

# Naming the dog on the internet : student reporters' verification tactics for non-elite newsmakers online

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## **Naming the dog on the internet: Student reporters' verification tactics for non-elite newsmakers online**

**Andrew Duffy & Jeanette Tan Rui Si (2018) Naming the Dog on the Internet,**

### **Abstract**

Digital disruption has challenged newsroom norms, and newsmakers are increasingly sought and found online. But who can reporters trust? In a post-truth, fake-news era, this paper explores how student reporters in Singapore verify the credibility of online newsmakers. The study has three areas of enquiry. Firstly, how do they utilise social media to find newsmakers? Secondly, as one benefit of the internet is that it offers access to diverse voices, how do they verify non-elite newsmakers' identities? Finally, how do they negotiate credibility online in a post-truth world? This study draws on interview data between 2010 and 2016 to observe changes over time. Findings suggest that the next generation of reporters "stalk" non-elite newsmakers on social media to verify their identity. They have a greater flexibility of what constitutes "truth" and are more accepting of truth as relative. Thus, they prefer to use multiple news sources and viewpoints. They also viewed the social aspect of social media as a marker of credibility as they preferred to access newsmakers who showed one degree of separation from their own network.

**KEYWORDS** credibility; diversity; internet; journalism; post-truth; social media; verification

There are two dogs in journalism. They meet on the internet. The first is the reporter's axiom entrenched for a generation in Poynter Institute teaching: "Did you get the name of the dog?" (Clark, 2012; Kraft, 2013). The principle is that in order to see the complete story reporters should be rigorous in the pursuit of everyone involved—even non-elite newsmakers. Set alongside this is the digital-ear problem of knowing whether it is a dog at all. In the iconic *New Yorker* cartoon, two canines sit in front of a computer and one says, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993). The internet has opened up the news to a wider variety of 'powerless' and 'popular' voices to be heard in the news (Philips, 2005); but has also raised the issue of verifying the identity of those who are not associated with authoritative organisations: "verification is the essence of journalism, but it also illustrates the difficulty of journalism" (Buttry, 2014: 16).

The question, then, is when reporters seek out dogs on the internet—in terms of non-elite newsmakers—how can they be sure that they are the dogs that they claim to be—in terms of verification and credibility? ‘Non-elite newsmakers’ refers to people interviewed for a story, those who ‘make’ the news, with no governmental or organisational role. They may be the ‘person in the street’, or the individual affected by a change in policy or a social phenomenon, rather than those in authority who are effecting the changes. To take two current buzzwords, in a post-truth world of fake news, how do journalists verify non-elite newsmakers on the internet?

Powerless, non-elite voices do not often have a credible web presence beyond social media, but they are still often sought out by reporters via the internet. This requires reporters to find new tactics to establish their credibility. This coincides with the emergence of more and varied news sources online. This is a paradigm change from a) fewer, elite voices in news, sourced through official channels, and b) traditional news reporting as fact-based ‘first draft of history’ to a) more non-elite voices sourced through social media, and b) more opinions as part of the news diet and a greater fluidity of news. It is timely, therefore, to examine how reporters negotiate this paradigm.

To do so, we interviewed student reporters in a Singapore university to see how they verify non-elite newsmakers they find online. We chose student reporters for three reasons. First, these are digital natives who have grown up immersed in online content, and as a result their attitude towards truth, fact and accuracy is likely to be different from their analogue ancestors (Tapscott, 2008). Second, literature on reporters’ verification processes has concentrated on traditional journalism (eg. Silverman, 2014). Given the decline in newspapers and the rise of digital media (Nielsen, 2015), an investigation into how student reporters negotiate credibility of online newsmakers is expedient to grasp how journalism norms may be changing. “If younger journalists have a greater sense of social media’s power, then this trend of greater use and adoption will over the course of time impact the profession” (Heravi & Harrower, 2016: 1210). The third reason is to assess the literacy student reporters develop *before* they are socialised into newsroom practices, by examining their activities at journalism school (Tylor, 2015). This may indicate some of the attitudes they will take with them into the newsroom, which may in turn alter news itself. As McNair (2005: 42) says: “they, and their audiences, will define in the end what journalism is going to be in the twenty-first century.” We chose Singapore as it has a high internet penetration and use (Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2017) so that student reporters are acclimatised to finding information online. Internet use increased over the time period from 71% of the population in 2010 to 84% in 2016 (Data.gov.sg, 2017; Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2017).

