



Beyond the Book®



So Much Media, So Little Time A Conversation with Reason's Michael Moynihan

Special Libraries Association annual conference 2009

MOYNIHAN: Let me first start by saying that I, too, reluctantly gave in to Twittering, which I think is the appropriate verb, is that right? Am I just saying that right? And it was at the behest of my editors and we use this in a variety of ways but mostly I use it to promote my stories, stuff that I've written for my blog post. And this is all getting very meta. This is Twitters and then blog posts and it's all sorts of nonsense.

But it actually works. And we look at our metrics and our statistics and a lot of people are coming from Facebook. We have a *Reason* magazine Facebook page. I don't know what happens there. Apparently people are making friends with one another, reading. As long as they're reading the things that I've written, I really don't care but –

KENNEALLY: Michael.

MOYNIHAN: Yes.

KENNEALLY: I (inaudible). I've been a friend of *Reason* for many years.

MOYNIHAN: You have but – yes, but are you officially a friend on the Facebook page? Things have changed.

KENNEALLY: They have indeed.

MOYNIHAN: So basically, and what we were speaking about the other day is I just submitted to this Twitter thing, very reluctantly. 140 characters. I tend to be a rather verbose writer. My editors are throwing fits all the time when I have my – I write a twice-monthly column for the website separate from the magazine, which you all should be reading. If you're not, you're missing – it's absolutely phenomenal. And it always goes over the 800 to 1,200 allotted words.

So now, I have someone telling me that going to condense my thoughts, which tend to be these rambling sort of non sequiturs, to 140 characters. So I'm saying, what on earth is this going to be good for? Absolutely nothing.

So I found out this week after having been doing this Twittering thing for a couple of months, that rather than hosting pictures of your dogs and your cats in these things, there is a tremendous advantage to Twittering, and that advantage right now you are seeing in the Iranian student movement. I've seen it in another couple of other examples, too.



Beyond the Book®



In all of the information that we're getting now, beating the networks, beating print, by – we're talking hours here. From the news business, it's a long time. We're finding out where people are organizing, what they're doing, how the revolutionary guards, how the mullahs, how supreme leaders are responding to this. And we're getting photographs from cell phones.

Now, there's a reason for this – and this is why I think Twitter's done really fantastic – is that Twitter technologically, it's sort of decentralized, so what the Iranian government can do is they can knock down Twitter or say, you do not have access to Twitter anymore. We are blocking this website.

Whereas these students, who are very clever – it's a great thing about – the only great thing about repressive regimes is they make people incredibly clever about technology and they know how to get around these things, so there's all sorts of these third-party bits of software that send things either from text messages or from third-party websites up into the Twitter universe. So we're getting an enormous amount of information. That's the one point.

The second point is you have – let's take a country like Cuba, which has very, very restricted Internet access. And if you go to Freedom House, Amnesty International, they have been promoting a woman named Yoani Sanchez who has been blogging her life in Havana and has been harassed by the regime and has been harassed by local police outfits. This is all documented on her blog.

Also to add that Iran has – I saw today – the third biggest per capita use of blogs. And there's a reason for this. There's a reason that there are an enormous amount of people blogging in Iran and there's probably less people blogging in Reykjavik, for instance. I'm sure there's plenty of them, but there's an urgency to blogging when people have cut off the ordinary means of communication.

And so, while I was pooh-poohing Twitter just as recently as last week, I am using it. From a journalist's perspective, you have an issue. You said earlier, the old dictum that you're checking the sources on your mother. Now you're getting stuff and is it disinformation? Well, then we get into a totally different problem.

But either way, in this moment, where blocked video, YouTube's been cut off by the authorities in Iran, but there are campus videos. CNN, by the way, who completely and utterly foolishly dropped the ball the other day. This is old media. We had – they were talking about that record companies and movie studios and the rest of it being behind technology, some more behind in technology than others, definitely record companies being the furthest behind.



Beyond the Book®



News organizations are slowly catching up and it's catching up in a way that is almost embarrassing. You see Rick Sanchez on CNN at 3:00 just talking about Twitter. I don't even know if he's going on about half the time. Twitter feeds, rolling. They're having iReports from – an iReport is basically something they take off of YouTube that somebody has shot that they didn't have anyone clever enough to be there for. And this is the case with Iran. They were behind almost by a day on Iran, and what they're doing now is they're running YouTube footage taken by students in the streets of Iran, and I presume they're not asking any copyright permission. It might be kind of difficult to get that approval right now, but it is providing an enormous amount of needed information of what's going on in a totally closed country.

