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## DELETION WILL BE MY EPITAPH: JOURNALISTS DELETION PRACTICES ON TWITTER

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The stakes involved in the deletion of social media discourse have grown as commercial internet platforms have become a central distribution infrastructure of the public sphere (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018) constituting together with news organizations a “platform press” (Bell & Owen, 2017). These platforms also serve as crucial systems for the “production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 1) more generally. Twitter is an especially important component of this ecosystem. It presents itself as the world’s “public square,” (Dorsey, September 5, 2018) suggesting its role in news gathering and opinion-making is central to its identity.

In many countries, a majority of journalists operate an account on Twitter for different purposes, from news gathering and reporting to attracting new audiences and maintaining a relationship with their readers (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017). Most studies of Twitter’s journalistic role have examined journalists’ tweeting practices and the ways in which Twitter serves as an organizational and individual branding tool (e.g., Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2018), studying commission rather than omission. While journalists’ tweeting practices have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, the status of journalistic tweets as a cultural archive and its role in shaping collective memory, have gained less scholarly interest. Work on journalism and memory (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014) has demonstrated how news production and products are involved in shaping collective memory. However, the potential contribution of journalists’ social media activities to collective memory is being overlooked. If a newspaper is the first draft of history, then journalists’ professional tweets are “the first draft of the first draft of history”—as described by one of the interviewed journalists in semi-structured interviews we conducted in New York City.

This study seeks to understand the practice of the deletion of tweets by journalists while arguing that these uniquely reflect the contemporary fragility of archiving and journalism

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– two human enterprises central to societies' ability to reflexively consider the past and present and democratically chart a future course. From the perspective of journalism as a profession, it argues that the study of tweet deletion is a means of examining the constraints under which journalists operate today including the occupational precarity (Davidson & Meyers, 2016) and polarized public sphere with which they contend. Workers in many sectors manipulate time on the job as a means of gaining control over their lives (Fine, 1990). Similarly, journalists might delete past tweets, limiting their temporal presence online, in order to minimize occupational and physical risks arising from the use various audiences might make of their social media record.

Based on interviews conducted in the winter of 2019 with 17 journalists working in New York City, the study examines how journalists perceive the action of deleting their tweets and how they justify it. The analysis suggests that gender plays a significant role in deletion practices because of political and sexual harassment. The journalists told us that social media audiences often took journalists' past tweets out of context to criticize them and damage their occupational prospects and threaten their physical wellbeing. We also found that the career shifts common to entrepreneurial journalists prompt them to frequently reshape their public image and hence delete some or most of their past social media activities to ensure their public record is compatible with their current job. This perception of threat together with a perceived lack of support from employing news organizations in an entrepreneurial labor market led some of them to prefer massive deletion over the preservation of journalistically valuable tweets for posterity. This is a form of "proactive ephemerality", a social media phenomenon that occurs when users intentionally remove their own content from their social media profiles manually or with the aid of mechanical tools. They do so in an attempt to reassert control over their public image and occupational destiny.

Further, some journalists claim they and many of their colleagues use external services to regularly and mechanically delete all but the most recent tweets from their timeline thereby expunging many tweets that have journalistic and archival value such as live-tweeting of prominent trials or of breaking news events. The interviews suggest that journalists' perception of using a mechanical solution to mass-delete their tweets and to periodically start a new blank Twitter feed bypasses the responsibility they feel when they manually delete individual tweets. In other words, when the machine oversees mass deletion, they do not feel the same moral obligation as when they are required to manually choose tweets for deletion. It suggests that human users echo the discourses and strategies internet platforms use when they argue that the responsibility for human actions on the platform lies with computer algorithms rather than with their human developers (Gillespie, 2010).

When discussing news both practitioners and scholars focus on the present and emphasize its immediacy in terms of production and consumption. As we talked to journalists about their decisions to delete (or not) tweets, we realized that many journalists were continuously aware of the passage of time as the tweets they publish in the present, in a given context, recede into the past. The interviewees expressed their concern that these tweets are remaining accessible to audiences months and years after first published anchored in a different context. They were especially attuned to the

risks their public record of tweeting in the past could pose in the future, and some if not all were determined to wield deletion as a means of reducing such risks. We argue that the occupational and physical threat journalists experience together with the lack of nuanced deletion tools on social media platforms and a lack of employer and platform support to deal with online abuse result in massive deletion that damages journalists, news organizations, the platforms and society more generally. We suggest platforms and news organizations adopt a number of organizational and technical design changes to ensure that more of the first draft of the first draft of history survives in the long term.

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