14th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Day 1, April 19, 2013: Afternoon Session - 2:00-2:45 p.m.
Social Media, Journalism and the Urgent Case for Media Literacy

Chair: Andy Carvin, Senior Strategist, Social Media Desk, **NPR**

Keynote Speaker: Robert Quigley, Senior Lecturer, School of Journalism, **UT Austin**

Q & A: Andy Carvin and **Robert Quigley**

Robert Quigley: I am Robert Quigley, a senior lecturer here in the School of Journalism at UT. I teach social media, journalism, and an apps design class, where we're designing iPhone apps, and a reporting class.

I'm here to introduce somebody who could not be more timely with what's going on this week. We are talking about in our classes and on social and with each other about journalism, and how breaking news is happening right before us, and how we verify what is true, how we report that information and all that, and how the public can also be informed. And so, I think this is a really great person to have up here. It's his specialty. It's Andy Carvin. He's the NPR Senior Strategist on Social Media Desk, and he's a Bostonian. So, anyway, y'all know him from the Arab Spring reporting he did as a one-man newswire for NPR. So, without much more, I'm going to give it to Andy.

[Applause.]

Andy Carvin: Thanks, Robert. Hello, everyone. Sorry I haven't been with you much of today. It's been kind of a slow news day, so I've been catching up on sleep. [laughter] If only. But I'm really glad I was able to come today, because Rosental's been trying to get me here for I think four years now. And I was actually scheduled to speak once, but had to cancel because of a family emergency. And because of the Arab Spring work I was doing, I was traveling a lot. So, this is my first time here. I've heard so many people say it's the best journalism conference they go to each year, so I'm really excited to be here with you folks.

So, as many of you know, I'm not usually at a loss for words, but I've really struggled to decide what to talk about today, especially in the wake of the attack this week in my hometown of Boston. Some of my fondest memories of the city are of that magical Monday once a year each April, when everyone would like the streets and cheer on one stranger after another, encouraging them to succeed in accomplishing a little magic of their own.

I originally planned to discuss the role of social media and our coverage of Newtown today, but obviously a lot's happened over the last week. It's led me and I'm sure a lot of us here to broaden what we truly need to talk about at ISOJ.

So, I'd like to discuss something that both Newtown and the early days of Boston have in common beyond the obvious horror and the needless loss, and that's the fact that we messed up. We didn't always get the story right. We didn't serve the public as well as we could have. Now, a dynamic similar to the fog of war certainly rears its head during catastrophic breaking news. Mistakes get made. We all know that. It's perhaps rare indeed for a major breaking news story to be told from start to finish without some confusion getting in the way of informing the public.

Now as the person at NPR who sent out the tweet mistakenly reporting the death of Gabby Giffords, I know we're all capable of making these mistakes and understand the reporting failures that cause them to happen. Whether we're on-air reporters, web producers, or just members of the public, large Twitter followings, we all have the potential of getting it wrong and unfortunately making matters worse. So, that's what I'd like to talk about today—some of the factors that led to these mistakes, how they're amplified by social media, and perhaps how we can mitigate them better by rethinking how we engage the public.

Now, whether it's Newtown or Boston or some other breaking story, we all kick into high gear. At every newsroom, it's all hands on deck, battle stations, whatever you'd like to call it. These are the moments when the public expects us to do our jobs and do them well. These are the moments we pride ourselves in our roles as professionals. And thankfully, many of us rise to the occasion. In recent decades though, we've put ourselves in a bind by creating news cycles that are faster and faster and faster, and speed is often the scourge of accuracy.

First, there's 24-hour broadcast news, where in some quarters, there is a sin much greater than getting the story wrong, as you can always make a correction later, and that sin is allowing for dead air. Dead air is unacceptable, of course, but we can't exactly take over everyone's TV or radios, hit a magical pause button, and force them to go get a cup of coffee while we sort out the facts. Aside from throwing in extra commercials, we have to fill air time one way or another, and that creates a scenario where even the best journalists are more likely to make mistakes. In a bid to keep the coverage going, they might find themselves talking about a second gunman or reporting on the shooter's Facebook page that actually turns out to be his innocent brother's. They may report breaking news of arrests in Boston [and] then dig deeper holes for themselves trying to explain how they were led astray by their sources. And all the while, the broadcast rolls on. No dead air.

