Bud Ward is editor of Yale Climate Connections (www.yaleclimateconnections.org). He started his environmental journalism career in 1974. A cofounder of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) in 1989, he twice served as a frequent environmental analyst for NPR’s All Things Considered and Morning Edition, and he founded and managed the foundation-funded Central European Environmental Journalism Program for four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communications in 2009 named him its “Climate Change Communicator of the Year.”

Cogito, ergo sum.
Je pense, donc je suis.
I think, therefore I am.
But I digress, risk getting ahead of myself.

Let me start at the beginning. The beginning, that is, of my deep immersion into a life-long passion for and career in journalism, all of it, since 1973, emphasizing coverage of the environment.

I studied journalism – but in graduate school, we elevated it to “mass communications” to bestow on it more gravitas – at a large public university. It was a time of great media focus on two historic American events – the Vietnam War and the Watergate controversy – that led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon. A so-called “golden age” of outstanding and critically important independent and fearless journalism, we thought then and still.

All of which is to say that I’m no spring chicken, not hardly: I’ve got a lot of miles on me. I began my career – despite visions of soon succeeding the likes of the New York Times’s R.W. Apple and the Washington Post’s David Broder – with Hardware Age magazine, published by Chilton Company in Radnor, PA. Everyone has to start somewhere.

My college studies, both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student, had focused primarily on journalism theory – free press vs. fair trial, privacy issues, responsibilities of the media in a democracy and the like – and on applications of “the inverted pyramid” and the “Five Ws.” Our classroom lectures were strictly divided between those addressing journalism and newsroom practice and journalism theory. The truly big thinkers among us in those days were the seemingly visionary students who drove us to think of adding the “H,” for How, to the Five Ws hierarchy.
We were self-described, and self-limiting, as either “print” journalists or as “broadcast” journalists, and never did, nor could, the twain meet. There was no talk, none whatsoever, of one’s being a “multimedia journalist,” nor had anyone yet heard of such a thing, albeit there were of course some legitimate photo-journalists. The concept of “storytelling” was unheard of – and almost certainly would have been seriously looked down on – among the truly ink-in-the-veins hard news aficionados we all aspired to become.

It now seems we focused far more on commission than on omission, more on what we did in our reporting than on those elements we deliberately did not include. “All the facts, and nothing but the facts” was our sworn duty, often, it now seems clear, at the expense of vital context and nuance.

Our notion of technology involved little more than an IBM Selectric, our weapons of choice a reporter’s notepad and a pen or pencil. We also accessed a 35-milimeter black and white SLR, generally a Konica, Mamiya/Sekor, or, at the higher end, maybe a Pentax camera . . . and a darkroom. We were all over 400-ASA Tri-X and 125-ASA Plus-X Kodak films back then, routinely and diligently loading our own through those hand-held vintage Watson 100 black plastic film loaders best used in near darkness.

How times change.

I think, therefore I am? Maybe, but in today’s parlance perhaps something more like, “I communicate, therefore I tweet.”

Which brings me to the subject at hand.

Until fairly recently at least – and not solely because of the current US president’s fascination (obsession?) with the medium – it had been de rigueur for self-professed, important journalists, and those aspiring to the same, to look down on the character-limited and emoji-heavy www.Twitter.com. No self-respecting journalist, the theory held, and let alone none wanting the respect of her or his colleagues, would deign to such a tool.

One might note that not so long ago, some journalists’ same short-sighted snobbishness applied to digital cameras, to cell phone cameras, and, not so long before that, even to word processors and content management systems.

Give me a trusted Royal typewriter any day, long live the reporter’s pocket-sized notebook? Maybe not so long ago after all.

Twitter, one more tool in a reporter’s tool kit

The point is that Twitter, like all those hand-held tools now a standard part of the reporter’s daily life, is no more than a tool. It sometimes can be the beginning of the reporting process, as it surely has proven for many a valuable source of story ideas and contacts.