KENNEALLY: Well, in fact, I was going to just point to an article in today's *New York Times* to get to this very issue here. It's not simply repressive regimes that are under attack here. CNN is under attack. Untold thousands used the label CNN Fail on Twitter to vent their frustration over the weekend.

MOYNIHAN: Yes.

KENNEALLY: It's a great example. What about the example that *Reason* has kind of made so much a part of what it's doing? You've got a site, *reason.tv*, and obviously video is critical to that. *Reason.com*, I presume there are podcasts and all kinds of things.

MOYNIHAN: Sure.

KENNEALLY: How do you as a journalist and as an editor manage when you have so many different kinds of media that you're delivering the news and reporting on? Back in the day, I was either a TV reporter or a print reporter. I wasn't going to do both at the same time.

MOYNIHAN: Oh, God. I should – can I complain about this? Is this like a session where I can say we have too much work? We have too many things to do?

Yeah, *Reason's* been around for 40 years. We had our 40th anniversary last year, but we were ahead of the curve on video stuff and on the Internet. I think the last – I don't know what, whether it was Nielsen or one of these things – of political blogs, we were I think in the top 20, 15, 16, 17, something like that. We get a couple of million people a month. So this is – there's a lot of demand. There's a hunger for material.

This, unfortunately, from a journalism perspective, creates a problem. I know that if you're sort of under 40 and sort of half of your life was growing up on the Internet, you're supposed to be an evangelist for Internet technologies, full stop. I am, with some reservations.



Beyond the Book®



And the reservations are that there's a lot of material. Friends, a colleague, Andrew Sullivan, acts on the *Atlantic*, has one of the most – I think the first or second most popular blog. And he posts something like 50, 60 posts a day, 40 to 50 posts a day. Now that's a lot of material.

And I'm not saying that Andrew gets things wrong and I'm not saying that a lot of people get things – he works for – now, here's the interesting thing. He works for an old-media organization where he has summer interns, where he has people that can fact check these things. Most people don't have that.

So what the problem becomes is this desire to always be producing, and it involves a lot of overextension.

I wrote a very, very, very mean thing, which I probably should regret, but I don't – a few – maybe a year ago, where I identified an affliction, which is amazing. I'm not a doctor. But this new affliction called Google scholars. And the Google scholar says, something's coming across the transom about let's say Iran. Let's say the third – well, let's pick something slightly more – there's an election or a coup.

Georgia was a great one. Did anyone know where Tbilisi was before the invasion? I don't know. Perhaps not. But it didn't appear that they did because what happened right then is you have all of these bloggers out there that are – this is a huge news story. You have a major – the second superpower rumbling tanks across the border into Ossetia and did they even know where Ossetia was? So they became Google scholars for that moment. Hit Google, started saying, OK, this is what's going on this way, and writing these very (inaudible) pieces about what was happening.

I like to think – and we all, when we're under pressure, deadlines, etc. to produce material, we all probably say things about issues that we should know more about before we open our mouths. But there is a – certain bloggers that I have that shall remain nameless who come in on everything, everything. And you cannot possibly have the breadth of knowledge to –

Now, I've written a number of columns attacking old media too. I think a lot of newspapers that are gone deserved to die. I'm sorry to say.

But I have to say in defense of old media is that you have people on beats. You're reporting from countries or knowing what they're going on. And I think a lot of the old media criticism of blogs is actually right.

I suspect your blog is very, very focused on what your expertise is, and I find a lot of this these days from bloggers from big organizations that are covering everything from auto bailouts to health care to foreign policy is – I'm just – I'm not seeing it.



Beyond the Book®



KENNEALLY: I love that. I'm not sure it's end up in the – what is it? The handbook that doctors have for all the various syndromes?

MOYNIHAN: I doubt it.

KENNEALLY: But it's going to be – I get my ideas in one of two places. I hate to say it as a Copyright Clearance Center employee, but think of them or I steal them, and I think I'm going to steal the Google scholars.

MOYNIHAN: Yes. Steal it, that's fine.

KENNEALLY: OK.

MOYNIHAN: Yes. I've been trying to get this to get some traction and it's not working.

KENNEALLY: And in particular, what I think of as I hear you describe that is the paucity of information there, because if you think about Google – and you're all librarians, so you're familiar with research and how to research thoroughly – Google is hardly a thorough research tool. If you put Tbilisi, you get the top 10 results. Hardly anyone goes beyond that first page. And you don't know if they're selling you a trip to Tbilisi, which might be bad timing if the Russians are showing up.