Now, I don't stand here today to point fingers and throw broadcast news under the bus. Online news isn't immune from these mistakes either. How many of us have struggled to keep our live blogs fresh with one update after another? How often do we post reports without a third source or even a second one to back it up? And then, of course, there's social media, where we feel even more pressure to keep up the public — keep the public updated as quickly as possible. As we saw this week with the supposed arrests in Boston, news organizations, social media platforms aren't immune from the same mistakes that occur in our broadcasts or on our websites. How many of us have typed up a tweet for a major news twitter account and hesitated before hitting the send button? Just wondering, what if we screw this up? How many of us hit the button anyway?

Errors have always been a part of journalism. Corrections are perhaps a more recent phenomenon, but thankfully someone thought they were a good idea and came up with them. Yet, lately, it seems whenever there's a public discussion of major errors we've made covering breaking news, they are often eclipsed by discussions of how these mistakes wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been for social media.

Now, social media makes an obvious target, and understandably so. Never before have we had the capacity to spread misinformation from one grapevine to the next so broadly and so quickly. Whether it's a mistaken tweet or a Facebook post, inaccuracies take on a life of their own. But all too often I've heard people in our industry redirect the blame specifically on the public's use of social media. Yes, we may have reported something wrong, but *they* compounded it. Or perhaps we did our jobs — we did do our jobs by not reporting a rumor, yet somehow it got out there, and now it's everywhere because of those damn Twitter users. [some laughter]

Let's face it, it's never been easier to spread rumors. Yet, it wasn't all too long ago that these things would rarely see the light of day. We'd hear rumors while covering a breaking story, but we could nip them in the bud. They'd be discussed in the newsroom and hopefully end up dying on the cutting room floor. We had the luxury of scrutinizing information privately. The public never need worry about a potentially damaging rumor, because we'd take care of it for them. That's what it was all about—to report as accurately as possible and not allow the public to become misinformed. Besides, the public lacked the power to compound the problem beyond sharing it with their immediate friends and family.

But that era is over. It no longer exists. Today, almost everyone has a device in their pocket that can capture footage or circulate information to a broader public. We no longer control the flow of information. We are no longer the media, in the most literal sense of the word, in which news happens over here, the public is over there, and we stand in the middle, sole arbiters of what gets passed across the transom and what doesn't.

While we go about our business on air or online, the public is having its own conversations, passing along a variety of rumors. They can take on a life of their own. Some rumors that historically would've died on the vine now thrive online...perhaps even over vine. And given the deterioration of the public's trust of media, we should no longer be surprised when they choose to believe their friends before they believe us, even on those many occasions when we're doing a damn good job getting the story right.

Since the earliest days of journalism, our mission has been to inform the public as best we can. But despite the incredible changes we've seen in media and technology, we still treat the news as if it's a one-way street. We try to sort out the facts, then tell everyone else what we know. I inform *you*, and *you* listen. It's almost as if social media didn't exist.

But we all know that's not true. Twitter and Facebook are as real as any community that exists offline. So what should we in the media do, now that the public can inform each other while simultaneously ignoring us? Should we continue to treat journalism as a one-way street, when everyone else thinks they're chatting at a block party?

I think we need to get back to the core part of journalism and rethink what it means to inform the public. In fact, I think one good starting point can be found within NPR's mission statement, and that is to create a more informed public.

Now this may sound like I'm just parsing words, and to a certain extent I'm sure I am, but there is a difference, and it's worth discussing. To inform the public is to tell them what *we* think they should know. To create a more informed public is *to* help them become better consumers and producers of information and hopefully help them achieve their full potential as active participants in civil society.

If this is indeed a worthy goal, then why aren't we engaging the public more directly? I don't mean engagement like encouraging them to "like" us on Facebook or click the retweet button. That is not engagement. By engagement I mean, why don't we use all of these incredible powerful tools to talk with them, listen to them, and help us all understand the world a little better? Perhaps we can even use social media to do the exact opposite of its reputation and to slow down the news cycle, to help us catch our collective breaths and scrutinize what's happening with greater mindfulness.

When a big story breaks, we shouldn't just be using social media to send out the latest headlines or ask people for their feedback after the fact. We shouldn't even stop at asking for their help when trying to cover the story. We should be more transparent about what we know and what we don't know. We should actively address rumors being circulated online. Rather than pretending they're not circulating or that they're not our concern, we

should tackle them head-on, challenging the public to question them, scrutinize them, understand where they may have come from, and why.