Previous studies have looked at how student journalists verify information they use in newsgathering (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016; Tylor, 2015). We take this one step further to include how they verify the people *behind* the information, and to move beyond the truth-claims of

news to the identity-claims of newsmakers. While verification of newsmakers' identities has long been a fundamental principle of journalism, this paper's goes further to examine whether a generation which has grown up immersed in the uncertainty of online identities and a variety of opinions from a multiplicity of news sources online—a fluidity of 'truths' on the internet—will be more accepting of this variability.

We interviewed 20 student reporters, half in 2010 and half in 2016, asking about their practical experience verifying the identity of the 'dog on the internet' when they looked for non-elite newsmakers online. The purpose for the time gap was to observe any shifts in verification norms as student reporters became more habituated to the use of social media for finding newsmakers. We focused on social media as, today, most journalists use it to find stories and newsmakers (Hermida, 2012; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). This directed the first research question: How do student reporters use social media to find non-elite newsmakers?

This matters because, historically, journalism has claimed to be true (Zelizer, 2004). Its credibility lies in its verification processes (Battray, 2014; Knight & Cook, 2013). While these processes can be compromised, challenged and questioned, they remain one of journalism's distinguishing characteristics, so that Kovach and Rosenstiel call journalism a "discipline of verification" (2007: 71). Further, the American Press Institute (2016) observes that news organisations with a reputation for trustworthiness earn more money and increase their audience.

### **Sourcing and verification**

Reporters do not exactly trust social media, even as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and forums are spaces they routinely access in search of stories and newsmakers. How they deal with what they discover there varies: according to Broersma and Graham (2013), they tend to take tweets at face value; on the other hand, according to Lyon (2012), reporters treat social media with caution because the verification processes developed over generations may not be effective online. Social media is also a source of non-elite newsmakers who may or may not be trustworthy. Once they have been found, therefore, the reporter must verify their identity. For this paper, the concept of verification follows Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins and Følstad's (2016: 325) definition as "skilled determination of the accuracy or validity of both the source and the content itself... there are two key elements that need to be verified: the source of a piece of content and the content itself."

High principles, but while facts may be sacred, they are rarely checked. In the UK, one study found fewer than half of news stories were verified, and that "the number of checks that the typical journalist made to confirm a story was decreasing" (Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas & Mosdell, 2008: 40). Davies (2008) also identified a wealth of unverified, PR-based stories

appearing in national newspapers. Small wonder, then, that trust in the press has been frequently described during the past decade as being in decline (Haravi & Harrower, 2016; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). One study in Germany observed journalists spend barely over 5% of their time checking facts (Machill & Beiler, 2009). Their reason? The newsmakers were considered innately reliable. Diekerhof and Bakker (2012: 7) go so far as to say that journalists “outsource the judgment of credibility to other parties” even though those people “may have a stake in the issue.”

Verifying information found online has been a regular theme in academic thought as “it is unlikely that the Internet has *not* changed news sourcing techniques, and with it the complex relationship between journalists and (elite) sources” (Lecheler & Kruike-meier, 2016: 158). There is no standard journalistic protocol for verification, but rather a collection of individual approaches (Schifferees et al., 2014; Shapiro et al, 2013; Hermida, 2013; Diekerhof & Bakker, 2012). Verification of facts depends on the reliability of newsmakers. Yet when those newsmakers are sourced from the internet, and particularly through social media rather than corporate websites, this raises further questions. Today the web of uncertainty that is social media is a trigger for story ideas and newsmakers as “journalists monitor social media for breaking news and content, they use it to find sources and eyewitnesses, and they harness its broad reach to crowdsource varied perspectives on newsworthy events” (Heravi & Harrower, 2016: 1195). Heravi and Harrower identify some routines Irish journalists perform to verify Twitter information, including checking it with real-world contacts, cross-referring it against established media, or by going direct to the source of the tweet. The frequency and number of posts, the length of time the account had existed, and links to institutional sources were all considered indicators of reliability. Their concern there was for the credibility of the information; this study looks at how the next generation of reporters ascertains (or even values) the trustworthiness of the newsmakers *behind* the information.

Routines for verifying newsmakers’ identities has also been explored (Fishman, 1980; Manning, 2001; Wardle, 2014). Godler and Reich (2017) suggest that journalism is a ‘trust-based’ rather than evidence-based practice. Since reporters rarely have time to access the original source of information, they rely on a (trusted) intermediary such as an eye-witness or an expert. Traditionally, however, sources have demonstrated reliability through association with the elite, such as being a spokesperson for an official organisation, or access to credible information (Gans, 2004; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1972). As a result, the press “reinforces conventional wisdom more often than it challenges it. Views at the margins get little coverage not because they lack validity or interest, but because they lack official sponsorship” (Schudson, 2003: 40-41). Yet the internet has opened the gates to contributions from non-elite newsmakers, giving voice to communities that the traditional media has rarely serviced (Diakopoulos, De Chaudhury & Naaman, 2012; Hermida & Thurman,

2008; Hunter, 2015; Lowrey, Brozana & Mackay, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002; Yin, 2008). These non-elite sources may be harder to authenticate, however, which suggested a second research question: How do student reporters verify non-elite newsmakers' identities to assess if they are reliable?

