Seeking Truth: The Evolution of Ambient News

By Daniel A. Nelson

With social media becoming more prevalent in today’s society, websites like Twitter have transformed the definition of “ambient news.”

The term ambient news is often described as the omnipresent nature of news in society through the media into public spaces. It used to be that this communication model was one-way. News was piped into homes through radio or television without resistance. With the rapid growth of the Internet, ambient news has developed into a two-way communication model. Now we choose what we read and interact with it.

This two-way system has spawned websites like Twitter. It has become a way for reporters to be in different locations vicariously through everyday members of society.

A perfect example was in 2009 when a tweet about US Airways Flight 1549 surfaced on the Internet. The first reported tweet about the plane crash came from Jim Hanrahan:

“I just watched a plane crash into the hudson rive [sic] in manhattan” –Jim Hanrahan, @highfours, Jan. 15, 2009, 3:33 p.m. EST.

Shortly after, a photo taken by Janis Krums from a nearby commuter ferry popped up on TwitPic:

“There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.” –Janis Krums, @jkrums, Jan. 15, 2009, 3:36 p.m. EST.

About 30 minutes later, Krums was contacted by MSNBC for an interview and the rest is history.

This milestone in social media reporting changed the landscape of new media. As journalism has evolved, the race to find the next scoop has become increasingly competitive. This is where the two-way communication model of ambient news breaks down. Journalists have a difficult time shedding the storyline blinders that frequently distort truth.

Enter the story of Manti Te’o. The Notre Dame football star’s story is one that stems back to 2009 when he reportedly met a woman named Lennay Kekua.

"Their stares got pleasantly tangled, then Manti Te'o extended his hand to the stranger with a warm smile and soulful eyes." –South Bend Tribune, Nov. 28, 2009

Only this occurrence never happened. It wasn’t until two years later that the first documented accounts of correspondence between Te’o and Kekua appeared on Twitter.

“@lovalovaloveyou nice to meet u too ma'am” —Manti Te'o, @MTeo_5, Oct. 10, 2011.

The story takes a bizarre turn when Sports Illustrated reported that Kekua was involved in a car accident that left her “on the brink of death” in early 2012. She was diagnosed with leukemia in the
hospital, but reportedly recovered from her injuries and graduated from Stanford University. New York Times refers to Kekua as a Stanford alumnus in an article on Oct. 13, 2012:

“This has been a trying season for Te’o, whose grandmother and girlfriend died within hours of each other last month. His girlfriend, who lost a long fight with leukemia, was a Stanford alumnus.” –New York Times

Te’o reportedly lost his grandmother to an illness and Kekua to leukemia the same day in September 2012, but discrepancies in the order of events arose in various reports. The South Bend Tribune contradicts itself saying that Kekua dies first and Te’o’s grandmother dies less than 24 hours later in a Sept. 22 report. Then they report that Kekua died after—even giving her time to send her condolences to Te’o about his grandmother. The New York Post reports Kekua dies three days after Te’o’s grandmother. ESPN and CBS report that she dies four days after.

CBS This Morning obliviously ran a three-minute segment on the day of the BSC title game between Notre Dame and Alabama about the tragedies Te’o had gone through. CBS ran an image of who was thought to be Kekua alongside an alleged direct quote from her to Te’o right before she died:

“Babe, if anything happens to me, you promise that you'll stay there and you'll play and you'll honor me through the way you play.” –Lennay Kekua via CBS Jan. 7, 2013.

A Hollywood-like script had been written by the media, but the fairytale was not real. For those who enjoy heartfelt stories, the damage was done. An entire nation clung to a young man’s personal journey through adversity, but the burden of proof was passed around like a buck. Lennay Kekua never existed. A story that started from two people meeting on social media was never fact checked using social media.

This led to a blind eye being turned to gross factual errors like someone graduating from Stanford, a serious car accident and someone’s death. Instead of Twitter being a tool for journalism, journalism became a tool for Twitter.

This is the conundrum with today’s state of journalism. In a study done by Ali Nobil Ahmad called, “Is Twitter a useful tool for journalists?” Ahmad writes:

“The role of journalists as fact-finders, in this context, may well come under increasing question with time as more and more citizens take to blogging and uploading visual data. It is a development that cannot help further blur the line between journalists and citizens around the world, and at the very least, is likely to raise questions about what the word ‘journalist’ actually means.” –Ali Nobil Ahmad

As this issue continues to be debated in journalism, the immergence of Manti Te’o’s story further questions the purpose of journalists themselves. The most thrilling aspect of journalism is finding a great story, but the most rewarding part is telling a story with veracity. Journalists must use every tool they can to get a story right. What the Manti Te’o story has taught us is that underreporting a story besmirches the credibility of journalism. More importantly, a good storyline can manipulate an audience for more than three years.