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Transformations in News Reporting Practices: An In-Depth Qualitative Study of Social Media Usage among Malaysian Newspaper Journalists

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Abstract-- Technology continues to change ways journalists gather and deliver news. This qualitative study examines the role and influence of social media in changing the ways Malaysian journalists gather and deliver news. In depth interviews were conducted among print media journalists in Klang Valley to determine the use and influence of social media in their work. The Diffusion of Innovation theory was used as foundation to explore how journalists adopted social media in news gathering and reporting. The study found that social media was advantageous and indispensable in news gathering and reporting as it is resourceful and convenient. It also found that social media dictates news in print media and has induced an urgency to be first with information. Concerns were raised that inaccurate or false information could be released and that use of social media has burdened journalist with additional roles.

Keywords-- Journalism, Social media, news credibility, news innovation, Malaysian newspapers

I. INTRODUCTION

Technology continues to change the ways journalist gather and deliver news. The rapid development of internet has added more tools to supplement communications with the media and the public. Across the world mainstream news organizations such as newspapers, magazines, television news channels, and news websites are facing a crisis like never before, an existential crisis if there ever was one. Public trust in mainstream media as a source of accurate and unbiased information has been declining over the years [1].

This directly influences practices, internal (power) relations and social constructions within the political field itself. This has more recently also been associated with a tendency towards polarization and simplification in a post-factual society [5]. This qualitative study examines the role and influence of social media in changing the ways Malaysian journalists gather and deliver news.

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II. BACKGROUND OF MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

As of June 2010, there are 6 free-to-air TV stations (2 public stations RTM1 and RTM2, and four commercial stations TV3, NTV7, TV8 and Channel 9. In addition, the satellite TV station ASTRO is providing a direct-to user service, which carries 80 channels ranging from sports channels, educational channels, movie channels to entertainment channels. Another pay TV service, MiTV which offered about 40 channels was short lived due to lack of subscribers. Launched in September 2005 with programs from content provider worldwide, its operation was suspended in October 2006. The Malaysian newspaper industry does not register phenomenal growth but is dominated by a few who possess large distribution channels commonly referred to as mainstream newspapers. Little has been written on the development of the "right to know", ceremoniously called the freedom of information in the Malaysian media. There are currently 50 newspapers in Malaysia, and 16 of them are published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 19 in Chinese and 2 in Tamil. Bahasa Malaysia dailies reach 46.5% of the Malaysian population, followed by English dailies (28.7%), Chinese dailies (24.1%) and Tamil dailies (0.7%) [5].

What is important for the present research is that these transformations increasingly manifest themselves through a virtual and digital mediascape. A second important observation is that the main driver behind these shifts has been the changing habits on the part of the news consumers rather than a pro-active longer-term strategy to overhaul existing news reporting practices. Together with the growing interactivity of ICTs, these innovative forms of news engagement have led to the "mutualization of news", i.e. the blurring of boundaries between news creation and consumption [6]. For years, newspapers largely ignored or overlooked the new trends in media consumption (e.g. asynchronicity, the move towards online news sources and user-generated content), something that would have negative consequences: barely one decade after the introduction of Web 2.0, the US print news industry, for example, was already close to collapse. The nationwide drop in newspaper circulation led to urgent restructuring, redundancies and outsourcing but also a serious rethinking of the day-to- day activities that make up journalism as a social field.

III. Problem Statement

These recent transformations in media are exciting and worrying in equal measure. On the one hand, Facebook, Twitter and other networked platforms allow today's journalists to gather and report news faster than ever before, to promote news products 24/7 and to build relationships with fragmented audiences [7]. The new journalistic realities and news production opportunities have also helped news organizations to become more competitive, and survive, in the global news industry [8]. On the other hand, a neoliberal climate of competition and the sheer quantity of social media usage have also raised legitimate concerns over the quality of news coverage. Prior research has identified weakness and threats to do with sensationalism, polarization of public discourse and the risk of eroding standards of journalistic practice.