When we see members of the public making claims that might be questionable or flat-out wrong, we should address them directly, asking them where they got that information and why they believe it to be true. We should help them understand what it means to confirm something. And confirming is not just sharing something you heard over Facebook from a friend of your brother-in-law. Similarly, we should challenge the public when we see them parroting certain journalistic tropes, such as "confirmed," "breaking," or "reports," when in truth they may not understand the nuances that make these terms very, very different.

We now report in a networked world, where information spreads by members of the public and it can be just as consequential as information spread by the media. Just as we cannot afford to underplay our own mistakes, we can no longer afford to underplay the public's role in propagating information. If we are going to embrace the notion of creating a more informed public, reporting is no longer enough. We must work harder to engage them, listen to them, teach them, learn from them. We must help them better understand what it means to be producers, as well as consumers, of information.

If we wish to remain relevant in this networked world of ours, this must become a core part of our mission. It's no longer enough to just inform people. We must do whatever we can to create this more informed public. And we can't afford to wait until the next Newtown or Boston to begin anew.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Q&A Session:

Robert Quigley: All right. So, I have this list of note card questions here, but I want to toss them for a second, because today while we were all sitting here listening to all the great content this morning, Andy was sort of listening to us, sort of listening to Al Jazeera, sort of doing some work and some Internet sleuthing, and ID'd a Twitter account for one of the suspects in the bombing. And so, I want to ask you, what was the process? How confident are you that it's the right person? How did you get his phone number?

Andy Carvin: Hmm. So, last night, I arrived here pretty late, and I went directly to my hotel, turned on Game of Thrones, and fell asleep. So, I had no clue any of this was happening until I hit the snooze button a few times and woke up and opened up my computer and was pretty shocked. So, I initially told my colleagues, "Don't expect me to contribute much today. There's just too much going on." But my Twitter followers essentially wouldn't let me take some time off. And almost from the moment I woke up,

people started sending me Twitter accounts supposedly associated with the younger of the two suspects. And they both seemed promising because they'd been around for a while, but the stuff they were tweeting about was purely to do with sports. They weren't interacting with anyone. And after a while, it became clear that these were actually existing accounts of people who logged into their settings and just changed it to this guy's name and picture. And also, if you Googled the cache version of some of these tweets, you would have seen it was originally from someone else.

But then over time, some of my Twitter followers started telling me about a third or fourth Twitter account by this point. And it really intrigued me, because of all the engagement that was taking place. It was clearly a kid who enjoyed hip-hop, smoked a bit of weed, had a lot of fun, and hung out with his friends a lot. And what I did was, I decided to take a look. First, I took a look to see who was following him. I went to the bottom of that list to look up those names to see if any of them were talking about him. And then I did the same thing for his twitter archive. He has about 1,000 tweets, give or take. So, I went to the earliest ones and worked my way back up to the people that he was having conversations with and saw what they were talking about. Some of them had locked their Twitter accounts, but many of them were essentially saying, "I can't believe I know this dude."

There were several photos that were in the feed. One that is taken by the person who has the account. It's like of his legs at a swimming pool. And his shorts clearly say something about Cambridge wrestling. There were also two pictures of a group of people, one of them who looks a lot like him, including with the hat turned back. There were references to Chechnya, but they were old references. So basically, all of those things came together.

So, I mean, I don't know. I rarely say anything is confirmed, but I'm 95% sure this is the guy.

Robert Quigley: So, everybody's treating it as if it is him. What if the 5% comes up? What happens then?

Andy Carvin: Well, we figure out how we got the information wrong. There are still Twitter followers who are challenging me saying, "The stuff he's talking about doesn't sound like something a terrorist would say." Well, I don't know any terrorists personally—[laughter]—at least none that are currently terrorists. I actually have met one guy who was a former member of Al-Qaida, but that's a whole other story. But, you know, who knows? You can't really tell. They were saying, "This guy's talking too much about sports and hip-hop."

Robert Quigley: But how do you hedge that? In other words, how do you make it clear that your 95% instead of 100%?

Andy Carvin: By saying that. By saying that over and over again. I would say things [like], "I cannot go as far [as] to say this is confirmed, but it's in the high likelihood that this is legit. And these are the reasons why I've come to this conclusion." And if we're wrong, we'll have to figure out why all these other things fell into place. So, I'm documenting every step of the way being as transparent about it.

Robert Quigley: And he did that before noon, so he's doing a lot of work. I love the idea of having a better, deeper conversation with the public through social media. It's something I, you know, preach to my students. And I think that's an opportunity that's missed a lot. Why seven years after Twitter's debut at South-by-Southwest here in Austin are we still treating this as a one-way street? I mean, you're sitting there saying, "We've got to get past the one-way street of journalism." Why are we still there? And how do we change that?