But by no means is it ever the end of one’s reporting, save perhaps for its being a useful way for reporters, and especially those increasingly working as freelancers, to self-promote their stories once taken live. Twitter is effective when used with purpose, moderation, and judgment. It evokes the Goldilocks principle: Not too hot, not too cold, and just right. Too much or too little Twitter spoils the recipe for journalism excellence.

A report based solely on information gleaned from Twitter? None dare call that journalism.

So, let’s accept, at least for purposes of discussion, the notion of Twitter as just one more tool in the reporter’s toolbox, one more arrow in the quiver. Under this approach, outright rejecting proper application of Twitter – and this is critically important: both as a way of sending and as a way of receiving useful information – might be tantamount to rejecting use of a compact digital camera in favor of a clunky SLR, tantamount to sticking with pen and ink rather than moving to Microsoft’s Word or Apple’s Pages or an offshoot.
I communicate, therefore I tweet

Try thinking of Twitter as a contact sport, for it surely is that – a way to make and cultivate news contacts and sources, the coin of the realm. But if asked if you, as a journalist, “tweet,” be sure to answer, and be sure to be honest with yourself, that you tweet both in the sense of ingoing and outgoing messaging. Doing one or the other, but not both and frequently, amounts to some kind of journalistic Twitter malpractice. That approach will reap you few benefits.

Why tweet? Addressing that question in a March 2017 posting, the blog for the highly regarded Poynter Institute (www.poynter.org/news/i-studied-how-journalists-used-twitter-two-years-heres-what-i-learned), Alecia Swasy, Donald W. Reynolds Chair in Business Journalism at Washington & Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and author of “How Journalists Use Twitter: The changing landscape of U.S. newsrooms,” pointed to the example of *Tampa Bay Tribune*’s fine environment reporter:

Twitter expands their readership to an entire globe that was once limited to geographic circulation boundaries. The best example of this came from the *Tampa Bay Times* and Craig Pittman, one of the country’s top environmental reporters. His presence on Twitter got the attention of the editors of *Slate*, who asked him to do a month-long blog. It also helped him land a book contract on news of the weird in Florida.

Beyond promoting one’s own work in ways few could often expect from the publicity arm of a large news organization, Swasy wrote that her two years of interviews with 50 journalists from four large-market metropolitan daily newspapers pointed to benefits directly tied to news-gathering and dissemination. She said all 50 indicated that “reluctance gave way to acceptance as the early adopters showed how Twitter could help in newsgathering.” In fact, “the most important finding from the 50 interviews had nothing to do with revenues,” she wrote, calling Twitter “a useful addition to old-fashioned dogged reporting.”

**Twitter helps journalists “Become Human”**

Swasy added that the senior executives and publishers she interviewed for her PhD dissertation “agreed that Twitter builds ties to the community and helps readers understand who is behind the news: Journalists are real people. We’re your neighbors.”

That’s especially important given the broadly unflattering reputation “the media,” along with so many other institutions, shoulder in modern American society, in which a sitting president broadly labeled the media an “enemy of the people” and made “fake news” a recurring theme.

Calling Twitter a “must-have tool for journalists” in a post they wrote for the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism’s Advanced Media Institute, Scot Hacker and Ashwin Seshagiri describe it as “a way to keep a pulse on and engage with communities, locate sources, and to report on the world in new and unique ways” (https://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/twitter/).

They quote Jeff Jarvis (2009), interactive journalism program director at the City University of New York, on this reporter-as-real-person capability: “Twitter, blogs, Facebook, etc., also provide the opportunity for reporters and editors to come out from behind the institutional voice of the paper – a voice that is less and less trusted – and to become human. Of course, they should mix business and pleasure.”

That’s a far cry from the common journalistic experience of throwing a large rock into a quiet brook and getting hardly a ripple of audience response and reaction. For that, Twitter clearly provides psychological benefits gratifying to any journalists’ or communicators’ sense of self.
To recognize Twitter, and by extension certain other social media platforms, for its successes and contributions to responsible journalism is not to ignore its limitations, and surely not its potential downsides. For those declining number of full-time reporters and editors still working as salaried professionals for major news organizations, there is much to be said for their employers having social media policies, developed with the direct and extensive involvement of the reporting staffs themselves and not solely the product of the outlets’ top editors or, yikes, its marketing arm. Those policies can be instructive also for freelancers laboring over hashtags in their home offices and bedroom slippers.