As for Malaysia, a recent survey by [9] found that local journalists have mixed views about their role in civic society, a lack of clarity that may also affect new ICT-based news reporting practices. Despite diverse opinions

about expected role performance, there is agreement about the critical importance of the following journalistic goals: (i) getting information to the public quickly, (ii) providing analysis and interpretation of issues and problems and (iii) investigating claims and statements made by individuals and organizations. Because of the technological, economic and sociocultural changes in the media landscape, it has become more difficult, however, to resolve the tensions among these three goals. Journalists do not only have tonavigate the external and institutional realities of Malaysia's news industry [10], nowadays they also have to make trade-offs between speed, interpretive depth and quality assurance (e.g. verification). The current study will collect first-hand and up-to-date information from local journalists as to what kinds of trade-offs they make. The knowledge can then help identify potential risk areas in their daily routines. At the same time, it may help bridge the journalism education and journalism practice, especially skills, duties and concepts This study is therefore guided by the following research questions:

- 1. What are the perceptions and beliefs among Malaysian journalists about the use of social media in their work practices?
- 2. In which ways and to what purposes do Malaysian journalists use social media in their work practices?
- 3. What recommendations can be made regarding the desirability of adopting a social media strategy for journalists?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rise of Social Media Research

Social media have been defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" [11] defines social media as "the online tools and practices people use to engage in conversation and collaboration". Social media is so popular that the number its users are ever increasing [12]. The main purpose of social media is to connect people, based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious or nationality-based identities, shared interests, political views and joint activities [13].

The rise of social media as a news platform provides an interesting context for scholars to explore. Indeed, social media have recently become a research focus for scholars from various fields. From a mass communication perspective, the uses and gratifications paradigm is one of the most common theoretical frameworks used in approaching social media during its very early stage of development.

Scholars have investigated how journalists cope with social media as alternative media [14]and how mainstream media are responding to the emergence of social media [15]. Scholars interested in issues related to the diffusion of innovations, in particular, have examined how social media as an innovation has become diffused in society [16]. Others have combined the diffusion approach with network analysis, conceptualizing the processes through which social media are adopted as the diffusion of an innovation through networks of social media users [17]. Some media scholars have treated social media as a *mass* communication channel and tested the credibility of the channel or messages it transmits in comparison to other news channels [18].

Social Media in Malaysia

According to [2], Internet has become a pivotal medium in social engagement and leisure activities amongst Internet users in Malaysia. Approximately, there were 24.5 million Internet users accounting for 76.9% of the population in 2016, an increased from 24.1 million in 2015. Nearly all Internet users (96.3%) used Internet for texting via over the-top (OTT) messaging platform. The use of OTT messaging was prevalent amongst Internet users, coupled with the value-added benefits offered by the services, such as communication with anyone at any time, regardless of the geographical location and customization of messaging texts and theme, as well as the convenient of accessing the service over multiple devices. Apart from texting, visiting social networking sites were also common amongst Internet users (89.3%). The Internet remained as an important source of information for 86.9% users. For leisure activities, listening to music or online radio was preferred by 72.7% of users.

There were about 21.9 million social media users in 2016, of those 97.3% claimed that they owned a Facebook account. Ownership of Instagram account (56.1%), YouTube (45.3%), Twitter (26.6%), LinkedIn (9.1%) and Tumblr (4.8%) saw an increased as compared to previous year. Smartphone remained the most popular means for users to access the Internet (89.4%) with 28.5 million mobile broadband subscriptions. A multidisciplinary and cross-campus research revealed that Facebook came out tops as the most used social media platform at 38 per cent, WhatsApp at second with 35 per cent and Instagram third at 12 per cent. Ninety per cent of participating students responded that they used social media to stay connected with friends 'often' or 'most of the time'. 83 per cent use social media to get news often or most of the time [19].

The Impact of New Media on Journalism

The Internet and social media have only increased the ability to bring many different kinds of news to its audience, and significantly faster than had before been possible [20]. The computer and Internet technologies have significantly influenced the journalism industry [21]. For newsgathering [22] study found journalists working in Internet connected news organizations could quickly access large quantities of valuable information; as a result, some newsroom managers and reporters felt the Internet gave their organizations a competitive advantage. Traditional-media news organizations also began using the Internet as a news distribution channel. News websites proved to be beneficial because newsrooms could publish more content without the time and space constraints that were present in TV news broadcasts and print newspapers .

