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Abstract

This paper reviews literature regarding the emergence of "social news sites," which differentiate themselves from traditional news sites in many ways. I attempt to dilettante these differences, investigate the origins of them, examine the psychological impact, and make a case for social news sites from a marketing standpoint.

A New Model for Media

In such a crowded space, media companies are under increasing pressure to compete with one another over page-views, earning them a tunnel-vision motivation to hook readers. In this age of social media, the premier way to attract new eyeballs involves tapping into base elements of human psychology like trust, curiosity, and emotional involvement. The power of peer pressure is well documented; psychologists have long known that humans look to others for behavioral cues, and the already-dramatic effect is increased between people who have a relationship and have established some trust. The viral nature of the Internet (i.e. the tendency of something to spread rapidly across the connected population) is a result of these psychological underpinnings. With this evolutionary force on the media industry established, the social news landscape quickly became a battle of survival of the fittest. Academics, researchers, and bloggers alike have all contributed to an ongoing conversation about the New Media paradigm. Some academics have raised concerns about New Media's lack of editorial structure (and thereby, lack of credibility) (Waters) (Steele). Bloggers have defended New Media's structure, proclaiming that Old Media needs to adapt to the new way of doing things, or be left behind in the dust of history (Rosen) (Deckers). Researchers, specifically those in psychology, have looked at how being immersed in a sea of media — media with no evolutionary precedent — is affecting the way we think and interact. However, psychologists have noted that while the so-called

"information gap account" has started to be investigated by psychology, the phenomenon has not been studied in a broader sociological/economic context, so the macro-impact of the New Media model is unclear. Additionally, while some journalists have written about clickbait (which I will define later) and its place in today's media, few have discussed the broader context of clickbait, how it came to be, and outlined connections with psychological literature. I wished to examine this takeover of so called social news sites, how they interacted with Old Media, how the novel archetype is affecting our psychology, and how it is revolutionizing the media sphere. In this review, I will argue that although New Media *comes* with detrimental psychological side-effects, it is truly well adapted to our information society, and Old Media can learn a few things from these new tricks.

How did clickbait come to be? (or: Why modern journalism needs Facebook)

When Facebook became a cultural phenomenon, it started to influence the media landscape — maybe subtly at first, but as the world of journalism and media production continued to evolve, Facebook reached a point where it was exerting unprecedented control over the entire industry. The journalism industry's old business model is beyond obsolete, and a new model has emerged from the same idea, but with a completely different structure. Traditionally, newspapers have leveraged advertising revenue alongside a subscription model. When the Internet brought along more information than had ever existed before — for free — consumers became more reluctant to pay for media that they could access online, free-of-charge. As a result, The New Media landscape is dominated by a single struggle for high advertising revenue, which translates to a large quantity of clicks and page-views. This sole economic motivation has birthed

a subset of the media space, sometimes termed "social news sites." Among this category exist sites like *Buzzfeed, Gawker, Upworthy, Cracked*, and dozens more.

The emergence of the social news category has ballooned to the point where traditional news organizations and academics have been forced to recognize and discuss the phenomenon. The category is often criticized as "clickbait," due to the sites' nature to write titles which lure users to click and read the full story. It should be noted that in between the different media spheres (and academia), the term clickbait is ill-defined; researchers Jonas Blom and Kenneth Reinecke Hansen wrote a paper investigating the phenomenon, and refer to clickbait as "forward-reference as lure in online news headlines" (Blom & Hansen). Their article refers to many techniques which create the art of clickbait, including: stylistic and narrative devices to make the headline seem more interesting, sensationalism and provocative content, and gossip-like content which emphasizes things like sex, self-improvement, and the supernatural (Blom & Hansen). This flavor of headline attempts to induce anticipation and curiosity to entice users to click, and it does so in a way which is frighteningly effective (Golman & Loewenstein). Psychological literature has noted that curiosity correlates with brain activity "in regions thought to relate to anticipated reward, suggesting that information is a reward in and of itself" (Golman & Loewenstein). Robinson Meyer from *The Atlantic* describes the style, noting that using emotion, ridiculousness, sexiness, or "just by withholding critical information from the reader, [clickbait] tantalizes people in such a way that they can't help but see what's on the other side" by mostly the mere linguistic structure alone (Meyer). Meyer continues, summarizing clickbait's structure as "confident, in the first or second person, saccharine to the point of grossness… and, most importantly, gets people to share the story" (Meyer).

