



The Inside Social Media Podcast Episode 21:

Lili King, Senior Director of Social News, CNN
RickMulready.com

Rick: Alright, let's jump in to it here. My special guest today is Lila King. Lila is the Senior Director for Social News at CNN Worldwide. Lila, welcome to the Inside Social Media podcast. Thanks a lot for joining me today.

Lila: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Rick: Awesome! So, Lila, this show is all about hearing what big brands are doing well in social media, and then how small business can model that behavior within their own minimal social media and marketing budgets.

So, let's start out by learning about the set up of your team. How are you structured and where does the social media team fit in the overall organization there at CNN?

Lila: Good question. My job is to be, kind of, the ring leader of the social media circus at CNN.

Rick: Okay.

Lila: You know, in a news organization, social media is woven in to so many things that we do. So, I personally fit inside the CNN Digital Organization. That's the group that's responsible for CNN.com and all of our mobile sites and apps – social is part of that. But, the reality is, most of the people who actually work on social every day aren't necessarily directly part of my team, and don't necessarily work explicitly for CNN Digital. But, we all work together and I'm the, sort of, connective tissue and glue that keeps this all marching in the same direction.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: We group things in to three general buckets. One is the publishing and, kind of, operations side – so it's what CNN is on other social networks. To that group I lump the things that we publish on our giant CNN Twitter accounts. We've got something like 37 million followers in our branded accounts worldwide, which is enormous. CNN is far and away number one in terms of size. Also, you know what we put in our Facebook page and that kind of thing.

The second arm of the social world here is, really, listening. So much of news gathering happens through listening really carefully and closely to the conversations that are

happening outside of our own walls. It gives us tips about what's trending, what stories are about to bubble – for example: where we should send our crews, where we should focus our news gathering efforts.

The third arm is, kind of, this story-telling, and sort of, events and stunts wing which is the group that thinks about how to pull social conversations and participation of the audience back in to the stories that we tell every day. Those are things like when we partner with Instagram to take hundreds and thousands of photos of the Inauguration that we did in January – that kind of big project.

Rick: Okay. I have so many questions that just came out of your answer there that I'm just chomping at the bit here.

Let's start off with the content piece. I mean, I'm guessing what you guys have is seemingly endless content. How do you decide what content to share and what goes out? Take us behind that sort of process there from a content creation and distribution standpoint.

Lila: Yeah. We like to say it is part Art and part Science. We're a content company at heart. So, you're right, there's an extraordinary amount of media that's produced every minute of every day at CNN. What we try to do is we try to do a mix of identifying what CNN has said is the most important story of the moment.

We've got, of course, the news agenda meeting at the beginning of every day where all of the heads of the networks, and the shows, and the different parts of CNN come together and decide you know, "This is the top story of the day. These are the five things that we are focused on and putting our efforts behind." Certainly, you want the CNN presence on Facebook, or Twitter, or Instagram, or whatever else to represent that same stamp. You want CNN to have the same set of stories wherever people might come across us.

On the other hand, there's a real – you certainly noticed very well – a headline that you write for the homepage of CNN.com is not necessarily the same way you would write the headline when you publish it on Facebook. Because the way for people to see anything you do on Facebook is to get in to the news feed, which means you want to craft the headlines, maybe, less something that says... I'm trying to think of an example right now.

One of the lead stories on CNN, of course, is about Egypt. The headline on CNN.com or the headline on the lower third of the television screen might be something like, "Egypt in Chaos." But, publish that to Facebook, what we tend to find works better is when we get a little deeper in to the actual story and find an individual, or a particular detail, or piece of color that really helps to take you inside the story.

So, for example, we have a photojournalist. One of our photojournalists in Cairo took a picture that he posted to his Instagram. He was right in the center of Tahrir Square, right exactly where massive demonstrations were happening. The picture he took was of a

woman who was sitting down on the street. She has a full *hijab* on, you couldn't see her face. But, she had been taking water bottles and pieces of charcoal, and making a makeshift gas mask. She had this makeshift gas mask on in anticipation that there might be, you know, gas pointed towards the demonstrators. It was a really tight shot – just of her. That's what we decided to put on twitter and Facebook with the link back to the story.

