversial issues like police brutality,” and another reported, “It takes about 5 asks per 1 person to get a good interview.” A number of students also mentioned improving their photography skills as the biggest takeaway from the assignment.

**Skills developed.** Students were asked what skills, if any, the Instagram story helped them to develop. Students were allowed to choose more than one answer, and the majority of students reported photography skills (53.85%), followed by interviewing (50%), thinking on my feet (42.31%), writing (19.23%), editing (15.38%), and other (3.85%), which included “writing captions.”

#### **Favorite part of Instagram storytelling**

Students overwhelmingly reported that shooting photos and talking to people as their favorite aspects of the assignment. One student said, “Getting to use my new phone for the first time on this assignment, and I liked it even more,” while another student wrote, “My favorite part was hearing the different opinions of people. Everyone is using their own voice and no one had the same response. That’s what makes the assignment so great.” Another student reported, “Interviewing people in person instead of over the phone.” Others mentioned having to step out of their comfort zone as student reporters to get the story as their favorite aspect. “I like how it made me get out of my comfort zone and ask people about subjects that can be sensitive,” one student said.

**Most helpful about use of Instagram.** Most student responses to the question about the most helpful aspect of the assignment focused on the unconventionality of the use of Instagram in journalism courses. One student said the assignment allowed her to tell stories in a different way: “It doesn’t have to be just written or on video, it can be through pictures as well.” Another student commented that telling a story in a completely mobile environment was helpful. She said, “I got the new iPhone 7 and I was able to use the portrait mode on my phone to take great pictures. Not all pictures in journalism will be taken with a professional camera, so it helps that the professors are acknowledging that.” One student reported that it was nice to learn a professional use for a social media

platform she uses often. She said, “That’s really tricky to answer because our generation is so familiar with Instagram really. I think it was helpful to learn how to use it more professionally.” Finally, many students reported photography and interviewing as the most helpful aspects of the assignment.

**RQ2:** How will students react to the Instagram storytelling assignment?

When asked to rate how beneficial the Instagram storytelling assignment was to their future careers on a 10-point scale (0 = not at all, 10 = very beneficial), the mean was 5.13 (n=23, SD = 2.89). For journalism major students specifically, the mean was 5.58, and for public relations students, the mean was 3.33. The mean score for seniors was 5.06, for juniors 5.25, and for sophomores 4.00. Similarly, students were asked to rate how beneficial the use of Instagram was in the classroom. The mean ranking for the question was 4.96 (n = 27, SD = 2.56), putting the overall perception in neutral territory. For journalism students, the mean was 5.30, and for public relations students the mean was 7. For students who reported pursuing careers in multimedia journalism, the mean was 5.67. In the qualitative open-ended portion of the survey, most students suggested that fewer photos be required in the future for this assignment, while a few students suggested that no changes be made to the assignment.

#### **Discussion**

The third question posed in this research, RQ3, asked if Instagram could successfully be integrated into journalism writing and reporting courses? The answer to that question seems to lean to the affirmative. Students learned or honed important journalism skills and techniques, and seemed to, for the most part, enjoy the learning experience. Students produced 185 Instagram posts during the fall 2016 semester, and the assignment engaged students in ways that some had not been previously engaged in the classroom. Assigning Instagram stories in the classroom forced students to actively problem solve while out in the field—they had to be creative and think critically about how to best use a visually driven social media platform to best tell a story. Our findings support the literature that students using social media in the journalism classroom are required to think quickly on their feet (Kinsky & Bruce, 2016) and to actively create their own knowledge based on their personal experiences in the field (Kolb, 1984). Some students took the assignment and ran. They created their own

processes, found new ways to tell stories, and thrived in a new social media platform. Other students struggled to get started or underestimated the time and energy that would be needed to complete the assignment. Those students generally had a more difficult time wrapping their heads around the assignment and took longer to figure out their processes.

One of the reasons for this could have been that many students took for granted their personal use of Instagram, thinking the assignment would be less difficult because they already use Instagram regularly for personal posts. However, as argued by Melton and Hicks (2011), students may overestimate their social media expertise, but classroom training and experience can provide students with much needed exposure to the use of social media in a professional setting (Madden et al., 2016; Toliver, 2011). This assignment provided that for students, who, in many cases, were using Instagram in a way that they had never used it before. From a critical thinking standpoint, the assignment is successful. A large number of students reported having to step outside of their comfort zones to produce their Instagram stories — something that is music to a college professor's ears.