### **Context: Fake news and post-truth**

2016 was a tumultuous year for politics and the media, as two linked phenomena were identified: post-truth, and to a lesser degree, fake news. Each was chosen as the word of the year (Macquarie Dictionaries, 2016; Oxford Dictionaries, 2016) and each impacts on how people trust—or distrust—the news media. In a post-truth world, facts and opinions vie for influence, so understanding the fluidity of facts and their subsequent verification become imperative (boyd, 2017; Wardle, 2017). This forms the backdrop for this paper, rather than being what is examined. It is of interest here insofar as it influences the credibility of newsmakers. Post-truth is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). It contrasts with journalistic values based in fact, trust and reality. Scholars suggest that the current post-truth era is an evolution of media manipulation for profit and ideology (boyd, 2017), and may be connected to partisan media which works hard to discredit media outlets and politicians from opposing viewpoints so that all media finds fault with other media (Soon & Tan, 2017).

Responsibility for countering both fake news and post-truth lies with the media which stands to lose most if it is discredited; and with the distribution platforms—most notably Facebook—which propagate them. Some media organisations have taken a step in the right direction with fact-checking and blocking fake news sites from advertising. Journalists were also swift to highlight the role social media giants and advertising companies play in propagating fake news by personalising and selecting posts that pander to the individual's interests, thus acting as echo chambers by reinforcing people's biases (Alba, 2016; Tufekci, 2016). The changeable nature of verification led to a third, broader, research question: How do student reporters negotiate credibility online in a post-truth world?

### **Methods**

This study is based on face-to-face interviews with 10 journalism students in March 2010, and 10 between February and May in 2016. All were final-year students at the researchers' university, which teaches the only journalism degree course in Singapore. Seventeen women and three men were interviewed, reflecting the dominance of women on the course. They were all selected based on their practical experience in print journalism; all had worked at news wires such as Reuters and AFP for a six-month internship; or for national newspapers; and/or were undertaking

nine-month, long-form journalism projects. Interviews took place in the researcher's office and had Institutional Review Board approval.

Interviews were semi-structured around three clusters of questions about credibility and journalism, so that results would be comparable but with the opportunity for new ideas to emerge. Each cluster was related to a research question. So, to answer **RQ1**, how they use social media to find non-elite newsmakers, and **RQ2**, how do they verify non-elite newsmakers' identities to assess if they are reliable, respondents were asked about their practice of writing journalism, which included how they used the internet as a research tool, particularly social media; and how they verified the credibility of newsmakers found online. To answer **RQ3**, how they negotiate credibility online in a post-truth world, respondents were asked about their own journalism consumption, identifying whether they preferred to access many or few sources, and what they valued in those sources—such as immediacy, credibility, completeness; and broader questions on journalism and digital media in society, such as which sources they trusted, how technology has changed news, and which traits they value in a reporter. Questions on trust and credibility were based on Tapscott (2009), while those about use of social media for news-reporting research were based on Lim (2008). The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. They followed Babbie's description of "a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent" (2011: 340). The interviews were analysed by two researchers, looking for attitudes towards and practice of the use of social media in newsgathering. Each interview was coded for answers corresponding to the three research questions (Charmaz, 2006); and each of these three clusters of answers were interpreted looking for themes and change over time (Tracy, 2003).

## **Results**

**RQ1** How do student reporters use social media to find non-elite newsmakers? *Student reporters prefer 'one degree of separation' when finding newsmakers through social media, which signifies credibility; they use social media to build their own credibility with newsmakers; they look to social media for ideas but not for facts; they check any quotes they find online by interviewing the newsmaker; there was a shift between 2010 and 2016 to accepting less authoritative sources.*

Respondents rely on social capital accrued over years on the internet to find or verify a newsmaker, using 'one degree of separation'. They locate the newsmakers first through the recommendation of an acquaintance, who they trust, but do not go with a friend of a friend of a friend: "One degree of separation is fine, two degrees is too difficult" (Student Reporter 20, 2016). If they already have a newsmaker in mind who they were trying to contact, they use Facebook to check if they had someone in common who could introduce them:

Usually I'll try and go for a mutual friend, because Facebook does tell you 'This person has how many mutual friends with you,' so the more the number, the more secure I will feel, because, kind of, linked us, in a kind of way, even though it's very superficial (SR13, 2016)

This idea of one degree of separation only emerged among the 2016 cohort. In 2010, using Facebook to look for newsmakers was associated with people younger than them, and was distrusted: "I heard quite a lot of people doing that before, like juniors, who have to do their trend stories will post this kind of messages online, but the problem is you don't know if the people replying you are the ones you are really looking for" (SR1, 2010).

