

NinaDiamond, freelance journalist and humorist

Michael O'Connell

Welcome to It's All Journalism, my name is Michael O'Connell. Today I'm with Nina Diamond. Nina is a humorist, a journalist. She's written for *Omni*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*. She was also a performer and humorist with *Pandemonium* on NPR. Good morning Nina.

Nina Diamond

Hello, nice to be here.

Michael O'Connell

Well, I'm glad you're here. You came to my attention, actually, when I was interviewing [Mallary Tenore](#) a few weeks back and she mentioned when I asked her who were good people in social media, who were good tweeters, and she mentioned you as one of her top picks. Just because she likes reading the stuff that you do, but also what you've been able to do with lists. And actually, you wrote a [story](#) for her at [Poynter.org](#) about lists. So, how did you get to be so good at social media.

Nina Diamond

When people ask me what I think the key is to using social media, I think they might be surprised by my answer, because quite often we see things written or we hear interviews with experts and self-appointed experts about social media who like to give a lot of tips. And everything is very general. It's not tailored to the person's goals. You know, you'll see crazy things like, "What's the best time of day to tweet?" Well, that really all depends on what you do or who your followers are. There is no best time of day to tweet in general. So they'll be very broad, crazy things like that about using social media effectively, and what I think all of these are missing is that social media, like any other form of media, is a way of communicating and it all boils down to the personality and the skills and the goals and objectives of the person doing the communicating. So, this is, I know, a long answer to a short question, but what makes anybody effective in any form of communication is going to be simply their skills at communicating.

I joke all the time that I started talking when I was 9 months old, which is true, and I haven't shut up since. So, I'm a good communicator. It comes naturally to me. I was born this way. I think it's something that maybe is inherent in people. They have the gift for gab. Those of us who write, we have a talent for communicating, and then really it becomes about polishing those skills, becoming better at it.

For me, I feel that the most effective use of Twitter is to be yourself, is to not approach it in a sterile way like some people do, where it's totally devoid of feeling and personality. I think what makes effective tweeting is the same thing that makes any form of communication effective.

Michael O'Connell

What attracted you to this? What made you decide, "Hey, I want to try social media. I want to do this." Did you have a particular goal in mind? Did you say, "Oh, I've heard this is a good way to get promotion out there," or something?" Or did you just sort of wander into it?

Nina Diamond

I joined Twitter in the summer of 2010, right at the point where it was becoming basically an international newsroom and so that was what brought me in. I probably could've come in a little bit sooner, and it had become a newsroom a little before then. That was what brought me in and I think that since then any journalist who had been skeptical about the value of Twitter isn't skeptical any more, because the news is breaking there through independent journalists as well as those attached to specific news organizations. The news will break there even before the news organizations will have something in their newspapers, in print or online or television. You'll see quite often a reporter, for example, from CNN who's breaking the story on Twitter and it's an hour before you actually see it on the air on CNN. So Twitter really has become the breaking news forum as well as an international newsroom. And I think every journalist needs to be there in some way.

Michael O'Connell

Now, do you remember what your "a-ha moment" was? I can tell you sort of what mine was. It was actually the Japanese earthquake, where I was watching it on television and had my phone next to me. And I'd been tweeting for just a couple of months and I just went to the Twitters stream and started seeing things just pop up and people were reacting and people going, "Oh, well, here's a place where you can send out relief aid and here's the latest thing I've heard from this news outlet." It was just each of the news outlets covering it from different ways and people providing information from Japan. So, do you remember your moment where you said, "Oh yeah, this makes sense."

Nina Diamond

I think that I felt from the beginning that it was an important place to be. I think I've had many, many "a-ha moments" since I started on Twitter. I think the timing of when I started that I came into it sort of with that "a-ha" feeling of "Here is basically my office."

I've always had my office at home, though I've also sometimes had offices at magazines and newspapers. I've been a freelance journalist for 30 years. So, I've worked on assignments for many newspapers and magazines. I've been a regular contributor to many of them. But my office primarily has been at home.

And when I joined Twitter, I came to realize instantly that Twitter was now my office. And there have been countless a-ha moments that reinforce the important news value of Twitter in the 2 1/2 years that I've been on. Almost every really large story, whether it's confined to the U.S. or is international, it's abroad, has reinforced to me how important it

is and it really gets the journalist's adrenaline going to be watching this break in real time and be a part of chain of information that gets spread out.

Even if you're not the journalist on the ground reporting the story, you are one of countless journalists who are tweeting links to people's stories, retweeting and making comments and passing along the tweets of other people's reporting so that you can share this with your followers.