I guess, I'm sort of rambling a bit here. The bottom line is we tend to take a really macro view on television and on CNN.com, and we tend to find that in social, even for the same story, a micro view tends to be what draws a better connection, and incentivizes, and helps people want to share and discuss what's happening.

Rick: Sure. That's such a great lesson there. I mean, social media is all about connecting people and having that conversation with people. You guys have taken the higher-level view within your larger channels whether it's T.V., or that sort of platform. Then, from a social media perspective, you found that human element works best.

How did you guys come to that conclusion? Because I'm sure that didn't all of a sudden just happen. What I'm going with this is that the, sort of, the art, if you will, of testing things out is something that is, I think, small businesses really get overwhelmed with that. I think that this is a concept that even though it's you guys, it's the CNN, this huge, huge company that there is such a great lesson here that small businesses can take from this.

So, can you take us in to how you guys arrived at that point where, "Okay, you know what? The human element is going to work best and connect best on the social media front?"

Lila: Yeah. Today, we've got a lot of tools and software that we use to help us get a sense of all the hundreds of things we post. I think our branded accounts tweet about a thousand times a day, which is not too far off – one tweet every minute, which is, kind of, like news heroine for the news junkie in all of us. We have a lot of tools that we use to look at which tweets and posts get the most shares, and comments, and likes, that kind of thing. We look really closely and analyze it.

Honestly, when we started out, we didn't have a whole lot of tools. What we would do instead was every, single week, take, literally, a list of the things that we have posted on our flagship Facebook page – that's where we started. Then, sit in a room together with the small team of people who manage that page, and just look at the list and sort it by what had gotten the most interactions and click through, and try to suss out the patterns. It's pretty clear when you do that several weeks in a row.

The things that stand out are that are when you... For all those photos that you post, if you post a picture that actually has a human face in it, it's shared – I'm pulling this stuff off the top of my head, I'm not going to get it exactly right.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: But, I think it was three times as many shares for pictures that have a face in them. When you think about it as a person, it makes so much sense, right?

Rick: Sure.

Lila: We love faces, we love people, we love to talk with people, and that's who we identify with. But, it was, really, for us, at first, a whole lot of manual review. When we first started to do it, it was a little bit painful. There was a little bit of internal conflict. We were like, "Oh, my god, why are we spending so much time in conference room talking about all of these posts and looking at all these photos over and over again?" But, the patterns start to emerge pretty quickly.

In hindsight, when I look back on it, I think that was some of the most valuable time we could possibly have spent. Take an hour away from the hamster wheel and kind of madness of day to day, and step back, and try to get a sense of what's working and what's not. It means, as a team, we've gotten much faster about: One, all being on the same page. Two, just making decisions quickly because we all have the best practices baked in to the backs of our skulls.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: You know? They're like right there. It's natural.

Rick: Yeah. I think the lesson there is, is that you guys tested a bunch of different things, found out what worked the best, what got the most engagement, and then did more of that. At that time, you weren't using these fancy tools, you were just looking at the, I'm guessing, sort of the insights, the stats you get from those individual platforms that are available to anybody, and just sitting down and looking to see what's working. Then, sort of, looking at what the trends are and so forth, and then seeing what's working, and then doing more of that.

The other thing that I picked out of there is that you're just humanizing, if you will, your business. The things that are getting the most engagement are the ones with that human element. So, a really, really good lesson there.

The other thing that you mentioned a little bit before is, sort of, finding your voice in social media. That's a challenge that so many people have on social media, let alone small businesses. So, first off, can you define for my listeners here what you think of when you hear "Finding your voice in social media?" What does that mean to you?

Lila: Wow. What a big question. "Finding your voice in social media," I think of it in a couple of levels. One, as an individual, it's probably much easier, right? It's about understanding what you as a person are most passionate about and most excited about, and allowing that to come through.

From the brand perspective, I think, it's knowing and being able to articulate really clearly what it is you're about and you stand for, and what kinds of content and topics that you can use to get that across.

Rick: Sure. With CNN, with so many reporters and personalities, and so forth that make up CNN, I'm curious to know whether having a consistent voice across social media something that's challenging for you guys with all those different reporters and personalities? How do you guys manage that?