An alternative was to turn to social media to give a 'shout-out' to ask if anyone could introduce them to a person that fit the description of what they were looking for. Two respondents criticised this as 'lazy' journalism that was 'too easy', while others found it was successful: I've used Facebook and Twitter to request for contact information for people who fit into a certain criteria ... I just post and hope someone responds to it ... It occasionally works (SR14, 2016)

Once again, this relies on first their own social network and second on one degree of separation, when a friend shares their post on their network. While extending journalism's reach, this still relies on connection to foster trust. It gave a voice, therefore, to newsmakers who were connected to their own social circle, albeit indirectly. Rather than opening the doors to all varieties of newsmaker, the student reporters seek a form of reassurance through social connectivity, credibility-by-association with existing social networks. Relying on social media for professional contacts can also backfire, and one mournfully said, "I got funny responses from my friends who gave me weird suggestions. It was useless" (SR4, 2010).

One respondent uses Facebook to build her own social capital with newsmakers who are not close in her network, equating commenting on their posts to buying them a coffee. Another said that sharing her life with new newsmakers beyond her social network, by friending them on Facebook, makes them more open to her which led to trust:

After I added them on Facebook they were slightly more willing to talk about things ... the fact that I added them means I'm opening them to be involved in my life ... I am not just, like, I just want to talk to you and then get you out of the way (SR5, 2010)

Even so, several felt awkward about blurring the lines between personal and professional, so that they move away from social media: "Facebook is your personal life, so I'm OK with people



contacting me on Facebook, but definitely at some point during that contact there must be a professional point, so it must move to email, it cannot always be Facebook” (SR11, 2016).

At the same time, despite using social media to find information, newsmakers and ideas, respondents are reluctant to quote or cite material off it because it is seen as opinion rather than fact. Their relationship with online opinions is varied. Some see them as a source of story ideas, which show which way public opinion is going: “there’s this flood of information and it’s all there. I think it makes it easier to know what the average reader, what’s his opinion on this sort of thing” (16, 2016). Yet this kind of research demanded common sense, or a pinch of salt: “There’s a double-edged sword. You can see what the people are feeling on the ground ... but on the other hand, you expect to judge for yourself whether what they’re saying is true or false” (SR9, 2010). Verification is thus internalised.

Respondents extend a requirement for verification to reporters in the mainstream media, and criticise them for the ‘lazy’ practice of quoting newsmakers from Facebook, Twitter or forums, direct and un-mediated, because usernames or ‘handles’ rendered these newsmakers untrustworthy: “There’s this anonymity thing that we don’t know whether to trust” (SR18, 2016), and “I appreciate when news stories quote netizens’ comments or tweets from social media, but a lot of times, they just use the username, it’s very hard to confirm who they are and what their interest in the issue is. So, it diminishes the credibility of the story” (SR17, 2016). Another pointed out that the younger generation are more critical of the uncertainty surrounding online identity than are the older reporters in the newsrooms:

I find it interesting when articles quote Facebook comments. Because I just can’t wrap my head around ‘Why would you quote a random person that might not even be using their real account?’ Because usually when they quote those comments, they don’t say this person’s name, but they say, this person who goes by the handle, whatever, they realise that it can be an alias for something ... Would I take it seriously? Not so much (SR12, 2016).

If they find useful but anonymous quotes on the Internet, one respondent said that he would contact the person to ask permission to use that quote, and also find their names and ages, applying traditional journalistic standards to reporting a social media source:

I feel that there’s a need to confirm it, so you go back to the source and ask, ‘Can I take it?’ ... The first step is to Google, and then from there you’ll be linked up. Sometimes these people don’t have a website, but you’ll be linked up through their social media accounts,

LinkedIn is one way, Facebook, Twitter, and from there you look at their postings” (SR15, 2016).

Finally, among the 2010 cohort, a connection with authority is a consistent market of value—that is, someone else had validated a newsmaker. People are trusted if they have already appeared often in newspapers: “usually for the sources, I’d go for those that have been published before ... because they just seem more credible since they will go through some rounds of editing and fact checking, hopefully” (3, 2010) and “it’s more reliable, it has been printed” (SR5, 2010). Only one talked about interviewing everyday people, and those contacts were passed to her by authorities’ PR agencies because “at least through the PR I know this person’s real name ... but in forums, chat rooms, I don’t know if what he says is true, and usually in chat rooms, people don’t reveal their personal stuff, and make up their own other details of who they are” (SR10, 2010). Six years on, that has changed and alternative voices are sought out, and there has been a shift from authoritative to social: “Sometimes I’ll look at things on social media more than the authoritative websites ... I think we are more influenced, in a certain sense, influenced by other people’s opinions, other people sharing” (11, 2016).