Andy Carvin: [sighs] Culture is hard to change. I think in any newsroom you're going to find champions at all levels of the organization, but that doesn't mean they're going to turn on the dime. You know, I'm lucky that I work for NPR and they've given me the latitude to spend a lot of time experimenting and basically use my Twitter account to say, "This is what we know and what we don't know." So, earlier you described my Twitter account as a one-person newswire. I actually prefer to think of it as a collaborative newsroom where I'm the one hosting it. Because much of the stuff I'm sharing simply is not known to be true, but I'm always discussing it in that context. And that's still a scary idea to a lot of newsrooms. And, I mean, I know I'm an outlier. I don't expect lots of people to be imitating me. I know very few people who really do. But at the same time, I think, like I said before, there are times when it's all hands on deck. And some newsrooms that do allow a certain amount of latitude, they sometimes drag people back to their original job duties. And so, right at the moment when you should be focusing on social media, you might be doing something else.

Robert Quigley: So beyond the obvious tools like Twitter that you are most comfortable in, I think, and Facebook, I've seen Reddit popping up quite a bit. I'm a fan of Reddit. I actually enjoy getting information there for my own entertainment, but also sometimes for things I'm going to tweet that I think are newsworthy. They were very, very active in this Boston investigation.

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Robert Quigley: In my original question I wrote last night around 9:00 was, "varying degrees of success." Now I've got to say, hmm, a little less degrees of success. They named two people last night who don't look like they are the suspects. It was based off of scanner traffic. There's an apology on Reddit today, where they are saying, "We sincerely apologize to the family of this person we named." And everybody is jumping on them in the comments as well. What do journalists need to do with communities like

Reddit? And how engaged should we be with a community that's kind of on the outside like that?

Andy Carvin: Right. Well, I first saw their work on 4chan, which is even more of a wild west than Reddit. And I spend a decent amount of time on Reddit. I mean, not enough that I proudly call myself a *Redditor* or anything like that, but, you know, I've been there for a while and occasionally chime in. There was an awesome conversation with the guy who invented the Dothraki language for Game of Thrones this week. One of the best Reddit discussions ever. But they also can be pretty brutal and un-PC at times. And so, when you looked at the collection of photos they analyzed, one of the very first photos you saw, it had a list of things that they were noticing. And I think after the word *backpack*, they used the word *brown*, and that's when things can get very uncomfortable, because, you know, whether we like it or not, we know that there is going to be racial and ethnic profiling being done by the authorities. That's always how they've gone about doing their job. It is what it is. It gets awkward when the public starts doing it, and they start making circles around people's heads with those red markers. And then suddenly, a news organization like the Post notices that one of those photos is among the photos that the FBI was circulating somewhat quietly to other law enforcement, and they felt that gave them license to run with it and put it on their front page. And so, they all got it wrong. And so, I think there's a place for every online community, and sometimes they rise to the occasion and sometimes they fall flat. You just have to be cautious of that whenever you're doing it, because, you know, mistakes happen constantly on Twitter.

Robert Quigley: Speaking of mistakes, so the Gabby Giffords thing, I happened to have retweeted NPR when I was a Statesman account, when I worked at the Austin American Statesman, so I was part of that as well.

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Robert Quigley: And then last night, I was up till 3:30 in the morning tweeting Boston news and came across…. I was listening to the scanner, too, online and heard on the scanner some names and tweeted one of the names. And I said, "From the scanner…" And as a journalist, I think of that as chatter. And I guess I assumed other people would see that as chatter, but instead saw it as confirmation.

Andy Carvin: Right.

Robert Quigley: And so, what do we need to do with the public? Because I tweeted a few minutes after that, "Everybody be aware scanner traffic is not confirmation and even an arrest is not a conviction."

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Robert Quigley: You know, there's some education that needs to go on. You've talked about that in your talk, but what do we really need to do to make that education happen? And how can we, at a journalism school, how can we inform the masses that go to UT on something like that?

