

**It's All Journalism Interview: Kate Gardiner, Distill Media (12/08/12)****Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Today our guest is Kate Gardiner. She writes. She shoots. She tweets. Kate Gardiner is a digital strategy consultant who works with media organizations and non-profits. She creates online strategies to help companies find their voice on social media. How you doing Kate?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I'm doing great Michael, how are you?

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

I'm fine. So, tell me a little bit about your experience, how you became a journalist.

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I did it the old fashioned way, all the thousands of internships leading to the Great Recession, which put me in graduate school at Medill in 2008. And then, I started working with new and different clients I guess at the beginning of the true era of social media for news starting in Chicago at WBEZ, moving to PBS NewsHour. I went freelance for a while and then at Al Jazeera and then I started my own company here in New York, consulting with a lot of bigger names that find me interesting, which is convenient.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

So, how did you get into social media?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

During said Great Recession, there were no jobs in reporting. I thought I wanted to be a features reporter, a city desk reporter. I wanted to do the hard-core breaking news stuff. But, A, none of the organizations I wanted to work with were particularly "online first," and, B, none of them had space really in their newsrooms for a person who wanted to do that. But, there were a lot of opportunities to develop Web strategies and work with online community building and also to connect tools with those newsrooms that really simplified the way that we were producing content.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

What is it you like about social media — or not like?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I don't know if it's "like" anymore. I think it was the pace of it. It is, honestly, the only thing that's faster than breaking news. And so, that's always been very, very engaging and something that pulls me back to the newsroom every single time I think about going someplace else and doing something different.

The thing that you can "like" is the repeated interactions with your community and the obvious growth of both your statistics and your impact. The thing that you cannot "like"

is instead of thinking creatively, some of us have started to pander to our audiences and that has led to a little bit of a decline in the quality of content. It's also become really "me too," which means that everybody's on it and it's not as innovative.

It's not as creative. As the Internet becomes a little more stable and the "wild west" goes away, we're going to keep seeing this sort of control clamp down on both how content is getting out and on the tools that we can experiment with and the freedom to experiment.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Who are those people clamping down? Is it the news organizations? Is it just companies that want to sort of control their message?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

It's all sorts of things. It's the diversification of audience. It's the realization that social media is in fact important and impactful in a way that no one really expected it to be. It's the realization that social can also highlight your failings. It kind of showcases the best parts of your organization and highlights the weaknesses in it.

If you've got issues communicating between departments and you can become really sensitive the fact that messaging is not consistent between those parts of your organization.

If you have speed issues or you have one employee who is clearly doing the bulk of the work, that becomes rapidly apparent and it becomes overly tied to that individual employee's work rather than a piece of what your brand is doing.

I think that's both good and bad. I mean, you can create a social media rockstar who can only bring you more and more street cred, as it were. But, you're also diversifying and diluting the messaging that you're putting out there. And so, it can be a real struggle, especially with the older the organization, to build something that has the same sort of gravitas as everything else kind of does and that a lot of us who've built for many, many generations around specific distribution points or audience verticals. It's definitely ... the shift is the new form of communication.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

You've worked at news organizations both hyper-local and global, how different is it to develop a social media voice for a local community as compared to a global one?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I think it depends on what you're looking for returns. If you're looking at local stuff, it's going to be more impactful if you have 500 people who live within an area that has 1,000. If you're looking at a global impact, it's much harder to make the noise that you want to and it's much harder to reach a diversified audience consistently, both because of timezones and just because messaging has to be both consistent and localized. It has to be specific to the niche that you're going after, but it also has to be broad

enough so that it has appeal to people outside of the organization. It's sort of that kind of stuff.

There are a finite number of people who live near a local community and are interested in it. It's definitely a decent number no matter where you are, but it's still going to be a finite number.

Globally focused brands are definitely not looking at any sort of cap other than the population of the Earth. It kind of depends on your end goals, but I think social sort of illustrates ways that you can and cannot frame your voice for those audiences.

### **Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Tell us about your company, Distill Media.

### **Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

There's not much to say. It's sort of an outgrowth of my freelancing. I've been freelancing for most of my career because that's how the market was and it was easier to make a decent income if I did it that way. I pulled it into a company, primarily, because my accountant started to say that I had to and because I needed to start having employees who can write some social content, who have time to schedule and book appointments for me. It's also just kind of "scale." If we have 15 accounts, I can only personally manage so many before I need to do something completely different, business development or attend some meeting, whatever the client expectations are.