Lila: Yes! It's challenging. I think we manage it in setting the priorities for the news agenda, really. We have people all around the world. If you look at the CNN account on Instagram, every day we try to feature someone from a different part of the world who's covering a story you may or may not see on television this morning.

Every morning our President, Jeff Zucker literally sets the standards, "These are the five stories that matter the most. This is what we're all going after." I think partly being aligned on what matters most and making sure that's reflected in your social presences is a pretty big part of the voice for us, too.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: I think this is, maybe, a unique thing to a news organization. The idea of a voice is something that has been around for much longer than social media, and we tackle it through having a style guide. So, there's an internal style guide that tells us how we refer to certain things, and how we describe them, and what we do or don't say in certain situations. It's a little bit standards and practices, and a little bit about the words that we use as an organization.

Rick: Gotcha. I'm just trying to connect everything that we're talking about here for small businesses. It's such a great lesson that you have mentioned a couple of times there that you guys have that morning meeting to develop the five priorities for the day. You're essentially setting a goal for that day and then working backwards from there like, "Okay, those are the priorities, how do you achieve those priorities?"

So, for a small business or actually any size business at that point, it doesn't have to necessarily be a daily goal. It can be just a goal that's out there and sort of working back from that point to figure out how you can get to that goal, which is if social media is a platform to use to get to that goal, which platforms and voice you're going to use to get there. So, it's such a great lesson there.

I'm curious. You have a couple of new shows that have started – the Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown, Morgan Spurlock's Inside Man are two that have come to mind because I've seen them recently. I was like, "Oh, that's pretty interesting," because they're not your traditional news show. So, with that in mind, how do you determine whether social media is a marketing channel that you want to use to promote new shows like that?

Lila: Those two shows are so great. I, personally, don't think I could love the Parts Unknown show more. It's so, so great. On launch night, the premier episode there's a trip to Myanmar, and I decided to cook a Burmese feast to celebrate the launch. So, I'm totally a fangirl, I guess, is what I'm like. I'm admitting here.

For both of those shows, what we decided would be most effective – and I think it's really panned out – was that they're, you're right, they're not straight up, typical news broadcast, but there is so much rich and interesting information that comes out of the show.

Rick: Yeah.

Lila: It's just positioned in a slightly different way than in a traditional news television, but there's so much to learn from both Parts Unknown and Inside Man. The approach we took: we anticipated there might be a lot of conversation organically online about the shows while they were on. So, what we decided to do was on CNN.com we try to harness and collect the conversation as it was on in a, what's essentially, a live blog that we would do now for every episode of Inside Man and we're doing during the first season of Parts Unknown.

We had a couple of Producers. I should name check them because both were really brilliant – Steve Krakauer and Katie McLaughlin – who would watch the episodes in advance and think through all of the things that we were learning in the episodes like what would be the most interesting tidbits and behind-the-scenes elements that we could add in while we were watching them on television. They were investing that in to both Twitter, and then pulling that in to a live blog. With the Bourdain show we had all of the members of the crew, when they got on the original shoot, had been tweeting, and posting on Tumblr, you know, just crazy stuff about how they got some of those shots. They were just incredible. So, we're trying to pull all that in to a, kind of, behind-the-scenes, second screen experience if you will.

One thing that works really well, for the first season of Bourdain... The premier episode would come on Sunday night and the live blog would happen. There would be all sorts of great conversation about, you know, "What's he eating?" and, "Oh, my gosh. That's so... Wow!" "What did he just say?" "What does that guy...?" "What did we just see there?" We would take the most interesting elements of the conversation from the premier night, and take some of the tweets and posts, and put them back on television on top of the show when it re-airs.

Rick: Wow, okay.

Lila: So, it's kind of like hosting a conversation while the show is airing and then tipping our hats to the fact that there is a conversation, and putting it back on T.V.

Obviously, I wouldn't expect every small business owner to have their own television station at their disposal and put things back on T.V. But, I would say the thing that's most important there is that – this can be incredibly effective and it matters really deeply to us

– that when we are actively hosting a conversation with our audiences about the work that we’re doing and the stories that we’re airing – we say this all the time – if you’re going to host the conversation it’s your responsibility to listen, and pay attention, and to honor the participation that you get, and really highlight the best contribution.