Andy Carvin: I think essentially what you need is, there need to be certain elements, people in your newsroom, that are offering color commentary on what you're doing and how you're doing it. So when I was listening to scanner traffic earlier this week or like during Newtown, I retweeted some of it, but I also said, "This is what the first responders are talking about. And this captures the chaos, because they are contradicting each other. And the news is contradicting each other as well. And so, take all of this with a grain of salt and see my Twitter feed as capturing the chaos, rather than interpreting it with an ultimate answer, because I have no idea what the answer is here." And so, then when I see people write something saying, like, "A. Carvin has confirmed blah, blah, blah," I call them out publicly and I said, "Take a look at what I said. I did not confirm." I use that word very, very rarely, and we all should. We need to stop putting *confirmed* and *breaking* in all caps in front of all our tweets, because it's pointless. It doesn't help. So, I think, you know, we still want to get the story right, but I think we need to be measured and a bit more humble in terms of how we're sharing this stuff.

And like I said in the talk, ultimately, a lot of this information is now coming from the public via social media. And some of them do it very well, but some of them have no idea what they are doing. Because, you know, the term citizen journalism is funny, because I think when it was first defined I don't know how many years ago, I think people thought a citizen journalist would be this ideal Jeffersonian democracy type, who would donate dozens of their hours each week to become a community reporter. Whereas, while that does happen, I think in reality the vast majority of citizen journalists whose content get incorporated into the news are conducing random acts of journalism. They're in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time, depending on what you're talking about. And often, you know, they are scared as hell. They don't know what's going on, but they feel like they've got to document some of it. And so, while we share that information, I think we need to put that in the right context. But if we're able to talk to them as well, either while it's happening or after the fact, you know, we need to help them move down the right path, so it doesn't take us all on a wild goose chase.

Robert Quigley: It's a good point about being humble and also kind of using the right words to convey what you're trying to say. I should have said, you know, "This is scanner traffic." I'm used to it, because I did it for 16 years, listening to the scanner and going, "OK, that turned out to be nothing," or whatever.

Andy Carvin: Right.

Robert Quigley: But you need to remember to do that, absolutely. What news organizations or journalists out there do you think are doing this right? I mean, who do you look to and say, "Yes," like that?

Andy Carvin: Well, I mean, there are a lot of folks out there. You've got the team at the Lede of the New York Times. I think they are really excellent at going through social media, finding out what's important, and sharing it in the right context with the public. Same thing with the folks at Reuters, AP. The Guardian does some top-notch live blogging. I have to give a shout out to my brother, because he's the social media editor at the AP, but hey, it's nepotism. [laughter] So that, you know, I think there are a lot of people who've done a really good job integrating social media into their work flows. There aren't too many people out there that work the way I do, because it takes a lot of time and a lot of resources. And many news organizations won't allow for it. You know, when I do see people doing it, it tends to be people like a former colleague of mine, Ahmed Al Omran, who lives in Saudi Arabia. He runs a blog called the Riyadh Bureau. And so, he's got the luxury of time to really talk back and forth with people and sorting this stuff out. But at the same time, I think there's a ton of this probably going on for stories here and there that we don't hear about, just because it's become a routine part of our business. You know, it's hard to list how many reporters I've seen having productive conversations with the public, because it happens so often. It just hasn't become part of our institutionalized routines yet.

Robert Quigley: Okay, so backing up a little bit, when you said that you go out and you basically educate the public as you're going on Twitter, you're saying, "No, this is not confirmed. That's not what I said," that kind of thing. Do you see a shift in the larger conversation? Because you have enough followers now that maybe you could start to see some movement when people are retweeting what you're saying. Do you actually see this have a positive effect?

Andy Carvin: Well, you know, I see it among the people that I engage with. There definitely is a pattern, especially for people who embrace becoming citizen journalists for a long period of time. I noticed during the Arab Spring that there would be people, when their revolutions began, they weren't particularly good at sharing information, but within a few weeks or a few months, they were masters of it. And I think a lot of it was learning on the job, but I think a lot of it was also engaging with a variety of journalists, including me, telling them, when we would tell them, "This is productive and this is not." And so, you know, beyond that, who knows.

Robert Quigley: All right. So, you talk about that every time, and we all bemoan that. You know, there's this dead air time and they're just filling it by going in circles, but they kind of have to. Social media also has an air time feel to me, in that I always thought of it as like when you're running an engaged account that you're close to, it's like a close cousin to being a radio talk show host. You know, you're taking calls in and you're answering and all

that. What is the downside to going dark on social media until you get that second or third source that you said that we don't get so often? Could we not just tweet, "We're checking on this, and we'll get back to you," and go away for a while? Or, "We have a lead that we're following up on." Or, is that just not enough, so we need to keep talking?