And there are a lot of people who are in the media, who are journalists, as well as civilians, as I call them, who follow journalists and have set their Twitter feeds up so this is how they're getting their news. So I know, from the feedback I get from my followers, that I'm a news source for them. When there's breaking news, they are really happy that I'm there passing along things that they can trust because they feel, well, a professional journalist has vetted this and she's only going to pass things along in her feed that we know that we can trust. Of course, mistakes happen and corrections have to be made sometimes and we all do those. And they know that that will happen as well.

Michael O'Connell

How do you do a correction? If you get a name wrong or a fact wrong, how do you let people know?

Nina Diamond

I do it in multiple ways. If someone reports something and I retweet either manually where I have actually typed out "RT" and "@so and so" and then I type out their tweet and it's a link to something, and maybe there is an error that they made in the their tweet. And, I might do a manual RT that may or may not have a comment of my own that I put in front of it. If it's that kind retweet or an automatic one, where you just click the retweet button and it's basically a snapshot of their tweet that goes out in your timeline.

Either way, if there's a mistake that is in somebody's tweet, as soon as I become aware of it, I will either put a tweet out that has a correction in it as well as the deleting the incorrect one. Sometimes I'll just delete the incorrect one and then if that person has corrected it, I will then put their correction straight out there with my own comment.

It depends really on what the error is, how they've handled it, whether it's they've made an error of some sort or I made one, you know, there are a lot of different ways to correct it. But, I always make sure that people will see in my timeline that it's been corrected and that I will go ahead and delete the one that's incorrect.

The reason that I delete it is that a lot of times people aren't paying close attention and they'll go look in the Twitter stream and they'll see this tweet not realizing that a few tweets down the road is a correction. So, they'll see this incorrect tweet, not know it's incorrect and they might retweet it. So, I don't want incorrect information to continue to be sent out, so I will go ahead and delete the incorrect one.

Michael O'Connell

It's funny, what you were saying before, that people come to you as a journalist to sort of vet some of this news. We've been trying to set up this interview for a couple of weeks and playing phone tag. And actually, the last time I touched base with you, or tagged you, as it were, you said, "The pope is stepping down, I'm tweeting this." So, I caught you at the moment of breaking news. How did you tweet out the pope? What were you doing?

Nina Diamond

Well, because I follow close to 3,000 Twitter accounts now and large portion of that is media outlets, people in the media and other information sources. So, I have got a tremendous amount of information coming in. And then on top of that, there will be retweets coming into my timeline that alert me to maybe someone I hadn't been following or hadn't put on my lists, which is also another way of following people unofficially, you can follow them through your list as opposed to officially in your follow account. Retweets of stuff will come in.

Also, I'll do a search when there's a breaking news story, I'll search some keywords, because I want to see what's out there. There are often reporters on the ground who I am not following and they, because there's tens of thousands of reporters around the world, you can't be following all of them. So, when the pope story broke, for example, I would go do a search and I'm going to see who's out there, what're they saying, what might I want to retweet or do an original tweet with maybe a link to their story or something like that. So, it's a combination of things.

And, quite often, if I'm at home with my laptop and I've got the TV on and I'll be watching, switching around, especially if it's something that's very, very big, where I know that all of the cable news channels are going to have live coverage of something, and I'll switch around to all of them to see what they're saying, what they're reporting, what's the video they're showing. So, it's sort of a two-screen operation.

Michael O'Connell

It sounds like what you're trying to do is organize the Twitterverse, for lack of a better word.

Nina Diamond

Yeah, I've always wanted to organize the universe so that it functions to my liking, and Twitter, in a certain way, let's you do that. At least, in part, you get to order your own news universe in an organized way.

Michael O'Connell

OK. The way you sort of presented this I found kind of interesting. You made it seem — I assume that you're not getting paid to this. This is part of what you do.

Nina Diamond

People have asked me all the time, "How can somebody monetize being on Twitter?" Well, that's like saying, "How do you monetize your networking?" and "How do you monetize your Rolodex, your list of contacts?"

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Nina Diamond

Twitter is just a tool that we use to better do things that we used to do using other tools. So, as a journalist, I'm constantly networking through Twitter. Almost every person I've interviewed in the last 2 1/2 years, that has been initiated first through contact on Twitter. Interviews for stories that I had sold to publications, I have made my first contact with them through Twitter. So, it's a way of networking with people. It's a very fast way to contact people directly to them as opposed to calling up and having to go through multiple people, their various representatives or whomever, if they have them. You can get people very, very quickly.

And I'm constantly interacting with editors as well. So, for example, Mallery at Poynter, when I did the article for them on lists, that came about because Julie [Moos], who is the editorial director of Poynter online, she and I were following each other on Twitter and she asked me, she sent me a message asking if I would like to do a story about lists. She liked my use of lists in Twitter and asked if I'd like to write an article about it and Mallery's the managing editor at Poynter and, among various other things, oversees those kinds of "How To" articles, so she then introduced me to Mallery.