Recent studies have found that the carpet bombing of breaking news on social media has disrupted traditional news gathering and selection routines, challenging the traditional top-down, one-way notion of gatekeeping [23]. Once viewed as passive, the audience is now active—and influential—in news organizations' editorial and production processes. Nowhere is this active-ness more visible than when sensitive and sensational news is broken and shared on social media much before it makes an appearance on mainstream media. One reason why audiences tend to depend more on social media sites for breaking news, is that these sites are accessible across platforms like laptop, tablet, and smartphone. They also provide ease of access and use and are habit-forming. Social media channels work best in situations of a rapidly developing or breaking unravelling so fast that mainstream media can't

assemble all the facts at once. Under these circumstances, audiences prefer mobile online platforms to access news as it happens [24].

Nevertheless the importance of traditional print or broadcast media cannot be underscored. In their study of how college students accessed breaking news during the Boston Marathon bombings, [25] found that a majority of respondents (52%)received the breaking news from Twitter, followed by personal communication (9.9%) and mobile phone alerts (9%). Traditional news platforms trailed behind. However those who heard the news of the Boston Bombings from Twitter first, (n = 82), 22% turned to TV news websites for more information while another 22% turned to newspaper websites. A further 17% turned to cable television news, while 13% turned to network television news (p. 8). In other words, nearly three-fourths of the respondents moved to mainstream traditional media to seek confirmation, elaboration and clarification of the event after initial exposure to social media.

V. METHODOLOGY

The sample frame for this study is a purposive sampling focusing on working journalists. Purposive sampling techniques have also been referred to as nonprobability sampling or purposeful sampling. Purposive sampling techniques involve selecting certain units or cases "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly" [26]. Purposive sampling is focused on relevance in observational and other research designs while probabilistic sampling is aimed at representativeness" [27].

The sampling technique employed in this study is homogeneous sampling as the units of study in this research share common traits and characteristics of belonging to the journalism profession. The purpose of a homogeneous sample to describe some particular subgroup in depth and homogenous samples can facilitate meaningful comparisons across studies [28].

Interviews were conducted with13 journalists around Klang Valley. All of them are acquainted with social media and are exposed to print and digital media. The interviews were semi-structured with avenues to adjust interview by adding or avoiding questions.

Given the difficulty in obtaining participants availability due to their busy working schedule, the interviews were scheduled according to the participant availability and with their preferred language. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Notes were also taken during the interview. Interviews were preceded by information the purpose of the study, the use and dissemination of the results and the consent of the participants was recorded before the interviews began.

In order to protect anonymity of participants, all the journalists are assigned pseudonyms. The journalists had no prior knowledge of the interview questions so as eliminate any possible influence it may have on the results of the interview.

As the purpose of the study is to discover how social media altered journalistic practices, only practitioners familiar with both printed and online media were selected. The use of in-depth interviews rather than closed-ended survey questions, seeks to elicit the perception and personal opinions of the journalits. Interviews were conducted

both in English and Bahasa Malaysia depending on the requirements and comfortability of the journalists. All interviews in Bahasa Malaysia were subsequently translated into the English language. Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and were digitally recorded in their entirety.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted around Klang Valley from December 2017 to March 2018. The Star, Malay Mail and New Straits Times were selected as sample newspapers because of their wide circulation and diverse readership. It may be argued that the study cannot be based on just two or three newspapers in a country with such a wide conglomeration of press and media sources. However, this expansive range of circulation and readership is a significant factor in representing the topic of information restraints as it gives the results of this study with validity and the results can be fairly generalized because of the population representativeness of these newspapers. The journalists were asked a total of 12 questions on how social media has affected their work as journalists and what were their concerns on accuracy and content quality. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. To maintain confidentiality, the journalists involved in this a study are referred to with an abbreviated label of PJ followed by a number.

Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed using professional transcription services. The transcribed data was then coded and themes were constructed to group the findings together. The data was subjected to peer review and examination by the co- researchers in this study to promote validity and reliability.

