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Tom Cavanagh
University of Central Florida

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By Tom Cavanagh
UCF Forum columnist
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Most of us have heard the expression "A little birdie told me..."

This generally refers to a piece of hearsay or gossip, particularly one from an anonymous source. Whenever I hear someone use this expression, I take what I'm hearing with a certain level of skepticism.

That's why I am concerned about a trend I have noticed lately in online journalism. The phrase "a little birdie told me..." popped into my head the other day when I was reading an online news story that was basically a series of quoted tweets from various Twitter feeds, with a tiny bit of original text to wrap around them and offer some short, pithy commentary. Take away the Twitter quotes and it was two paragraphs long.

Since when did this become journalism? Apparently, I can now sit at my desk, type in a few hashtags, search a few well-known (and not-so-well-known) of the world's Twitterati, and compile a story that consists almost entirely of other people's online musings. No effort is made to do original research or obtain actual human quotes. This seems to be most prevalent in sports and entertainment reporting, but is seeping into other areas, too.

For example, a recent story on the sports website Bleacher Report by a featured columnist concerned the recovery of basketball star Kobe Bryant from Achilles tendon surgery. However, when you actually read the column, it consists of a mere 255 words from the columnist and 15 embedded tweets from various reporters covering the story, including another Bleacher Report writer. I could simply follow along on Twitter and get all the same information.

In some cases, I have seen stories, mostly in entertainment reporting, where I have absolutely no idea who the people are who are quoted in the embedded tweets. I have a fair grasp of pop culture and I like to think that I might at least recognize some of the names. Now I might just be an out-of-touch middle-aged guy or these stories are attempting to add spice by including commentary by the general public. The inclusion of such tweets is basically equivalent to pasting in the comments that often follow any online news story. People are entitled to their opinions, but why are their random opinions now news?

On a larger scale, there is a growing trend in online journalism in which stories are simply aggregated from various external sources and compiled into one central location.

I imagine that the value proposition of a tweet-based news story or a news website is one of curation. We live in the information age and we have more information available to us in the smartphone in our hand than all of mankind had in all of history up to this point. How do we know what's important? How do we sift through the endless haystack of data to find the needle that we are looking for?

We need experts to evaluate the information landscape and separate the valuable from the wasteful.

In some ways, the world of higher education, where I live, is evolving in that direction. With the answer to pretty much any question available in less than a second through Google, how do we help students make connections, synthesize concepts, and focus on the knowledge and skills that are most important for their future success?

We, as educators, can curate the valuable from the infinite electronic data sources, contextualize it for our students, and then assess them on their new understanding. We can leverage Google as an instrument in this service, not as the service itself.

If these tweet-based news stories can offer some analysis and commentary, doing more than simply reposting the same information we can get via a simple search, then they will be contributing to the public discourse and adding value.

However, too many of these stories simply list the tweets with no added value beyond simple compilation. And that just results in a lot of little birdies tweeting all over each other.

Tom Cavanagh is the University of Central Florida's associate vice president of distributed learning. He can be reached at cavanagh@ucf.edu.