But whether a journalist is interacting with a potential source or a potential person to interview or profile, or an editor that either may ask them to do an article or whom you'd like to pitch an article, all of that is going on Twitter simultaneously with also the tweets that we journalists send out having to do with news.

It could be that I'm covering a big news event and by covering I mean not that I'm on the ground, you know, where this is happening, but I am relaying the information of the people who are through my Twitter stream.

Or, it could be that I am sending out a tweet with a link to an article that I've done that's in a magazine, a newspaper or other publication. Every time one of my pieces is published, obviously, I'm going to put that out through Twitter. Often, when there are breaking stories or maybe an anniversary of something, I will also put out a tweet with a link to a story I've done in the past. You know, I've got 30 years worth of stories. So, many of them are in online archives. Some aren't, but the majority of them are from the various newspapers and magazines. And even if I did a story in the '80s or the '90s, before a publication was online, if they're a big publication and they're still in existence, they've got everything archived. I used to write a lot for the Sunday magazine, it was called *Sunshine*, of the *Sun Sentinel*, which, at the time, was called the *Fort Lauderdale Sun*

Sentinel. And all those *Sunshine*, like many Sunday magazines, was shut down in the late '90s. All of my articles are archived online. That is the case also with many other publications that may or may not still be around. So, I will tweet links to some of my past articles, when it makes sense to do that.

Michael O'Connell

Tell me how you use lists and how journalists can use lists to help them do their job better.

Nina Diamond

Lists are the most important tool that Twitter offers to keep organized. Unfortunately, they have not upgraded the ability of their lists as they have upgraded other functions over the years. Many of us are hoping they will do that soon.

So, at this point, you still can only make 20 lists and you can only have 500 in each. That sounds like a lot, but it isn't, not by a long shot. You can make these lists with any kinds of categories that you'd like. You can choose to name them anything you want and put anybody in them that you want.

These lists become an active second incoming Twitter feed. When you click on a list, you can watch it. Everybody that's on that list is listed on it. Whether you're also following them as a regular following option in Twitter or you only have them in a list, doesn't matter. They will come through in this separate stream when you're watching a stream of your individual list. You'll see each list individually streaming, one at a time.

So, it's a secondary way to be able to follow people as well. It really functions like a live, interactive Rolodex. It's a place to put people for whatever reason you want to have on your list. Some of them you're following all the time. Some you're not. Some you might dip in and out.

I have many lists of journalists all over the world, I don't necessarily need to be following all the time. They're on my list. When a story breaks in a particular place, there's something going on that I know is that person's area of expertise, I'll go and I might click and follow him for a while. But, I know that it makes it easy to find them. I know they're on my list.

When, let's give an example. There's a hurricane. Well, I have a list for Science, Weather and Health. Now, I would have individual lists for each one of those things, but since Twitter only gives us 20 lists that we can make, I had to combine those three into one. When there's a storm, I go to my lists and I see all of these wonderful people and organizations that I know are going to, pardon the pun, "be tweeting up a storm," because there's a hurricane someplace.

And this is a way, I don't have to reinvent the wheel. I don't have to figure out, "Oh my gosh, who should I follow? Who should I go, you know, take a look at their Twitter feed

and see what kind of information. ... Oh, I've got to start from scratch." Well no, you don't have to do that. You've got all these people basically in this Rolodex-type list.

So, there are lots of wonderful uses for these lists and, of course, you have to maintain them because people change jobs, various organizations come and go. Some of them still exist, but maybe they aren't tweeting much anymore. They've become inactive. You want to do maintenance on your lists to make sure you keep them current.

Michael O'Connell

You've alluded a few times in this conversation and we talked briefly about it before we started recording that you've been a journalist for over 30 years, as have I. And we both emerged in a print journalism world and it's not a print journalism world anymore. What are your thoughts, just initially, what's your first thought about the way that this has changed.

Nina Diamond

Since I've been on the planet long enough to have seen a lot of changes and too have also seen what people predicted would happen and didn't, my stand on print is informed a lot by the hysteria that went on around the time I was born.

In 1956, television was beginning to become this powerhouse. And all of the so-called experts were claiming, "Oh, that's the death of movies. Nobody's ever going to the theater again. They'll just stay home and watch TV." Well, it wasn't the death of movies.

Everybody's always very quick to predict the death of things that most of the time don't happen. Things change. Certainly, a lot of the forms of media have morphed over the years. But they don't necessarily die. People have been predicting for years the death of radio, the death of film, the death of television, the death of this, the death of that. It's crap. It's not true. Every generation likes to predict these things and if you look at the long arc of history, you find that none of it happened in that way.