VI. FINDINGS

Emerging themes

The interviewees addressed, among other things; matters arising in balancing time, meeting deadlines and expectations, and issues relating to increased workload. The research questions were used as guidance for the interviews and the development of themes relating thereto. The emerging themes from the interview were resource and convenience, speed of information, urgency to be first, multiple roles and reliability. Analysis of the data gathered revealed similarity in the information provided by the journalist. Therefore only those who gave descriptive and thoughtful responses on the use of social media in their daily work have been quoted.

Resource and Convenience : All the participants interviewed were in full support of the use of social media in journalism. The interviews had in depth revelations on how social media is used at work coupled with practical examples to better explain the journalists' thoughts and comments. They had positive response regarding the use of social media in transforming print media journalism. **PJ1** noted how his seniors back then had to

"...take a bus to travel to another state just to report on a football match", adding that technology has made it so easy now that

"...information can be gathered with the coolest comfort from almost anywhere".

The participants highlighted social media's usefulness as a source of information. The ability of an eyewitness or a person sitting in an important event to upload a tweet, a Facebook video or a WhatsApp message and share a breaking news in real time had come as a boon to journalists, who now scoured social media platforms around the clock. All of them agreed that sourcing information had become a lot easier because of ready access to Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other

Social media platforms so much so that

"....anyone can post anything which may be picked up by the reporters"... PJ3.

The convenience of finding information online has changed the way in which news is gathered and disseminated that PJ 5 claimed ...

" nowadays we are actually leveraging on what the average person... the man on the street can tell us....cause he might be witnessing something which we have no idea about..."

The same was echoed by PJ3, claiming

"....we've had quite a number of good stories, not from email or phone call or from conversations, but directly from social media especially Facebook."

Ancillary to this, social media emerged as a means to reach a wider audience, and as a tool for greater engagement with multiple stakeholders. Social media platforms such as Twitter were helping journalists receive real time feedback on their work, while alsocreating a new pathway to reach out to, and engage with, audiences. As PJ3 acknowledged

"even tweets from prominent politician and personalities can become a strong news by itself..."

Social media platforms have not just encouraged and enabled journalists to connect withaudiences. Engagement with influential sources, and the ability to quickly reach out to important

institutions such as government offices, has had significant effects on some journalistic practices

such as news verification, and information gathering.

PJ5 opined that news gathering cuts across all social media platform namely

"... when its required to look for newsworthy element...., the reach of social media is vast that ... the industry has allowed it to dictate news for print media..."

Participants concurred that Twitter is very important in the communication between politicians, governments, government agencies, and the media and they take full advantage of it. This was echoed by PJ6 who said

"...Twitter is an excellent way to follow government agencies and individuals during a breaking news situation..."

Speed of information: Journalists were in consensus in agreeing that social media had dramatically cut down the time involved in transmitting information to the newsroom and the audience. As PJ 7 said

".... all we need to do is to send one para alert to our editors who will 'blast' it to the online portal...everything else comes later. We send it as the event is unfolding....its really "live"

Live reporting via social media namely Facebook has also transformed the speed in which information is transmitted. As PJ6 appropriately puts it

"...gone are the days when people translate whatever they get on newspaper to Facebook. Today whatever appears on the Facebook only appears in the print the next day..."

The pace of information goes both ways. Not only does news get disseminated fast, responses to it is also quick. As PJ7 explained

"...because its fast.. instantaneous. The reach is instantaneous and mistakes will be immediately noticed and commented upon and I can transmit basics and photos about breaking news with just my handphone..."

Such responses are not surprising as the prevalent use of social media and its features has allowed journalist to engage readers and engage them in the news process as PJ 7 revealed

"....Facebook or twitter or any social gave the readers a feeling of being there.... immediately there."

Urgency to be first: Journalist agreed that the need to be first at the scene for breaking news has increased by a leaps and bounds that it had led to an obsession. At a very fundamental level however, editors felt that the big change was in how the news sharing or dissemination process itself had been affected. Confirming it, PJ 10 said

.... "If you have a breaking story today, Twitter takes it first. Then comes your online website, then finally comes print. 10 years ago, TV would break it and print would follow up on it".

Another journalist, PJ11 concurred saying

"....today, as we speak, news breaks primarily on social media. So, quite naturally, when we get a breaking news, we obviously want to upload it on social media first....."