### **Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Who are you clients? Are they non-profits? Are they businesses, big, small?

### **Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I've worked with a lot of public media branches. Right now, I'm working with WNYC and CBS Interactive, so it really depends on the scale of the project. But, I would say that I have a preference for non-profit media and public media, if given the option.

### **Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

What do you see as the value of social media for a company or organization? Why is it important that some company develop a social media strategy?

### **Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

Most companies need it just so they're aware and sort of grabbing their territory. It depends on the size of their organization and how long they've been around. But, being active and engaged in social can only help a young company, and being active and engaged on social can only help and encourage specific programming initiatives. It's also really important so that if in a crisis situation you have channels engaged and open to really reach out to the community of people who are either dependent on you, interested in you or who are going to support you through that crisis whatever that might be and however big that might be.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

What organizations and companies, media outlets, etc., who do you think's doing a good job with their social media?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I think it really depends on what you're looking for. I really like engaged and informative strategies, but I also know they kind of fizzle out after about 100,000 followers on Twitter.

You can really directly respond to your listeners and readers, but I don't know, it's sort of an economies of scale problem. You're only relevant to a certain point. I really liked what WNYC did during Sandy. That was actually authored by Caitlin Thompson [<http://www.wnyc.org/people/caitlin-thompson/>], politics editor. And I really enjoy what PBS NewsHour [[www.pbs.org/newshour/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/)] has done over its last four or five years. Huffington Post [<http://www.huffingtonpost.com>] does good things in terms of its social and digital distribution strategies, though they have different content and you can have any opinion about that you like. I've been enjoying what BuzzFeed [<http://www.buzzfeed.com>] has been doing lately, both because of how active and engaged its authors and editors are and because of the way that they're using social media to both program their site and to encourage participation and interaction on it. Another one that's kind of fun is The Verge [<http://www.theverge.com>], primarily because of what they're doing in terms of audience experience onsite, in addition to just the decent creation of content.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

You were in Phoenix recently for the Knight Ridder News Foo event. What was the event about? What did you take away from it?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

News Foo is an annual gathering of about 150 of the best minds in media and it's hosted by Google, O'Reilly [Media] and the Knight Foundation. Between those three organizations, their connections, you get this crew of technologists and media pundits and everybody else. It's really kind of hard to match anywhere else. I think the most fun part to me was hearing Harper Reed, who was there from the Obama campaign, and hearing his war stories from Chicago was kind of awesome. And actually getting to talk to [O'Reilly Media founder] Tim O'Reilly was good, because he was one of the guys who invented the Internet in a variety of ways.

I think for me one of the reasons I went was there was so many people there who think creatively and are all kind of past 'Oh my God, journalism is dead,' and we're all looking forward to 'OK, journalism isn't dead. Long live journalism. What are we going to do next?' I think that was the most interesting aspect of this News Foo. If you have been on the conference circuit as much as a lot of us have, you've heard all the, 'Oh my God, woe is us,' sort of speeches, but you haven't heard, 'OK, here's a creative solution to a specific niche audience. This is how we're monetizing. This is how we're doing what we want to do and how we're reaching that audience that's respected us for so

long.'

I think the other thing we got to talk about a lot about is the use of data and visualization and spacial awareness, connecting the community into an aggregate and then being able to tell the story of that aggregate and spot trends amongst them. I always like to talk to all the data nerds and it was fun hanging out with all the best ones in the globe.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Did you have any conversations that really just blew your mind this time?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

Actually, we spent a lot of time talking about women in technology and the role that we aren't playing in a lot of ways, in both the background and in the foreground of storytelling and the aggregate picture.

Harper told a lot of stories about how he was trying to recruit women and people of color into his team at Obama for American and how he just couldn't. I think that that continues to strike a cord across several groups of speakers, conferences in general, across many of the tech verticals. Just because there are not enough women who are advocating for ourselves and our skills and there are not enough women who are trained as engineers or who are trained in the technical side of the Internet to really help to provide balance and perspective for these male-dominated rooms. That was really interesting and it was kind of fun that it was Harper who was bringing it up, because he's a dude. And, of course, Rachel Sklar [of the Huffington Post and Mediate blog] started a lot of conversations, so that's kind of how that kind of works. I think we're all looking forward to the time that we're all beyond some sort of technical glass ceiling.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Have you ever encountered any glass ceiling for you being a female in journalism in just what you're able to do? Not necessarily technical, but social media, reporting and writing, have you ever encountered anything like that?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I think that the trick to all of it is that I'm probably pretty tough as a girl. It's not the first thing that comes to mind in the context of my career. It never has been. It never probably will be. I don't care much about that side of stuff. I know that it definitely impacted how comfortable I was at Al Jazeera and, conversely, it's been incredibly entertaining to work at WNYC, which is female dominated, from the CEO on down, at least half the department heads are female. So, that has been an amazing contrast for me in the last two or three years.