Now the latest thing is they're predicting the death of print, just because we have online. Well, print is not going to die. It's changing. It is compatible with online, just like television and film are compatible with each other. You don't have to kill one off in order to take the best advantage of the other.

And so, I think print isn't going anywhere and I believe it's growing into something that is going to be different, obviously, just like radio changed when television came in. They said it was the end of radio. Well, no, it changed. It offered different things and in a different way, but it was not the death of radio. Just like it wasn't the death of film either. So, I don't think print is going anywhere. I think that it is just changing.

Michael O'Connell

Are you at all concerned about the business model of print journalism?

Nina Diamond

What I'm concerned about is the greed that is destroying print. Print isn't being harmed primarily by the Internet. That's a myth.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Nina Diamond

Print is being harmed by the greed of corporate owners who insist on having as much money in their own pockets as is humanely possible. And, you know, if you sell a product, and you say, "Well, my sales are down, but I insist on having the same amount of profit in my pocket that I had last year when sales were up. I'm not going to line by pocket with less than that. It's not going to be proportional to what my sales are. If my sales are down, I will not put up with having my pocket have less in it. I insist on having the same amount." Well, the only way to do that is to begin to gut the thing you own, to spend less, to lay people off, to bit by bit begin essentially destroying your product.

So, essentially, they're like vampires. They're taking as much money, the blood of these companies, and putting it into their pocket. It's got to come from some place because profits go up, profits go down. If they insist on having the same amount of money in their pockets, even when sales are down, well, the only way they're going to be able to do that is to stop spending money that should be spent on things that are important. So that's what's been happening.

And you have corporate owners who insist on having this large pocket of money and the only way they can do that is to begin to cut insane corners on their products. And that is more of a harm to any product than the Internet could ever be. If they weren't doing that, then this transition would not have been as painful for print.

There's a big movement in certain areas for journalism to become non-profit, in part, take away this problem of corporate raping, essentially, of these companies. I think having magazines and newspapers be non-profits is in some ways a wonderful idea. It takes away the incentive to gut the thing. I don't know if this will ever come to be, but I do think that the greed of these corporations is the biggest problem, not the Internet.

Michael O'Connell

I would agree with you a lot on that, that trying to maintain a margin and at the same time gutting your staff, basically destroying the quality of what your product is, to the point where it's not even viable to exist as a media outlet anymore. I think we all have seen that. So, the papers and magazines that folded, maybe they died the happy death or at least the death that was most merciful, rather than the ones that linger, with smaller staffs.

Nina Diamond

Yeah, yeah.

Michael O'Connell

What is your hope then for the future of journalism right now?

Nina Diamond

Well, you know, since I've always also written humor, I have seen things coming in my mind to answer this question.

It has become very difficult to write satire, because reality has become so bizarre that, you know, a popular thing to do on Twitter when you really see a bizarre story is to tweet a link to it with the comment, "This is not *The Onion*." Because the headline on this story or the description of it is so bizarre that it sounds like a parody. It sounds like satire. It sounds like something that would come from *The Onion* or any other humor publication or program. But it's real. And, so, we're living in such bizarre times that it has become so difficult to do satire because the things that you would've done as satire, these very things are actually happening.

Michael O'Connell

They're doing a good enough job on their own of making the ridiculous entertaining.

Nina Diamond

Exactly, and for those of us who do satire or parody, boy, our job has gotten so difficult.

Michael O'Connell

So it's triggering the death of satire is what this discussion really is.

Nina Diamond

Well, reality has become a bigger satire than any insane thing you could think of as parody or satire, and so when you look at the future of journalism, we're sort of looking at that happening within journalism. That things have gotten so nonsensical, so stupid, so ridiculous that it almost looks like journalism has become a parody of itself. And these things are arising, I think, from these greedy choices that are being made that are being the excuses that these companies are making.

When you hear their explanations, obviously, they're grasping at something that they think might make sense, because the truth is not something they're ever going to tell you. They're not going to say, "We're greedy bastards and that's why we're doing it." So instead, they try to come up with some feel good reason that makes no sense that sounds exactly like a parody. When they do something to screw over the consumer and say, "Oh, we're doing this to make our customers happy. We think this will give you a better user experience." No, you're destroying our user experience. You're doing this to line your pockets. So, essentially, we see in journalism and in any other business parody and satire, basically, is what this looks like, except that it's real.

So, you know, I don't know what the future of journalism is going to be, but there are an awful lot of us making a lot of noise in the hope that it's not destroyed. Because, no matter which way you look at it, essentially, the common enemy is greed.

Michael O'Connell

I think that's a really good place to wrap it up. Thank you very much Nina for giving me a few minutes of your time.

Nina Diamond

My pleasure.

Michael O'Connell

And you have a good day. And enjoy the ongoing parade of satire that's out there.