Andy Carvin: I think it depends. Like this morning when I was trying to figure out if this particular Twitter account was legit, there were times when I wouldn't talk about it for 30 minutes. And I would tell people, "I'm looking into this. Bear with me." I think if you're upfront about not knowing the answers and explain to them a bit about what it's going to take in order to get there, then they are quite forgiving. I think things get more frustrating — and I saw this just a couple of days ago when news organizations tweeted a confirmation of arrests. Some of them went dark for as long as 30 minutes without making a correction. You know, I think it would have helped for them, as soon as they realized something was going to be wrong, to say, "We're receiving conflicting reports. We'll get back to you." The silence can be deafening. So I'd rather acknowledge that we've got a bit of an issue here and we're trying to figure it out, or [say], "We don't know what we're talking about yet, so we'll be back later," rather than absolute silence.

Robert Quigley: So since you brought up corrections again, I'll ask you, how should corrections be handled? If I were to tweet the wrong name of a suspect for a major news organization, do you delete the tweet? Do you tweet, "Oops, we messed up," and leave it there? What do you suggest?

Andy Carvin: I don't think there's a right or wrong answer in this, because you have to do what your conscience and your professional gut tells you. When Gabby Giffords happened, we decided to keep the tweet. Within a couple minutes of posting it, I posted a note saying, "We're getting conflicting reports now." We later corrected it. I then later wrote a brief essay explaining all the steps that went into the reporting and how it got screwed up and how it propagated from there. But we stuck to the idea of keeping the tweet on the site or on Twitter because I just knew that people would accuse us of a cover-up. You know, NPR is too much of a political target, that if we deleted that, we'd catch hell from someone.

Robert Quigley: But then the flipside is people keep retweeting the wrong tweet even after you're putting better information out.

Andy Carvin: Yeah. One of the things we can do in those situations is that if anyone with a particularly high number of Twitter followers does it, you contact them and say, "Please correct this." You know, I'd love for there to be some sort of like recall function on Twitter, that if you make a mistake, that it would either, I mean, it could be removed from everyone else who retweets it, but I think ideally it would replace it with an update and do a forced retweet to everyone who'd retweeted it, through their account, so their followers would get it too. I mean, that could also get abused very

easily, but in some ways, it's a lose/lose situation, but I would rather be transparent and have to deal with the aftermath of it, rather than remove something and deal with the cover-up.

Robert Quigley: I'd be happy with an edit function and the ability to say it was edited or something.

Andy Carvin: Right. That would cover a lot, especially if that edit propagates across people's retweets.

Robert Quigley: Right.

Andy Carvin: That would be great.

Robert Quigley: So, if anybody knows Twitter in here, give them a call. [laughter] So, one thing about corrections though is, so on Twitter, you know, with Gabby Giffords, correct me if I'm wrong, didn't NPR actually air that before you tweeted it?

Andy Carvin: Yeah. What happened there is, I believe, a spouse of one of our journalists in Tucson was actually at the supermarket where it happened, and so, they contacted their spouse. The spouse immediately alerted us. We were…. I think we might have even…. We were among the ones that broke the initial report that a shooting had occurred. And then about 15 minutes to the top of the hour, they alerted one of our weekend editors that one of their local law enforcement sources had said that she passed away. And so, not wanting to be a bit more careful before going on air at the top of the hour, one of our people called a staff member in Congress, an aide, I believe, to reconfirm it, and they said the same thing. What they didn't know at the time was that aide and the law enforcement official [were] getting bad information from the same person. And so, at the top of the hour, they went with it as our lead story. Then our web editing staff heard that on the radio, frantically changed the title of our lead story, [and] frantically sent out an email alert to everyone. I was sitting at a restaurant with my family and saw the alert come in, and then I checked the website and saw that, and I saw no one was managing Twitter over the weekend, so I copied and pasted the headline and sent it out.

Robert Quigley: And that's common, yeah.

Andy Carvin: So basically, it's a reporting failure that cascades across platforms.

Robert Quigley: And if I remember correctly, the mini-outcry…. I don't think there was a big outcry, because NPR, you did such a great job with NPR that people weren't like, "Oh, there goes NPR again," or something.

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Robert Quigley: But the mini-outcry over that was, "See, social media." And you mentioned in your thing that social media is an easy target. However, this was broadcast on the radio, which has been around a little bit longer than Twitter, before you ever tweeted. Why is social media such a target? Why didn't people go, "Boy, we have a problem with radio right now"?

Andy Carvin: Yeah. Because there are enough people, I guess, who want to be curmudgeons about something. [laughter] You know, there are cranky folks who don't want to change and/or they're pundits who have taken a certain position on journalism and social media and they don't want to counter their own narrative. You know, it's easy to be fearful of things that we don't use well or understand. Simple as that.

