On chat apps, journalists need to build relationships

by Valerie Belair-Gagnon & Colin Agur

Our new report, “New Frontiers for Newsgathering: A Case Study of Foreign Correspondents Use Chat Apps to Cover Political Unrest,” explores the ways that journalists at major news organizations are using mobile chat applications such as WhatsApp for newsgathering in coverage of political unrest.

On Friday November 4th, Public Radio International, the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication Minnesota Journalism Center, and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism co-hosted the launch, which included a panel discussion, featuring two of the report authors, Valerie Belair-Gagnon and Colin Agur, Angilee Shah, Digital Editor of Global Nation at Public Radio International, and Andrew Haeg, founder of GroundSource, a news startup that helps newsrooms and journalists manage conversations and relationships over SMS and chat apps.

Our discussion of the report highlighted on three key findings: how foreign correspondents we spoke to used chat apps to access multimedia content and organize newsgathering processes; the growing role of digital fixers, who help reporters embed themselves in local social networks; and the ways that protesters used chat apps to communicate with the media, using chat apps as rolling digital press conferences.

Shah, who used chat apps to cover the European refugee crisis, emphasized that “these technologies are great but at the end, they are just facilitators for building relationships.” Last year, Shah wrote a series of stories on refugees.

She initially got in touch on WhatsApp with an Iraqi refugee, Amer, trying to get to Berlin to meet his fiancé. Shah was able to communicate directly with Amer; she received images, videos, texts, and was able to geolocate Amer’s journey, which she added to her article on PRI. WhatsApp made her daily work more efficient, but
it also made her feel “immersed in [Amer’s] life” by being able to connect with him at any time and talk about his life’s challenges. Chat apps are more than a Rolodex; with these apps, reporters can build digital networks and sustain relationships with sources near and far.

Haeg added that the future of chat apps lies in automation. Amazon Echo (Alexa) is a voice-based chat app and self-driving cars are based on conversational interfaces.

In the Q&A that followed, the audience looked ahead to future changes in reporting practices and news outputs. The audience included journalists, media researchers, a cohort of Edward R. Murrow fellows visiting from more than a dozen African countries, representatives from the US State Department, journalism students, and others interested in chat apps and reporting.

The conversation centered around the ability of journalists to develop private relationship with sources on chat apps. Like digital fixers, journalists can develop new ways to develop connections (and keep those relations) with sources and their audiences, something that it may be harder to do with automation. At this point, what seems certain is that in the years to come, chat apps will play large and multifaceted roles in news production across a wide range of news organizations.

To read the report, click here.

References