But my point there is that in the world of the old media, a journalist would have had to have gone to something called the morgue and done his or her research on their own and to have found things serendipitously or purposefully. By the way, what you would find in the *Boston Globe* morgue would be thoroughly different than what would have been in the *Los Angeles Times* morgue, and now it matters not at all where you are and you get the same results in Paris or Poughkeepsie.

MOYNIHAN: Yeah. I also want to say that I am a huge evangelist for the Internet as a great research tool. Half the stuff that I've been able to come across that I've been looking for, I wouldn't have been able to find in 1995 or I could have found it with great effort.

That said, one of the social – not really a social media tool. One of the phenomena that we're supposed to talk about is Wikipedia, which *Reason* did a cover story kind of fawning. I wouldn't say fawning, but a positive cover story on Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, which I think is an absolutely phenomenal tool, but it unfortunately becomes the only tool for some people. I've seen this happen. I've seen people use it and you can tell when they're blogging and plucking things out of Wikipedia.

It doesn't mean that stuff's wrong. I have seen stuff in Wikipedia that's wrong, but I have to say that percentage wise, it's not that much greater of the stuff that I've seen that



Beyond the Book[®]



is wrong in newspapers, for instance. Newspapers issue corrections. Somebody else in Wikipedia will edit that entry.

So, yeah. I find that there is an enormous amount of positive resources and I didn't want to sound like a member of the Cassandra corps here. There are some fantastic things and I use it every day.

KENNEALLY: Finally into a great discussion, but it's really only a start. I want to be sure that we prepare people here for your questions and your reactions to what's been said. But Michael, last question then. How does *Reason* respond to reuse of its material in places where you may not have given permission? Do you have a policy on that?

MOYNIHAN: We don't have a hard and fast policy, much to the – look, it doesn't happen that much. I think that the discussion we've had today is interesting, but one thing that I would say is that we have a fairly large readership in print. I think we do 60,000-65,000. On the Web, as I said, we have a number of people. We do two million-plus a month, 2.5 million a month.

And for the amount that we have, the amount of material that we produce, it's funny how little of it is actually reprinted wholesale. We do have people cutting and pasting bits of it, usually to be critical, which we encourage. We appreciate that. We enjoy it.

The thing is is that it's hard to put the genie back in the bottle now because news organizations gave away this stuff for free for so long with very, very few exceptions. People tried. *Slate* tried. It didn't work. *Wall Street Journal* being one of the very few examples of doing it. *Investor's Business Daily*, another. People that are offering specialized information.

So we have so many readers and people that are on our website but I think they grew up with this stuff and came to *Reason* fairly recently believing that all news is free, which I think is probably another thing that we have to attack.

But what we do, by the way, we have a lot of writers that write for other outlets, a lot, and we're encouraged to freelance. So if I had a piece that's in the *Los Angeles Times*, we contact the *Los Angeles Times* always and ask them if we can run the piece on our own website after a certain amount of time. And as far as I know, and I could be wrong about this, but as far as I ever experienced and being one of the Web editors at *Reason*, no one's ever said no. No one ever says to us, you know what? There might have been one or two examples, but most people say, yeah, sure. You can run it. Just put the attribution at the bottom, this article first appeared X, Y and Z.

Now, one final brief point. I just had something that was repurposed for free, and it was – I've had plagiarism problems where – and they were fine and took the stuff down,



Beyond the Book®



which is obviously a different kettle of fish. I had a repurposed thing where it was asked of us. So they asked, can we repurpose this? And I shall say was the *Huffington Post*. So we said, yeah, great. You guys have enormous amounts of traffic. They're the biggest – they do 9.5 million whereas *Drudge Report* used to be the king is now around two and a half, three. So we said, yeah, sure.

The one thing that's interesting about the *Huffington Post* is they aggregate content. It's a big aggregation website, as you were saying – and I believe that they pay for all their stuff. They don't pay their writers. They make an enormous amount of money. They make – Arianna Huffington has deep pockets. They don't pay a single writer on the website. This great liberal website that doesn't pay a single writer. That is true. They pay for the stuff that they aggregate. You write for them, you write for free.

And that is where we are. That's where we are. And people do it. They want the exposure and they'll do it for free. And it's been a very, very successful business model that's been going on for four years now, three and a half, four years, and they haven't paid a – they don't pay their writers. They have a couple reporters that they pay, but if you want to pitch a story to them and you want to be on the *Huffington Post*, you're not going to get a nickel.

KENNEALLY: Well, I respond to that as a former freelance journalist. I had a pretty simple business model. I ate what I killed and that meant that I didn't write for free.

MOYNIHAN: Yes.

END OF PODCAST