Robert Quigley: Does anybody have any questions that they want to come up? I don't want to hog all the question time. So, come on down to the microphones if you have questions for Andy or for me, either way. But in the meantime, I want to ask you a little bit more about Reddit itself, because they were — I saw tweets last night saying, "Welcome to the new world of journalism." Right? So, how much can we trust that? And what should we like specifically do with information we see on Reddit? I mean, I know you said you should be involved there and that kind of thing, but should we outside of this mistake and this problem, I know I've seen you say that you kind of like think that's a tweet journalists should pay attention to.

Andy Carvin: Mm-hmm.

Robert Quigley: Why exactly?

Andy Carvin: Because oftentimes they nail it. You know? I think you should follow anyone who has a generally decent track record of digging things up. That doesn't mean you run with them every time, but you add that to your repertoire. You know, I'm not going to start ignoring Reddit as of now because they screwed this up. I'm still going to pay attention, but I'm also going to continue to take a lot of it with a grain of salt. You know? Even your best sources you sometimes have to be skeptical of for whatever agendas they have and all that. And so, when people say, "This is like the new face of journalism," I prefer to think of it more as this is *a* new aspect of journalism. Of course, it's not *the* face. We're not replacing one with the other, I think. I think that's intellectually lazy.

Robert Quigley: You know, I have people ask me that all the time, too. Like, "Well, how can we trust this community there?" And I say, "Well, I trust them as far as they are a tip or they're a source." And as journalists, we don't just take tips or a source and say this is fact.

Andy Carvin: And why do they trust us? They often don't.

Robert Quigley: Yeah, that's true.

Man: There's a lot of Twitter traffic today saying, "Journalists shouldn't be retweeting scanner traffic, period."

Andy Carvin: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Man: And you guys sort of said, "Well, we want to capture the chaos." But is that really our role as journalists? Shouldn't we be trying to bring clarity out of chaos, instead of repeating chaos?

Andy Carvin: Why is there only one story that needs to be told? Why is there only one narrative that comes out of this? I have countless colleagues at NPR that are focusing on a dozen different aspects of the story, and so why isn't there room to capture the emotional aspects of what first responders are dealing with?

Man: Why should we be repeating misinformation, though, from amped up cops at the scene of a crime, who may or may not be saying true things into the microphone?

Andy Carvin: I don't see it as reporting misinformation. I think it's capturing the fact that no one quite knows what's going on. I think it's completely legitimate to tell the public, "This is how messy this is right now. You can listen for yourself and see that this is a total mess." And I think more importantly, the public is already retweeting this stuff. I think it is reckless on our part when we completely ignore it, because part of our job is to warn the public when people might be using things the wrong way. So, I would rather capture aspects of scanner traffic and discuss it in its proper context so other people do the same.

Man: Don't you worry about the crappy signal-to-noise ratio on Twitter?

Andy Carvin: Follow my Twitter account and decide for yourself.

Man: I do! I think your Twitter account is great.

Andy Carvin: 99% of Twitter is noise. Or, I'll rephrase it. 99.999% of traffic is noise. [laughter] And it is part of our job to sort through that .001% and make that useful information. It's kind of like saying, you know, 99.999% of the public's opinions are noise or what they talk about at coffee shops are noise. That's human nature. People talk. They talk smack among themselves, you know. It's not all going to be relevant. So find what is relevant, get rid of the noise, and do your job.

Man: At like 1:30 a.m. last night when the scanner traffic started being tweeted around, it was being tweeted around like as a trending hashtag at some point without journalists doing anything.

Andy Carvin: Right.

Man: The conversation is going. What you could do is go in there and say, "This is what scanner traffic…."

Andy Carvin: The cat's out of the bag, which is why I think we need to take on the role of trying to slow down the conversation. Because, like I said, I think it's reckless of us if we pretend the public isn't sharing literally millions of tweets among themselves claiming the scanner traffic is truly accurate, when we can take that scanner traffic and put it in the proper context or whatever the report happens to be.

Sarah: Preach. [laughter] That's not what I was going to say. Hi. I'm Sarah.

Andy Carvin: Hi.