So, once past the questions about whether to use Twitter – and other social media too, but that’s beyond the scope of this essay – let’s next address that “H” from the Five Ws. How to use Twitter.

Using, and not abusing, Twitter

There’s no denying that Twitter and other social media platforms of use to journalism can pose their own kind of time-drain. Don’t let that happen. A virtue of Twitter is that it can lie at the ready in a tab of your Internet browser, available instantly when it’s needed or useful. Its very readiness can of course be a source of the time-drain problem, but given that it can take so little time to send out a practical “tweet,” one’s impulses should be easily controllable. Remember the Goldilocks rule – just enough, not too much and not too little.

Another “best practice” to consider is that journalists can make most use of Twitter in the early hunting and gathering phases of their reporting: Who is particularly active and thought-provoking on particular issues? Who has unique and informed viewpoints, and competency in expressing those views? What is the current “chatter” on the streets – or at least the digital streets – concerning a particular issue, be it the executive branch’s latest approaches on an issue such as climate change, or the nonprofit environmental community’s issues of greatest concern?

Finding those quotables via Twitter, as mentioned earlier, is the beginning, and not the end, of the reporting process. Only a cub reporter, at most, would dignify his or her copy by simply quoting or paraphrasing directly from Twitter, with no first-hand contact and, perhaps, useful elaboration, notwithstanding the inherent and undeniable news worthiness of, for instance, a President Trump’s tweets. (There are exceptions to every rule.)

Remember that Twitter is by design a “mass-audience” and not a “class-audience” tool, one designed to attract an attractive quantity of contacts and followers rather than primarily a smaller and more focused quality audience. It’s perhaps the ultimate crowd-sourcing tool.

Having one’s tweets retweeted by those with their own large followers is key with Twitter, and that capability greatly expands the reach of the reporter’s initial tweet. Few are the journalists’ environmental tweets that are likely to earn a re-tweet from, let’s say, a Beyoncé or a Lady Gaga. Leonardo DiCaprio, given his high visibility on the climate change issue, may be a slightly greater possibility, but don’t hold your breath. But there’s a legitimate value also in being re-tweeted by that highly respected follower too – a top-notch climate scientist with his or her own following like Richard Alley of Penn State or Kathryn Hayhoe of Texas Tech, for instance, or a respected retired environmental “hero” such as former EPA Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus.

The bottom line there to keep in mind: Just as you write or broadcast with your preferred audience(s) in mind, tweet also with that target demographic as a focus. Make your tweets worthy of their time and attention, and therefore possibly also of their retweeting. Waste their time and you waste your effort.
Some Twitter/journalism “Best Practices”

Writing on the Poynter blog in September 2017, Indira Lakshmanan, the Newmark chair in journalism ethics at Poynter and a *Boston Globe* columnist, outlined advice that had originated with James Hohmann (www.poynter.org/news/twitter-dustups-are-reminder-journalists-you-are-what-you-tweet). Hohmann is a reporter for a *Washington Post* politics newsletter who had researched and written the American Society of Newspaper Editors guidelines six years earlier when he was at *Politico*.

Lakshmanan described Hohmann’s view of Twitter as “a tremendous journalistic tool” that “allows you to create instant focus groups. You can watch a debate and see what 30 New Hampshire activists think right away.” But in acknowledging that along with its “tremendous benefits,” Twitter tempts one to “broadcast one’s thoughts without a filter or editor.”

To Hohmann, Lakshmanan continued, having 24/7 access to Twitter was like “walking around with a loaded gun: You have to be responsible with how you carry it, because you can fire it at any time and hurt somebody, including yourself.”

Lakshmanan offered some guidelines for responsible journalism use of Twitter:

• Think before you tweet, as [Politico managing editor Sudeep] Reddy says. Consider whether you’d write those same words in a story with your byline over it or utter them on television or radio for the whole world to hear. Can you stand behind the statement and the facts supporting you if challenged?