This explanation for the ubiquity of clickbait is simple and logical: New Media's focus is on quantity of clicks for ad-revenue — but this force driving clickbait's evolution is focused and intensified by the magnifying glass that is Facebook's algorithm. In mid-October 2013, several social news sites like *Gizmodo* as well as Atlantic Media's *The Wire* saw their page view count mysteriously skyrocket (Meyer). The publishers were oblivious to the traffic influx until "Facebook announced that it would start highlighting 'high-quality' content," and this change shook the structure of the media landscape in a foundational way (Meyer). This message from Facebook to media producers was deafening, clearly demonstrating Facebook's categorical dominance over online information exchange. This massive increase in hits (and thereby, ad revenue) prompted the entire news industry to question, as Meyer puts it: "How can we make this even bigger?" (Meyer). Through trial and error, the social news industry quickly learned the importance of socially optimized articles, and it formed a symbiotic relationship between itself and Facebook. As a result of this algorithm altercation, sites like *Buzzfeed* quickly won out in the struggle of survival of the fittest, having learned that clickbait spreads very effectively across social media. Just as evolution in the natural world, this change in the (media) environment forced individuals (i.e. news producers) to struggle more desperately than ever for clicks. With substantial psychological backing, social news organizations refined out "an entire vocabulary and syntax for headlines that people click and share" (Meyer). Because this novel paradigm has little in common with all prior models of a media ecosystem, the model raises questions about its sustainability and its societal impact.

A news landscape with Facebook-friendly titles promises more emotional return, and journalists like Meyer question how news organizations can "keep promising you that their

content is not only wondtacular but also, actually, wondertacular-er?" (Meyer). The business model of clickbait sites does not aim to sell a product or service — not to educate a population or to push an agenda — but to simply, stupidly, blindly, and by nearly any means necessary generate as many page views as possible. The problem with the page-view incentive is that it is set up to reward surface level titles that target fundamental human psychological sensitives, and this media environment encourages organizations to churn out a high quantity of low-cost (read: low-quality) content. Targeting content to match popularity rather than quality comes along with its own set of problems — academics often criticize the strategy: "the idea that the vector-sum products of tens of hundreds of anonymous collaborators could have much value is, to say the least, counterintuitive for most of us in my profession" (Waters 15).

Presently, *Buzzfeed* and a selection of its more popular clickbait counterparts have gained pop-culture relevance as a site where you can send friends provocative articles — the act of sending these articles allow you, personally, to make your friends feel the curiosity, the stimulation, the emotional connection, simply by your sharing it with them. Your act of sharing becomes tied to the same psychological games that *Buzzfeed* initiates with you when you first read the title. Now that *Buzzfeed* is beginning to amass this cultural capital and become a brand with an identity — its at the point where the entity *Buzzfeed* can be discussed among friends. In the course of such discussions, considerations about the ethics of clickbait can arise, calling the quality of the content into question. As a result, *Buzzfeed* has used their userbase, economic stability, and cultural momentum in an attempt to break into covering *actual,* hard news about events going on in the world, investing in serious news coverage to improve their image. This preening is evident in their hiring of a Pulitzer Prize Winner from *ProPublica*, a *Rolling Stone*

contributing editor, a journalist from *Politico*, and a general tendency to recruit students from schools like the Columbia School of Journalism.

What are social news sites doing to people?

Just recently, the rate of technological innovation has escalated to the point where media is not undergoing a total shift over a span of each generation (think: the invention of the newspaper preceding the invention of the radio preceding the invention of cable television preceding video games, etc.) — instead, constant technological development has caused the current generation to find themselves in a completely different world than those who grew up just five years after. As people continue to consume more and more media, the nature of the media becomes increasingly influential on individuals' psychological conditions, which in turn shapes society as a collective. Researchers have demonstrated that individuals generally prefer more choices to less, and much of new media's design is structured on this premise (Iyengar). Because there are no longer only ten-or-so choices of television channels, individuals can choose between a vast selection of different options; this expanded choice effects a very different selection behavior, as contrasted with deliberate and pre-planned selections. One researcher notes that "entertainment content is increasingly structured in an unscheduled format," adding that one key finding was that scheduled availability influences selection habits (Webster). The important implication of this research is that the New Media model, which strives to make media as tempting as possible, causes individuals to make impulsive media selections that are not aligned with the long-term goals of those consuming the media (Hoch). Some researchers have already

demonstrated that New Media has a tendency to distract individuals with superficial pursuits, decrease a sense of well-being, compromise one's ability to concentrate and learn, hamper one's ability to form social bonds, and possibly lead to addiction (Ophir et al.).