We do that through Bourdain and Inside Man, and also we have done it for years now. Actually, today is the 7th birthday of CNN iReport.

Rick: Oh, happy birthday!

Lila: We’ve been, through iReport for years and years, listening to what people said, and paying close attention, and then pulling the best of that back on to CNN – if that makes sense.

Rick: Sure. I think you summed it up there really nicely at the end there. I mean, you’re listening to your consumers, the people who are watching those programs. You’re adding value by giving them information that they wouldn’t normally know. You’re, sort of, adding to the conversation that’s happening on the show itself. Then, you’re incorporating that in to the show on the next episode.

So, I think the lessons there are you’re listening, you’re engaging, and you’re adding value to your consumers, which, you know, any business can take that, and you don’t have to have a T.V. show, like you said, in order to do that. So, some really good lessons there.

Lila: Sorry, by the way, I should be taking notes too. This is great. Thank you.

Rick: Sure. I want to step back a little bit here and, sort of, ask a little bit of a broader question. Obviously, social media is very mainstream now. It’s really changed the way that news gets reported. What do you think the future of news reporting looks like?

Lila: I love this topic. This is my favorite topic. So, I think, for a long time we’ve been in a world where everybody has a camera in their pocket. When you see a news story, your first instinct, of course, is to take a picture of it and send it to all of your friends. Otherwise, it didn’t really happen, right? Unless you take a picture and put it on Facebook, it’s not real.

We’ve certainly been in that world for a long time where that’s been happening. News organizations have gotten really great about listening and watching for that kind of activity, and really valuable, newsworthy media, and pulling it back to the news coverage. I think we’re probably heading in to the next frontier – is a place where the act of reporting the story and telling a story of what really matters about an event is much more collaborative than it is today. Today, the role of a news organization, I think, is to pay attention to what’s happening in social media, and curate, and highlight the best of it, and put it back in to the way we tell the stories.

Rick: Yeah.

Lila: But, I think there's a lot more room for deeper, and more ongoing interaction between people who are actually living through the middle of the story, and have a lot to say about where reporting ought to go and where we ought to be focusing the news organization through our centralizing and collecting that information.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: It's small and growing. I think it's our first step.

We use a tool at CNN we call Open Stories that we use for a lot of really big, significant news stories. We take the reports that we're seeing and that we're receiving through iReport and from our crews on the ground, and pull them in to a central database, and then display them all at once on a map and along a timeline. It gives you, kind of, a sense of how a story is moving over time and who's in the center of it. I still think there are infinite ways that process can be much more interactive and collaborative. That's ultimately where I think we're headed.

Rick: Sure. Are you guys more concerned with reporting the news? From a social media perspective, are you more concerned with reporting the news or getting people to watch CNN on TV?

Lila: Great question. I mean, it's kind of a chicken and egg thing, right? If CNN weren't reporting the news, then there would not be anything to watch on television. But, if people weren't watching on television, then we wouldn't need to report the news.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: So, it's hard to say which comes first. I think they're so intimately connected. I mean, CNN is news and our responsibility is to report the news and tell the stories that matter.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: Of course, we want people to watch the stories on television, and on CNN.com, and on all of our digital properties.

Rick: Sure. Along those lines – of course, from a news organization standpoint, you want to get the news out as quickly as possible. As you just mentioned, with social media, it's so easy to do that. But, obviously, you want to make sure that the news is accurate, so, what's the vetting process that you guys have? Is there some sort of policy in place that – we talked about before with so many personalities in, reporters that you guys have – do you guys have some sort of policy in place to guard against misinformation that's going out there?

Lila: Definitely. That's priority number one, get it right. A lot of times what you'll see that we'll do is: an event will happen, for example, with the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. We knew that there have been reports of a shooting. So, the first thing you saw on the alerts from CNN and from reporters on television like, "We are hearing

reports of a shooting and we're working to confirm." Literally, the story on CNN.com was that one sentence. That's what we knew, and we, sort of, develop and grow it over time.

Rick: Sure.