**RQ2** How do student reporters verify non-elite newsmakers’ identities to assess if they are reliable? *Student reporters turn to the internet instinctively while acknowledging its limitations; they stalk newsmakers to cross-check their identities; and they prefer face-to-face interviews.*

The internet has become the go-to place for student reporters: “If you take away the internet today, I don’t think I’d know what to do” (SR5, 2010). That much did not change over the time-scale studied. What did change, however, is that in 2010 the student reporters primarily showed an awareness of the risks and a subsequent cautious attitude, but were not clear on how to counter it. When finding newsmakers online—and verifying the identity of the dog—they acknowledged that it was not reliable: “if I’m going to the internet, I’ll have to put aside my, the problem with about, reliability and, also about the person might not be so willing to give me their name ... I don’t really trust the internet” (SR1, 2010). Here the uncertainty is clear from what the student journalist says, as well as from the fractured syntax of how she says it.

By 2016, however, they had established tactics to deal with the uncertainty. A respondent resists taking information, unchecked, from Facebook or Twitter because it’s not verified and the writer is not identifiable: “we understand that Twitter handles might not reflect who the real person is ... so there’s this anonymity thing that we don’t know whether to trust” (18, 2016). One means to validate a non-elite newsmaker is to assess their online footprint to see if they are consistent: “I Google names of newsmakers to see what they are doing, or whatever, see what I can find basically.

And sometimes their names come up on LinkedIn, and I just click on it, and I see what they've been working as, so there's kind of useful information too" (SR12, 2016). Another judges people based on "the following, whether they have a good following of people or the quality of people they follow sometimes, on their LinkedIn profile" (SR15, 2016).

Consistency is thus associated with reliability. To cross-check online identities, several respondents referred to 'stalking' a newsmaker: "I guess when we do our stalking, we'll actually do our cross-checking, so if we can find the person on more than two platforms" (SR13, 2016). They also run checks against other online sources: "For example, we'll look up this person, he studied in this place before, so we'll check that website whether it's the same thing, or he has a wife and two children, and we'll check the news reports to see whether that is true. Then we'll contact the person" (SR18, 2016). Equally, however, a limited web footprint need not indicate a fraudulent identity; it might be someone older who does not have much online experience: "The more informative their website is, the more credible I will think they are. But at the same time, I have to consider the type of source, so if it's usually Chinese businessmen, they're not very strong on web presence, so that's fine" (SR17, 2016).

At the same time, respondents recognise that stalking was a strange thing to do: "It's slightly weird to say this, but you stalk the person to verify their credibility" (SR19, 2016), and "social media is weird, it's creepy, it's stalker-ish on so many levels" (SR14, 2016). Yet one also said that stalking is considered good practice, even if it was socially awkward—and that newsrooms expect *them* to also have an open, stalkable online presence:

I think if we don't know, and it's all there, then I feel that perhaps we're not doing our due diligence to find out what's already there ... In the past, in newspapers, you just have your byline there, people may know how you look like but they don't know anything about your life. But right now, there's also the pressure to have a proper profile on your Facebook, on your Twitter (SR13, 2016).

After gathering sufficient information about their newsmaker online, all respondents said they prefer to move verification offline: "I always try to meet face-to-face ... You get more out of it when you can see them and know there are things you can note, how they behave" (SR16, 2016). The internet and social media are useful mostly as a means to locate a newsmaker and gather background information for an in-person interview. This is seen as the last word in verification: to meet in person. Equally, however, these student reporters who have grown up using the internet are inclined to trust it rather than challenge it, based on its familiarity:

I'm quite accepting of the people that I find online. I think we live in an era where we are comfortable with ourselves online. So generally if you have a photo and a name, and probably some other links to some other places that have the same personal data, I usually won't doubt it. I do a Facebook search of everybody I find, just to make sure they are who they seem in a personal sense, and if that makes sense to me, I usually accept it. (SR20, 2016)

**RQ3** How do student reporters negotiate credibility online in a post-truth world?

*Respondents value and maintain flexibility of fact and opinion, while seeing its limitations; they recognise echo-chamber 'news bubbles' and try to open themselves to a variety of sources and news; to them, credibility may be less important in a time of multiple truths.*