But, in general, I think being a female is an asset as long as you treat it as an asset. It's how you use it and it's how you look at it. I know I've covered some male-dominated sports and male-dominated industries, and it's definitely been incumbent on me to use

my "girlness," I guess, to get the story I wanted. I also know that a lot of people have told me things that they didn't want to tell me just because they were distracted by the whole "girl" thing. So, I'm happy with it and I'm somewhat conscious of it when I have to be, but I don't choose to be.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

Do you wish that you didn't have to have that sort of aspect to be part of the conversation if you, as a journalist, couldn't just be viewed as a journalist?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I think, actually, I don't really care and I know that I'm unusual.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

I'm not trying to make you be the spokesman for the women's movement, but I'm just curious that we sort of got into this conversation what your take was.

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I think I'm more inclined to take advantage of whatever assets I can find to either get myself into a position where it's beneficial to me or to get away from the discussion. But, I think, in the greater scheme of things, it would be lovely to have more women coders. I don't think I've ever worked with a female programmer who was in a higher position on the hierarchy on a news story. There are only about 10 of them, so my odds are pretty slim. I also think, at this point, I have worked with so many dude coders that I don't know how I would relate to another girl who's doing the same thing that I've done with so many male-dominated teams. So, I absolutely have no idea.

I don't particularly wish for it to go away. I kind of accept it as it is. That might be a flaw in my whole being a prominent female person in this situation, but it's also an asset because since I don't care, it's not something that's brought up in conversation and it's not something that we go out of our way to talk about. I don't know if we need to or not. Such as like.

**Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

The last few newsrooms that I've worked in have been female-dominated as far as the staff goes, so it's never really been an issue for me. It's never been a concern. But every once in a while, you hear somebody talking about it and we all have different things that are impacting us, our ability to do our job. We got into this sideline here and I was just curious to hear what your thoughts on it were.

So, tell me, what are your thoughts on social media in general. What's its value? As a journalist, who should be using social media and how should they be using it? Or not at all?

**Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

I think that it's not necessarily a fad. I think it's really important that we continue building these communities.

I think that we have to start driving our audience back to our freaking websites, though, because we have managed to put ourselves in an awkward position in terms of Facebook, where we're paying to play with people who were our consumers in the first place. We kind of give them to them.

It was very brilliant on the side of Facebook and I appreciate that. And it was brilliant in times of online audience centralization, which was nice. But, it is not contributing, not as much to our ads. And it is definitely not helping us to really build and engage on our pages in the way that we really want them to.

So, I don't want to be put into a position where I'm paying to play with people who I've spent so many years encouraging to participate and discuss topics and consumer content, and I know that's a situation that we've become part of on Facebook.

On Twitter, it's not as much of a situation because it's a broadcast medium. People expect it to be a broadcast medium and the entire nature of its sharing is a little bit more decentralized. The distribution of content is still controlled almost entirely by people on Twitter and it isn't entirely controlled by an algorithm on Facebook. An algorithm can be mechanically adjusted for profitability.

The ad-supported model of Twitter is a little bit more difficult to monetize and that's going to be trouble for Twitter continually for the next million years. But, as far as Facebook goes, they are going to monetize to the best of their ability because of the IPO and because they have more than a billion people on their website.

#### **Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

And we've helped to build these platforms where we have our content and these discussions that we created on their space as opposed to our space. And then those people are giving all their personal information and demographic information to Facebook.

They built the playground. It's difficult for us to get our people back from it or to figure out how to use that to monetize our content, I guess.

#### **Kate Gardiner, founder, Distill Media**

Ask the people who invented vertical distribution systems. We should be better at this. I don't know if news should've built Facebook, but we should've been more innovative about it in the first place, and now we're playing catchup. News is always playing catchup. So we'll see what happens.

#### **Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism**

That's pretty much our conversation. I appreciate you coming and talking to me Kate. If people want to get in contact with you, how can they do that?

#### **Kate Gardiner, founder, distill media**

I'm always on Twitter, @kategardiner or you can send me an email at [kate@dstl.it](mailto:kate@dstl.it)