How Buzzfeed is changing the nature of advertising

It's easy to read articles discussing Upworthy and *Buzzfeed*, — to learn about how social news sites work, and the critiques of its model. It's easy to synthesize these accounts and draw logical conclusions and make arguments about the structure of the thing, and its place in the media sphere. Let's put all of the questions about this content's negative impact aside. I sat down and loaded the current frontrunners in the field of social news — I opened Upworthy's main page right alongside *Buzzfeed's*. And the thing is: when you look at the two pages side by side, the designs don't look strikingly similar, but there are a few things that stand out. The first thing I noticed was the large quantity of visually-stimulating things: pictures. And I noticed that nearly all of the pictures were of people — and the pictures weren't taken far away from the people — they're all close-up. Emotive. Intimate. It gave me a feeling like I was looking at a fire — it's really easy to get caught up in just noticing it — in just staring at it and all of the little details in the faces that you wouldn't see if you just glanced at it. It's intriguing, and this fundamental fascination of human faces is written into our DNA. Back when humans lived as small groups of hunters and gatherers, fire was a very useful thing, and so if you were the type of person who was curious about fire, you were probably going to win. In the same vein, we are wired to process other people's faces in order to talk and communicate with others.

Another striking thing about a glance at the webpage is the lack of apparent advertisements embedded in the pages. There are a lot of pictures, sure, but you can't point to any flashing banners or intrusive headlines trying to sell a product. But the thing is, in practice, that's what the website is. There are images vying for your attention, and there are titles trying to entice you to click. In place of banner ads are large buttons inviting you to share the article you're reading on all of your social media — *Share with friends on Facebook — Tweet to followers on Twitter*. Instead of using advertisements which distract from the content, Upworthy and *Buzzfeed* choose to emphasize sharing articles to others, creating a impromptu web of distribution. I clicked on an article about how "the internet is making us more connected than ever before," which went on to detail the various benefits of our interconnected world, complete with interspersed GIFs and lines with large text. At the very end of the article was a very small paragraph which alluded to the presence of hackers, and which warned internet users that there were dangers that came from using the internet. Just following this was a video which essentially presented the article in video form, including the short sentiment of warning at the end. At the very end of the video was a logo for *Norton Antivirus* — who also produced the entire video. When I saw the logo, I was stunned; the whole article was given a new context with a new agenda that I had been unaware of for the duration of reading the article.

This technique of quiet advertising integration is the backbone of social news sites. The sites focus on getting people to share seemingly ad-free content while being paid by advertisers for producing it. Essentially, *Buzzfeed* and sites like it have figured out a way to get people to share advertisements for them without knowing it. Importantly, *Buzzfeed* readers share the articles with their friends, essentially saying: "I like this, and because you know me and the

things I like, you might like it too." Sharing to friends gives an article (i.e. advertisement) a social stamp of approval from someone close to you. This model of "native advertising" silently intermingles editorial content and business, which have long been seen by traditional news institutions as a kind of "church and state" which should remain separate.

Corporate-Orwellian concerns aside, *Buzzfeed* has realized that times have changed and that traditional advertising is no longer an effective business model (as evidenced by the shrinking revenues of traditional publications). The site is one of the few media producers actually making money; it is hiring prestigious figures in journalism and embracing the strengths of the internet (including tweets and user produced content in a cohesive manner). *Buzzfeed* knows that the way people consume content has changed: people nowadays check content more frequently for sharp bursts of attention. To put it bluntly: *Buzzfeed* is winning. It is able to charge double the price for advertising (as compared to most publishers); posts receive organic shares from actual human beings to their friends (providing *Buzzfeed* and its advertisers with a "brand lift"), and this concept is new to advertising. Their model is so successful that traditional publications (e.g. *The Atlantic* and *The Washington Post*) are playing with strategies similar to *Buzzfeed's* in an attempt to adapt to the digital age. I am not sure that it is good for your psychology, I do not know that you are going to learn much from it, but it appears that *Buzzfeed* is here to stay.

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