The essence of post-truth is the relativity of facts and opinions. Demonstrating the influence of such a perspective in their own daily diet of news stories the respondents seek alternative viewpoints alongside mainstream reports, rather than accepting any one viewpoint. This does not equate to opening the gates to non-elite sources; but rather to increase the aperture for varied news sources: "I don't really want to be exposed to the same perspective all the time, so sometimes I try to 'like' different pages ... some weird alternative media in Singapore ... But yeah, I just try to expose myself to different things" (SR12, 2016). Further, many respondents are aware of the bias that could happen due to Facebook's algorithm shaping the content on their newsfeed based on what they have read previously. This is different from earlier findings that student reporters did not consider the bias that came with Google's algorithm (Tylor, 2015). Thus, some make active efforts to thwart it: "I'm trying to game the system to get it to give me more interesting stuff again ... Facebook already controls the flow, but what I'm doing is trying to fight against the flow, I'm trying say it's OK, give me something else" (SR14, 2016).

One feature of post-truth is a greater acceptance of multiple 'truths' or viewpoints:

I look for competing sources, I look for alternative media, blogs that are on the undercurrent, that have not seen any other purpose, that specific people, influencers, celebrities, normal people on the street, and try to form an informed opinion ... That does take a lot of time, but I feel that that's the only way you can get informed opinion. I don't trust anybody (SR20, 2016)

Here, there was an observable difference from the 2010 cohort of interviewees and those from 2016. The former were less likely to turn to multiple news sources (50%) than the latter (100%). So one 2010 respondent said: "I would just go for one source. Because I think, for those,

facts are almost the same” (7, 2010). When they turned to many news sources, they named three or four. By contrast, the 2016 cohort named multiple news sources as standard: “I follow a lot, it’s really crazy. Like, I think at least 20. So, wires and newspapers, the typical, like the *Guardian*, *New York Times* ... and then *Straits Times*, *Today*, Channel News Asia” (SR12, 2016). Others rely on aggregators such as Flipboard for a round-up of many news sources. The intention is not necessarily to confirm facts, but to get a bigger picture: “multiple news sources are not really to verify the facts, because you trust the journalists themselves to be truthful, but it’s to get a more complete picture of what’s happening right now” (SR19, 2016).

This does not equate to a rejection of traditional news, and all respondents are clear that legacy news organisations and government statistics were the most credible sources first for their news consumption and second for their journalistic output. At the same time, they all asserted the importance of incorporating an alternative perspective into the mainstream viewpoint. Yet this also changed over time. While the 10 interviewed in 2010 had a greater proclivity to be more trusting of elite sources, the 10 interviewed in 2016 expressed greater acceptance of online alternative media as they preferred to get contrasting views before coming to their own conclusion. These quotes, separated by six years, while representing the opinions of two different interviewees, also illustrate different attitudes observed between the two sets of interviews:

I’m Singaporean, right, the *Online Citizen*, *Temasek Review*, all of these, I don’t really trust these so-called alternative ones. To me, they covered a sense of like slamming the government ... so I don’t really tend to trust this kind of thing (SR9, 2010)

I do agree that the authoritative sources are very one-sided and biased, but so are the alternative viewpoints ... I think it is important for the public overall to really look at both opposing viewpoints. They might be very extreme, but know what are the merits and demerits of each viewpoint and come to your own measured conclusion (SR11, 2016)

Further indicative of a change, the 2010 cohort was less likely to see a distinction between how the older generation got their news from a single source (20%) than the recent cohort, among whom half noted the phenomenon: “My parents, they read the newspaper and they catch just Channel 5 News, that’s it” (SR16, 2016). In one case, a respondent actively tries to involve her parents in multiple news sources, offering them, in effect, a post-truth version of the news: “I think they trust local news organisations a lot more ... and then I’ll tell them I don’t think the truth is just like that, because I’ve read other articles, trying to bring them another view ... Multiple narratives versus the one dominant one” (SR18, 2016). Going further, one respondent suggested that the very

idea of credibility might be altered by the multiple realities on the internet, with older people placing greater faith in elite sources and younger people in their social network:

I think what is accurate to the older-school journalists, and what is accurate to younger-school journalists now are different. For example, to them, credibility means ‘people online say so’, like this is the general idea that I’m getting from my social network, so it’s credible. But to the older generation it might mean authoritative sources (SR11, 2016)

Finally, one student reporter said that the credibility of a newsmaker might not even be an issue, and other newsroom norms such as independence, freshness and speed in some circumstances could be considered more important: “There exists a mentality out there that ... it’s more cool to be getting information from an independent source online ... it gives youngsters an edge whenever they are talking to their peers because they can appear more intelligent” (SR3, 2010); while another acknowledged the relativity of truth, as being more a case of what is right *now*, rather than what is right. Truth and social media are fluid and can both be constantly updated:

“Social media is for here and now, so if here and now says this, and shows this, then I’m not inaccurate when I say here and now says this and that, and I show this ... Journalism informs and gives you accurate information whereas social media, it’s just live updates, basically. When you get things wrong, you can correct yourself and say, ‘The results that were released were wrong, and it’s this’” (SR14, 2016)

## **Discussion**

**RQ1** asked how student reporters use social media to find newsmakers, while **RQ2** asked how they verify non-elite newsmakers’ identities to assess if they are credible. Broadly, they look online and cross-refer across multiple sites to assess a newsmaker. This approach to establishing credibility based on consistency has implications for how non-elite voices are heard. It gives power to the powerful who are likelier to have a more complex online presence, at the expense of non-elite newsmakers who are considered less reliable because they have a less sophisticated online presence. Similarly, the repeated preference for face-to-face interviews can favour elite newsmakers with the expertise to handle them. Respondents noted that they would commit more time and effort to a face-to-face meeting with significant newsmakers than to the ‘extras’ in their news story: again, this favours the elite. At the same time, though, this approach has the potential to give non-elite voices the chance to redress the balance by making the time to meet reporters in person, as this is evidently what the respondents most associate with credibility.

This is to consider the practicalities of newsgathering, which is further reflected in ‘one degree of separation’ to find newsmakers on social media. A cub reporter’s network is likely to be small and based on a social circle of likeminded friends, which limits the variety of voices. Facebook itself also favours one degree of separation as a message sent to someone who is not a friend of a friend is likely to go into a low-priority folder that the recipient may well not check on a regular basis. One degree of separation does open up a greater variety of newsmakers having a voice; counter to this, however, the student reporters use social media as a marker of value. If their circle is talking about something then it is considered newsworthy—depending on the reliability of those discussing it:

The news goes viral, you can see your friends sharing it, and there’s a community, your own friends and family liking it, then you have this sense that, ‘OK, this is trustworthy,’ because everybody gets it ... So it has a lot to do with going with the crowd, especially in the social media space (SR15, 2016)

This risks respondents’ news agenda being set by people with interests akin to their own. Virality on social media operates as an echo chamber. So while they think they are opening up their news aperture to a wider variety of stories, those stories still conform to the worldviews and interests of people like them. Another finding was that students cross-refer across a potential interviewee’s varied web presence to confirm their identity. This hints at an intriguing shift from background information based on what others have said about someone—in press cuttings, for example—to background information based on what people say about themselves.

**RQ3** asked how student reporters negotiate credibility online in a post-truth world. The increasing use of multiple news sources and multiple viewpoints may be associated with a greater flexibility of what constitutes ‘truth’ and a greater acceptance that truth is relative. Some respondents said that under some circumstances the flexibility of post-truth is valuable, as it opens them up to multiple views of an event or news story. Such flexibility allows them to seek fresh newsmakers to direct the final news story. They thus move from a post-truth attitude for inspiration, via a process of verification, towards a pro-truth attitude for the news story itself, indicating a valuable use of post-truth as a tool. They favoured multiple sources of news rather than a single source, which suggests they tacitly accept the tractability of truth that is the hallmark of a post-truth news habit. They relied on their own skills and literacy to assemble a truth. Despite this, they concurred that facts have greater value than opinions; but multiple subjective opinions can be assembled into a form of objective fact. They saw this as a distinguishing feature between themselves and the older generation—both their parents and more senior newswriters—who they

felt preferred a single, reliable source of information. This extended to their attitudes towards different news sources. They turned to traditional media for the definitive story, but to social media for a rolling news feed which they recognised would change. Traditional media is the ‘first draft of history’ while social media is ‘history in the making’.

## **Conclusion**

“News sources are changing, and so are news audiences. Moreover, what counts as news may be changing” (Lewis, 2003: 95). Given this reality, it is germane to examine the attitudes of the next generation of journalists who will enter—and alter—mutable newsrooms. Hermida (2010: 300) observes that “journalism norms are bending as professional practices adapt to social media tools,” so this study contributes to understanding of student reporters’ (which may in time become socialised into newsroom practice) verification processes when sourcing non-elite newsmakers using social media, and considers not just the truth-claim the reporters make about the content they use, but also the people behind the content.