Lila: There's certainly a big and robust process set up around verifying incoming information from social media. I think we really learned at first through iReport. iReport is seven years old and it launched the same year as Twitter, so we figured this all out at the same time as like social media was really exploding and becoming so important to news. The vetting process around iReport is something we've certainly learned and developed over time, but it starts with just getting in touch with the person who's filing the story or saying...

Rick: Can you back up one second and let people know what that is?

Lila: Oh, sure. CNN iReport is citizen journalism at CNN. It's a lot like Youtube for news. It's a place where anyone who sees something that seems to be newsworthy is invited to post it to CNN. Then, there's a small team of people at CNN who look through all of the iReports, the incoming tweets that are tagged CNN, incoming Instagrams, Youtube videos, Flickr photos, you name it, to try to suss out what's news-worthy and relevant, and what we need to verify, and then, sort of, throw it over the wall to CNN proper, and put it on television, and at homepage at CNN.com.

Rick: Cool.

Lila: That process really starts with calling somebody back and saying, "Hey, who are you? What did you see? What's this all about? What picture did you take right before that? What picture did you take right after it? What's your middle name?" Sort of verifying, and then double-checking all of those details with the things that we know from CNN-ers in the same location, or affiliates, or other official sources.

I said this before, in some ways it's kind of an Art and a Science – you look at the metadata, and you look at all of the facts and available information, and then you also just trust your gut instincts as a journalist. That's the human part, and the experience, and that's where the, kind of, smell test comes in. That happens because CNN employees are all around the world who know what they're doing.

Rick: Sure. Lila, I want to put you on the spot here. Where, in your estimation, do brands get social media wrong?

Lila: Where do brands get social media wrong? Well, I think where brands get social media wrong – and I'll cop to this, I think CNN gets this wrong sometimes – we get social media wrong when we just talk, and talk, and talk about ourselves, and don't listen well enough, or stop to pause and be part of the communities that we're in.

I like to think and I'd like to be able to say, and I'm proud to be able to say that I think CNN does this a lot better today than a few years ago. We get better every day. But, I

think it's our natural inclination as brands, you know, with a capital B brand, people who have things to say, and things to tell, and you know, we just want to talk about it, right? That's our whole history; it's what we're good at.

You certainly know this: the secret sauce of social media is community, and people, and figuring out what people in a particular platform are really in to and doing, and trying to be part of the club instead of, you know, big-footing in, and spreading our message around.

Rick: Right. There's a million dollar question that comes up in every single podcast episode here, and I'm going to put you on the spot again, and I'm going to ask you what you think that million dollar question is. I'll just give you a little hint. It's a challenge that almost every brand has.

Lila: The million dollar question: What's the ROI of social media?

Rick: Very good! Yes! How do you and your team measure CNN's social media efforts?

Lila: Yes, alright! Well, for us, we map all the things that we do in social media to CNN's larger business schools. I used to say this a lot: You know in the, like, Wild West days of the World Wide Web, everybody was building these crazy websites with Flash intros, and blinking marquee banners across the top, and songs that would come on when you loaded the webpage? I think we were doing all that stuff because we could, because, whatever – it's the Internet, we can do anything. I think that's, kind of, how social media started too, right? Inherently the same, right? "Yeah, let's just do whatever." "Let's tweet about our lives, whatever, just for fun."

But, as we've matured we started to get a little smarter about it. If we're going to put some time and energy in to what we're posting on Facebook, or Twitter, or stuff we're doing, big story-telling projects we do at Twitter, and we want it to matter. So, for us, the things that really matter are our audience, and of course, making money, and – this is a really big one – pulling in real insights and content that can fuel the news and tell us genuinely, fresh, and interesting, important things about the world.

Rick: Sure. I love it. So, let's bullet things out here, Lila. Let's say you're a small business owner and you have very little budget for online marketing, and you want to start leveraging social media to market your business. What are three things you would do to start out?

Lila: So, I think the first thing I would do is think really clearly about what you want to achieve, what you're trying to do, and maybe just pick one place to start. Maybe you just want to find people in your local area who are really in to dogs, or whatever it might be, right? Just pick one small thing and start there.

I mean, I think we talked about this too. Listening is probably the most effective thing to do before you jump in to any platform. Try to figure out what it's all about and what people are doing there, and match that.