Sarah: Texas State University. [cheers from audience members] That's right. So, I was very surprised to hear…. And I follow you on Twitter, so I know that you engage actively when you hear rumors. You're like, "You know, I heard this, whatever," you know. But that surprises me—I work for a private brand—that news organizations aren't using this best practice in terms of engaging rumors and misinformation online about news in the way that private industry engages brand, their brand. Like, you know, if I was Wal-Mart and someone said, "Wal-Mart sucks," you know, I would reply to that person and engage with that person. That is a best practice in the private industry and on social media. So, it's just very surprising to me that news organizations aren't using this practice in terms of news as their content, as their business, and using that best practice. So, I would like to know….

Andy Carvin: Well, let's not over-generalize here. There are plenty of news organizations that do it to one extent or another, just as there are certain brands that do it [to] one extent or another. It's just what happens is we hear about the ones who do it the best and we hear about the ones who do it the worst, but the ones who are just pretty okay about it, we don't hear much about. So I'd be very careful about making that type of generalization.

Sarah: Okay. Fair enough. But why do you think there is this resistance to doing it? You know, it's not accepted as a best practice or is it considered just defunct?

Andy Carvin: I hate the term 'best practice,' because nothing is the best practice. You know, what I'm doing is an interesting practice or an emerging practice or maybe a bad practice that could be improved. But there's a lot of

what we're doing on social media that are bad practices that could be improved, because this is all new, relatively speaking. And so, I urge experimentation whenever possible and documenting our mistakes as well as possible, because we never know when we're going to come upon a technique that in certain types of stories will bear fruit. Simple as that.

Robert Quigley: And there's a mentality out there [of], what do we get for this? What do we get for this staff member that we're paying for to spend this much time on it? I mean, NPR allowing Andy to do all that he does shows that they either just trust that he's saying this is worth doing it or they believe it's worth doing it, and he could answer that, but not every organization understands that or believes that. So you have to do…. If you're really a cheerleader for, you know, "Hey, we need to do this," in your news organization, you need to make a case for it and educate the higher ups to explain why this is important.

Sarah: Thank you.

Andy Carvin: Thanks. How much time do we have left or how many questions do we have left?

Rosental Calmon Alves: One.

Andy Carvin: OK.

Rosental Calmon Alves: Go ahead.

Man: Yeah. Just a quick question. Andy, how do you feel about the hierarchy at NPR in terms of what you do? And do you ever think it would be useful for you or helpful for you if you had an editor who sort of aggregated what you aggregate? In other words, somebody who kind of….

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Man: You know, because then I think that would change the scanner traffic dynamic to a degree, for instance.

Andy Carvin: Well, you know, in some ways, that already happens, because I'm in constant touch with our breaking news bloggers and they incorporate what I'm doing when it's relevant. I was going to go on air about 45 minutes ago, but they concluded I'm too busy, so they summarized what I was working on and had a couple of our reporters explain it to people. You know, I don't always have to be the one bearing the information to everyone, especially across other platforms. So, I think there are pros and cons of how that would work. At the moment, I'm in this netherworld, where I'm literally halftime in the product/management part of the company and halftime in the newsroom. So, we clearly have a long way to figure out how I fit into all this.

It's not…. If it's not obvious to us, it's probably not going to be obvious to most news organizations. And so, you know, when we figure it out, I'll let you know.

Man: I just want to follow up though.

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Man: I mean, you've been doing this for a couple of years.

Andy Carvin: Yeah.

Man: Why have you not figured it out?

[Laughter.]

Andy Carvin: Because it's not easy to figure out. You know, I have my…. Well, for example, I think ideally I would like to live in a world where there are at least one or two people at every news desk and at every NPR show that is so social media literate that I don't need to hand-hold them, and that I perhaps serve as an editor of theirs, and every show and every desk has a work flow to incorporate that into the rest of their coverage. I haven't seen a single news organization succeed at that yet. And it's not because we don't want to, because there are a ton of people in NPR management that want to do that. It's just it's hard to take a staff with 900 people and get all of this stuff to turn on a dime. So, I mean, yeah, sure, there are certain things I wish would happen faster, but I'm not surprised. And as of yet, I haven't been able to point to another newsroom to say, "See, we need to do exactly what they just did."

Robert Quigley: So, this is pretty much the end of our talk. There's a lot of educators in this room. I want to tell you that you should look at his Twitter stream from today, deconstruct it, and make a lesson out of it, because you're getting to see the process of a new way of looking at a story and taking a story apart. So, it's really, really informative. We've kept Andy away from Twitter for 45 minutes, so we'll let him get back to it.

Andy Carvin: Oh, my God!

[Laughter.]

Robert Quigley: Thank you very much.

Andy Carvin: Did anything happen? [laughter] Thanks.