Along with actively problem solving while in the field, a majority of students reported learning or honing photography and interviewing skills, something that differed from what had been found in other research. Kinsky and Bruce (2016) found students engaged in live-tweeting assignments reported learning how to write quickly and professionally in a short time and limited space. In contrast, students in this study had more time and space to create their projects, but they learned how to professionally photograph subjects and interview in a way that would yield interesting quotes and photo captions. It is similar to the difference between covering breaking news and writing and reporting feature or in-depth stories. The focus for the Instagram story assignment was on quality photos and compelling direct quotes and stories. Students also found interviewing “every day” people more difficult than the interviews with officials they were used to in other assignments. Students cited the difficulty in finding people that would talk about controversial topics with a reporter, but also getting non-official sources to open up and talk about personal experiences and feelings. While students found this to be one of the most difficult parts of the assignment, many reported that it was their favorite aspect of the assignment.

Live tweeting focuses on time (Kinsky & Bruce, 2016), Instagram storytelling focuses on sourcing. Students were not as engaged with each other as some of the literature reported; however, students were forced to engage with sources and people outside of the classroom creating increased and more meaningful engagement with public — something professional journalist report using social media for in their day-to-day work (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). In addition, Instagram storytelling forced students to apply multimedia skills to create successful stories. The assignment combined photography skills with interviewing, writing and social media, which encompasses many of the areas in which current professional journalists report needing additional training (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Learning these multimedia skills is important to journalism students because multimedia tools are increasingly being added to newsrooms at professional news organizations (Chock, Wolf, Chen, Schweisberger, & Wang, 2013), and as more and more multimedia news is produced it becomes more the norm in journalism as an industry (Boers, Ercan, Rinsdorf, & Vaagan, 2012). It is important then that students learn to think in multimedia terms, which includes both live tweeting and Instagram storytelling.

The biggest setback to this assignment was students' perception of the workload. It is possible that the polarizing thoughts on the general feelings about the assignment were influenced by the perceived workload of students. A large number of students reported that the assignment was just too big—too many sources required. In hindsight, first-time users of Instagram for the purposes of storytelling may have a difficult time finding the sources and collecting the interviews required in our assignment. However, scaling the assignment back to 5 for the first time, and adding more to subsequent assignments would provide students with a graduated learning curve that builds as students' experience and knowledge grows.

### **Limitations and Conclusions**

This research project involved students from one university, which resulted in a small sample size. Obviously this research is not generalizable to a larger population; however, the students did yield some interesting insights into the use of Instagram, an under-researched area of social media usage in the journalism classroom. The results are also based on self-reported data provided by students. Future research analyzing the content produced by students

on Instagram would add some meaningful depth to this research. Future research could also more closely examine using the multi-photo option for an Instagram post or the Instagram Story function of the application as a means for telling journalistic stories. This project looked at covering a large-scale, multi-reporter issue, but Instagram has the potential to be a platform for telling individual stories, especially those with strong photo and video components. Additional research needs to be done to better understand how to incorporate those skills into journalism curriculum.

Overall, students reported that this assignment was successful in honing their journalistic skills in photography and interviewing — two important aspects of multimedia reporting necessary in today's job market. The assignment also created a situation that forced students to creatively solve problems in the field to ensure they told compelling stories and shoot intriguing photographs. The Instagram assignment also forced students to interact with people outside of the classroom, which is important in the development of engaged and interactive journalists.

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**Appendix A**  
**Instagram Storytelling #BLM Survey**

- Q1 How would you describe your gender?  
Male (1)  
Female (2)  
Other (3) \_\_\_\_\_
- Q2 What career field are you hoping to pursue?  
Advertising (1)  
Public Relations (2)  
Broadcast Journalism (3)  
Multimedia Journalism (4)  
Marketing (5)  
Sports Journalism (6)  
Radio (7)  
Other (8) \_\_\_\_\_
- Q3 What is your major?  
Advertising (1)  
Creative Mass Media (2)  
Journalism (3)  
Public Relations (4)  
Other (5) \_\_\_\_\_
- Q4 What is your classification?  
Freshman (1)  
Sophomore (2)  
Junior (3)  
Senior (4)  
Graduate Student (5)
- Q5 What skills, if any, did your Instagram story help you to develop?  
Writing (1)  
Interviewing (2)  
Photography (3)  
Editing (4)  
Thinking on my feet (5)  
Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q6 On a scale of 0 - 10 (0 = not at all, 10 = very beneficial), how beneficial was the use of Instagram in class?

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

Q7 On a scale of 0 - 10 (0 = not at all, 10 = very beneficial), how beneficial was the Instagram assignment to your future career?

- 0 (0)
- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)
- 8 (8)
- 9 (9)
- 10 (10)

Q8 What was the most helpful aspect of our use of Instagram in the classroom?

Q9 What would you suggest we do differently with future classes (in relation to Instagram storytelling)?

Q10 What was your favorite part of the Instagram assignment?

Q11 What did you learn from the Instagram assignment?