Many others said the process of uploading online first allows journalists to test the watersor gauge public reaction to a story, helping them decide whether the news is important enough tocover in print, or broadcast on TV.

PJ 12 lamented

".... the industry is drowned in the fascination of breaking news. Its all about getting the story out quickly..."

In fact one journalist even went to the extent of claiming that

"... the whole fixation of wanting to break news has evolved into a culture ... " PJ7

Different platforms of social media with real time features has pushed news managers to impose conditions on journalists to be always on the lookout for breaking news. To cater to readers demands, journalist now report breaking news via online platforms first.

"... the practice of saving a story for print the next day are a thing of the past. People are getting news from Facebook, Twitter,.. Instagram...." PJ5

The journalist agreed in unison that the need to be first at the scene or to break news first has tremendously altered the manner in which news is gathered and disseminated.

".... the reality is we are competing not only with rival media outlets, but with blogs, websites and other social media users..." PJ8

Breaking news has become a crucial pulling factor in a fiercely competitive market which explains the obsession thereto. Posting information immediately and directing readers to online news portal helps boosting the media outlets' rating and readership.

Multi Journalism :Participantsbelieved that digital platforms allowed them a lot more space to elaborate on their findings and write more in-depth news stories. They said this new factor, coupled with social media's ability to engage with audience members who in turn could provide real-time feedback on their work, had resulted in journalists being more involved in multi- tasking to cater for the demand of better and updated stories.

This is compounded by the fact that social media is not constrained by space, which could be an issue in print. Journalist conceded that social media platforms with their vast collection of story links, live quotes, eyewitness images, and videos from the spot, made it a common practice for them to take up multiple roles. As PJ5 puts it,

".....we are not just reporters, we are photographers, commentators, editors....we are doing it all..."

The innovation of social media has transformed reporters into a multi tasking journalists and to be always on standby to start working.

"..live reporting is the trend now. Journalists are required to always be on standby to do live reporting on Facebook or Instagram....depending on the importance of that piece of information..." PJ3

It is a natural consequence that journalists lament that these multitasking has led to additional workload because t is not about writing and posting up stories anymore.

"... editors demand reaction pieces to our stories which are popular and attracts a lot of comments and this may come even late at night or just very early in the morning..." PJ8

Some of them raised concerns that the media organizations has utilized social media which usually comes free to cut down on manpower; thus increasing workload.

"....cutting down on people does not cut down work; instead it increases the workload..." PJ13

The increase in workload has put to stress the journalists ability to balance time and meet deadlines. They conceded that while social media is compatible with their work, their efforts are not adequately compensated either in time or remuneration.

Credibility and quality; As with other technology-driven products, social media too have brought along its share ofconcerns and challenges for news organizations and journalists. While journalists can nowprovide live updates of developing stories, the race now is to be first to upload breaking news on websites or share it on social media.

Concerns were raised that this speed-driven journalism has been found to discourage investigative or in-depth reporting. Journalists collectively agreed that breaking news coupled with the multi tasks that the journalist has to undertake prompted them to have serious concerns regarding the credibility and quality of stories.

"...my fear has always been that in the rush to post up stories, it opens the room for slip shot verification of the accuracy of the story..." PJ5

PJ7 went further to raise caution in that

".... social media is a dumping ground for unconfirmed news. I had always been extra careful when it comes to photos and videos on Facebook. I always start with not believing what I see.."

The participants stressed on the need to be comfortable before a story is released which rests on the credibility of that piece.

"...a story has to be credible and for that to happen it needs to be accurate.. which only comes when you put the pieces together...the need for verification would therefore be paramount as the whole business of picking news from social media is actually hearsay reporting..." PJ8

There were also concerns that the time utilized on getting materials and the process of verification has led the industry management to sidestep the need for stories with journalistic quality.