Maybe, third, make sure you're having fun and being true to yourself. Otherwise, it's going to be clear to everyone that you're really into it.

Rick: Such a great point. So, many people look at it as a chore and don't have fun with it. Just like you said, it's certainly reflective in the content that they're putting out there – such a good point.

Two more questions here for you, Lila. What are the trends in social media that you're seeing over the next year or so? How do you see these trends affecting small businesses?

Lila: I think, certainly, the one, big trend we're paying a lot of attention to is the ever shortening timeline for video. You see it with Vine has six-second videos, and Instagram has fifteen-second videos. We see that when we attach media to our tweets, either photos or videos, and media to our Facebook posts as well, they tend to draw higher engagement.

We're spending a lot of time thinking about and working on getting really, really tight and pithy with video, and trying to be creative about how we tell stories in really, really short spans of time. That's certainly one thing we're paying a lot of attention to.

Rick: Cool. Alright, so last question here for you. If you can recommend one business book to our listeners, what would it be and why?

Lila: Oh, man. Good question. I wish I thought about this before.

Rick: Totally putting you on the spot.

Lila: One business book. You know, I'll just try to pull out my Kindle. What have I read recently? Oh, give me a hint here. Tell me, like, some recent business books you've read, get my mind working.

Rick: Oh, that I've read? Now you're putting me on the spot.

Lila: Yeah.

Rick: I'm reading... I always read a bunch of books at the same time. At the moment, one that I'm reading is the 80/20 Way. I don't even know off the top of my head who wrote that book. I'm totally blanking on who wrote that book.

Lila: See how hard this is?

Rick: Yeah. Hey, wait, who's being interviewed here? Go ahead.

Lila: Yeah, I mean... You know, I'm thinking of like, that was my like distraction ploy.

Rick: I liked it. It works.

Lila: So, I had time to pull out my iPhone and look at my list – like what are the last business books I've read. Well, the last business book I've read Sheryl Sandberg's book "Lean In," which I thought incredibly important and inspiring. In some ways, it's, kind of, a business book, but more it's probably a self-help book in some ways. It shows really specific actionable advice about like figuring out who you are and what you want to do, which I thought was really great.

Also, I read Nate Silver's book "The Signal and the Noise."

Rick: I have heard, yeah.

Lila: Which is totally fascinating about the world of, you know, big data, and what it means, and what we can get out of it. Yeah, I would recommend both of them.

Maybe I find your question so hard because I tend to read way more fiction than non-fiction. But, a book that is a little bit about fiction in, sort of, like a meta way – I read this book by Frank Rose called "The Art of Immersion."

Rick: Okay.

Lila: Which I think is, in some ways, is about the future of the media business and how media experiences are more and more immersive, and like part of our daily lives. I think, in some ways that connects to the kinds of things that we're trying to do on social media. It's such a natural tendency, I think. I'm certainly guilty of it. Wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is look at Twitter.

The most successful brands on my Twitter feed are the ones that like catch me in the morning as part of my, kind of, daily habit, and are part of my life. CNN is certainly an enormous part of that. It's a great read. It's not directly about social media, but it's certainly about the way we tell stories.

Rick: Sure. What's it called?

Lila: The Art of Immersion.

Rick: The Art of Immersion. Okay, great.

Thank you so much, Lila. This has been a lot of fun, and that's so much great information. Where can people connect with you? I would normally ask you, "Where can people connect with CNN," but that's a pretty easy one. It's at CNN, and then CNN pretty much across every social media platform. So, where can people connect with you in social media?

Lila: Awesome! I am @lilicina everywhere. I get asked a lot about why on Earth that, because it's a little bit weird. My name is Lila, obviously, and I have this beautiful hydrangea bush in my backyard. Part of its scientific name is lilicina. It's a gorgeous flower, it's a billion years ago. I just thought, "Oh, well that's what I'll be on Twitter."

Rick: Awesome.

Lila: And, well, here we are.

Rick: I've learned so much today – so much beyond social media today.

Lila: Hydrangeas and weird books.

Rick: That's right. Well, Lila, thank you so much for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

Lila: Awesome. Thanks so much for having me. It was really great.