Despite considerable use of online newsmakers, though, what stood out in this study was that respondents still favoured elite newsmakers over the uncertainty of the non-elite ‘dog on the internet’, concurring with Lecheler and Kruikemeier (2016: 160) whose review of recent scholarship notes that “so far, the available data contradict expectations regarding the democratizing and disruptive power of online sourcing techniques.” This paper suggests some reasons why that should be. First, people with a significant online presence that allows for cross-checking of identity tend to be establishment or at least corporate—the ‘person in the street’ has no need of multiple web presences, while a large online footprint may be useful for a professional presence. Second, the time taken to double-check a non-official online source’s identity outweighs the worth that such a source has in the media, as traditional news values linger. Consistently in social psychology experiments, figures of authority are highly esteemed (Cialdini, 2001). Third, linked to this, the risk of the source not being who they claim to be is seen as higher if they do not have an expert agenda; that is, alternative voices and alternative agendas are suspect in a way that authoritative voices are not. For all the potential of the internet to open up space for a variety of voices, news journalism is not an immediate conduit for that to happen as it has not yet cast off the relationship with officialdom which has defined it for a century or more.

This study also finds respondents are invariably keen to move offline, to meet the source in person. Similarly, Heravi and Harrower’s study of Irish journalists (2016) finds that they validate content found on social media first by contacting the person; but the majority (83%) do so through official bodies. Many say that it is a time-consuming process—which suggests that it is unwelcome and that they would prefer to go to a quicker (albeit more official) source which would bypass the



need to check, but also deny access for the less powerful voices. This raises the issue that while giving voice to the voiceless is reckoned to be a 'good' in journalism, the practicalities of the demand for speed, accuracy and validation hinder it. It may be that scholars have been over-optimistic about the rate of change journalism is capable of.

When it came to establishing their own credibility as reporters, respondents emphasised the value of contrasting perspectives for greater objectivity. They also actively sought to prevent bias on their social media newsfeed. Lastly, they all conveyed hesitancy when it came to citing social media content, due to the different values they attached to traditional news sources and social media. The former were the ideal places to seek hard facts, whereas the latter was mainly used to gauge public opinion or trigger news story ideas.

Yet credibility is not the only marker of value in an information source, which helps explain the appeal of post-truth. The respondents said that they use information of uncertain provenance, as well as the variety of opinions and alternative versions of events found online as background information, and to help them assess public sentiment as a guide to writing their stories. Although they consider that verification was essential, they have no fixed standard for the process (Shapiro, Brin, Bédard-Brûlé & Mychajlowycz, 2013). Similar to the Scandinavian journalists interviewed by Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins and Følstad (2016), they make initial contact online and then, when possible, move offline for face-to-face interviews. There is need for a clearer understanding of the altered attitudes towards online sources and newsmakers among the next generation of reporters, to provide guidelines based on these emerging norms. Alongside that is a need to identify how journalists can better navigate social media for newsgathering.

As a single-country, qualitative study, this paper does not pretend to any generalisability, and is an illustration of the effect that social media is having on certain student reporters. Further, this paper does not suggest that practicing journalists, even in Singapore, have these attitudes towards using social media to identify the credibility of newsmakers; but these attitudes are evident among some of the emerging generation who have shown commitment to pursuing a career in journalism. Another limitation is that the interviews were between a professor and his students, which may have led to socially desirable answers. For example, they may have talked about cross-referring multiple sources to assess a newsmaker's credibility when it is more a journalistic principle than as a matter of reality. Tylor (2015) found that while student reporters said that they would verify information found on government websites, only 11% of them sought a person to talk to. At the same time, however, respondents' reliance on multiple news sources does suggest that they are accustomed to not relying on any single source.

Ideas, stories and newsmakers start online but they do not end there (Broersma & Graham, 2012). Social media is the chaos from which new ideas and new possibilities emerge—and that

extends to non-elite newsmakers who can be given a voice—and are then tested. This core value of multiple perspectives, and the possibilities they offer, gives a new theoretical approach to post-truth ideas of news. Rather than being inconveniently varied—which is the perspective of an epistemology that looks for certainty—multiple, fluid perspectives imply worth in diversity that holds potential. This is a new core value for the next generation of reporters as they enter the newsroom. Post-truth allows them to entertain several different possibilities at once. Using multiple sources of news, multiple newsmakers and multiple points of view, they are accustomed to assembling uncertainty into their own ‘truth’. Social media is like a jigsaw puzzle without a box or picture for reference; it’s down to the reporters to find there what they can make of it. Traditional media, by contrast, is like a box with a picture but no jigsaw inside: it’s fixed and becomes a reference point for the student reporters rather than opening up possibilities.

Finally, when it comes to the voices of the powerful and the powerless, two additional dogs emerge. Traditional media has always run the risk of becoming the lapdog of the authorities, favouring the powerful who have an infrastructure set up to promote their own agenda. Social media becomes a watchdog on them, representing multiple, competing viewpoints. The challenge for the next generation of reporters as they enter the newsroom, then, is simply to pick a dog.

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