".... I like writing and I became a reporter but now I found myself scavenging through social media instead of spending resources in writing..." PJ7

"....I still believe that the best journalism happens when you build relationships with people. I feel that too many journalist are hooked to Twitter and Facebook to look for ideas instead of concentrating on building sources." PJ8

VII. DISCUSSION

From the interviews it is evident that journalists perceived social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to be extremely useful. This indicates that journalists in Malaysia are very likely to use social media such as Twitter, Facebook or WhatsApp to track developing news including and gather information from people tweeting or posting about the event. More so, the media is a vibrant component of the civil society and its main staple is news. [29]. Hence, diverse news sources, including social media platforms, are very vital to fulfilling the aspirations of the civil society in terms of news consumption.

Journalists are equally likely to also cross check such information with people or sources who are present on social media and who they trust, just as they are likely to be influenced by trending topics on social media when making decisions on what story to select and reject. They are also likely to use social media to promote the same news that they may have sourced from social media with more in-depth stories available on their organization's website or videos to attract attention. In other words, they are using social media platforms as marketing tools to attract more readers and viewers for their organization's newspapers or magazines or websites.

While acknowledging beneficial uses of social media as a news source, most of the journalists also raised concern at how over-dependence on social media had adversely affected journalistic routines, led to social media determining story importance and placement, and affected quality of stories as journalists sacrificed news accuracy for speed.

The use of social media by journalists is compatible and is indispensable in all aspects of their work. It is undisputable that social media had enhanced the efficacy and speed of gathering and disseminating news. Similar to social media platforms, in terms of news reporting, purely online newspapers tend to be bold and straight to the point as compared to the conventional newspapers. On the social media platforms, news are shared without gatekeeping, hence, journalists find it suitable to obtain news which do not have any political flavor. The most common social media applications that help Malaysian journalists in their work are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

[30] associates the role of the journalist in the new media environment as related to the freedom of the reader in choosing what to read and when to participate in the process of news. The traditional top-down model of communicating with readers does not apply any more to the online spaces. The interaction between journalists and sources can be skipped, with information being spread directly by sources on online pages. Thus, the role of the journalist as a mediator between the external world and the audiences has become negligible.

An idea that was elicited during the interviews was the need to ensure journalists should use social media optimally and efficiently. One solution may be to allow journalists to become better acquainted with how to use social media in the most efficient and creative manner. News organizations may consider allowing reporters and editors more time to pursue meaningful digital and social media engagement that may not have adverse impact on journalistic writing.

Another strategy would be setting up specific guidelines of social media usage for journalists. A study by [31] that examined Twitter feeds of thousands of Americans belonging to different communities to understand why trust in journalism was declining, found that journalists were increasingly coming across as aloof, disconnected and opinionated, who were neither engaging with people nor being transparent about their stories on social media.

Social media not only made news content ubiquitous, but they are also transforming the news itself. In the old days, a reporter was given a lead or went out to find a story. Today, many stories are received third hand (sometimes even fourth or fifth hand) through Facebook posts or Tweets so that by the time a story is assigned to the reporter, the story in some form or another is already out there in the social media universe. The reporter now has to take that into consideration and find some angle to the story that is not yet being talked about. As to the notion of scoops and breaking news, a lot of tips or leads these days are from the web or what's "trending" in social networks like Twitter, Facebook or its popularity rating based on search volume patterns in search engines like Google or Bing. This is radically changing the industry's concept of what a scoop or breaking news is.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The news industry was no longer limited to newspaper, radio or television. Journalists are forced to accelerate the traditional journalistic process because people now want real time information. People want the information as soon as the journalist or the media outlet receives it. It is now a necessity to give the audience bits of information at a time, as soon as the information is available. No media outlet can afford to wait media outlets no longer compete to out-scoop each other but may be out-scooped by amateurs such as bloggers, citizen journalists and twitters. Social media has thus made a huge impact in news production and has dramatically changed the business model.

The use of this innovation has provided media outlets to connect with their audience. Social media has proven useful in locating sources, collecting and replying information. It has become a digital platform for users to interact on and alert media of news. It has also changed the way in which news is now reported; which is now done online as opposed to traditional print reporting, slashing down the waiting time. The use of social media in journalism increased the urgency to be first and facilitated breaking news, while by the same pace, increased concerns for credibility and quality of stories. News today has evolved into a round the clock digital storytelling, piling pressures on journalists to balance time while meeting deadlines.

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