• Realize that you’re not just talking to friends at a bar. Everything you write on Twitter is public and will live on (and potentially haunt you) in Internet archives and screenshots.

• Corollary to the above: Remember that Twitter is intoxicating and dangerous, like driving drunk. Also . . . don’t drunk-tweet.

• Consider your role: If you’re a reporter and not a columnist, your bosses may expect you to keep opinions to yourself because they inevitably reflect on your newsroom.

• Be confident you can support your comments with reporting and facts. That’s good advice for columnists and editorial writers too – though as Robert Schlesinger, managing editor for US News’ opinions points out, for editorial writers and columnists, “bias is a feature, not a bug.”

• Understand the policies of the organization you work for, says Joy Mayer, an audience engagement specialist and adjunct faculty at Poynter who teaches an online course on social media. Some newsrooms expect social media to be all about business; others expect staffers to be human beings on social media and don’t mind journalists engaging on hot-button issues if it’s consistent with their personalities, Mayer said. If you aren’t sure, ask your managers.

• If you’re feeling angry or emotional, take a deep breath and pause before you tweet anything. The world won’t end if your take isn’t instantaneous.

• Don’t fight with trolls. It’s unproductive and often makes a bad situation worse. It’s fine to engage with sincere readers and critics but keep it civil.

• If you mess up, have a plan, said Mayer: “Your organization might have a policy for handling social media corrections or missteps.” She recommends deleting a post “only if continued harm will come from leaving it up. Transparency is the better default course . . . Reply to a tweet with an apology, explanation or correction.”

• NPR’s Standards Editor Mark Memmott told me his network’s policy is to screenshot an offending post before deleting it, and to attach it to a correction or apology. The idea is to
be accountable and transparent that a mistake was made, but not magnify the harm by let-
ting it be retweeted.

• Last but not least, remember that Twitter can become an addiction, sucking valuable time
away from other parts of our jobs and lives.

In a piece strictly addressing the plusses and minuses of Twitter from the standpoint of
responsible journalism, it indeed feels strange that Lakshmanan ends with a reference to, of all
things, Facebook.

All the more strange is that her reference deals with the social media giant’s entreaty to the
public to beware of what it calls “false news.” That’s an indirect, but not so subtle, reference to
the “fake news” appellation made (in)famous not only by President Donald Trump but also by
Facebook’s own careless mishandling of its communications mission leading up to and well
beyond the 2016 presidential election.

But if ever the case is made of the relevance of social media – Facebook no less so than Twit-
ter – to journalism, that’s just what happened with a full-page New York Times advertisement
Facebook placed on Sunday, May 27, 2018.

“Together we can fight false news,” Facebook headlined its ad. The company encouraged
the public to “be skeptical of headlines. . . . If shocking claims in the headline sound unbeliev-
able, they probably are.” It encouraged audiences to “investigate the source” of the information
being communicated, the province, one remembers fondly, of all those newspaper editors whose
ranks have been so severely thinned by the very likes of Facebook. “If the story comes from an
unfamiliar organization, check their ‘About’ section to learn more.” (This kind of sounds like the
prods News Writing 101 lecturers used to proffer.)

“Consider the photos. . . . False news stories often contain manipulated images or videos . . .
taken out of context.” And for sure, “Check the evidence . . . confirm that they [the reporter’s
sources] are accurate . . . reliance on unnamed experts may indicate a false news story.” And also,
“Think critically about the stories you read, and only share news that you know to be credible.”

Given the pace of change, in the dynamic field of information technology, communica-
tions, and mainstream journalism, there’s no guarantee just how long Twitter will be part of the
landscape. But whether its Twitter, Facebook, or some as-yet-unheard-of “must-have” break-
through communications platform, journalists need to take full advantage of the available tools
for improving their trade in challenging times. They’d be foolish to waste valuable time chasing
hashtags. But more foolish to ignore the benefits those tools can offer. The real winners will be
those air breathers dependent on and in need of better journalism.

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