

# Smartphone changes news consumption and production

By Lin Su

Before smartphones were invented, people consumed news mainly by using mass communication technologies such as newspaper, radio, television. They each serve as a different platform. Newspapers provide written words and photos while radio transmits acoustic sounds and television conveys images, videos and sounds. Not until the invention of smartphones or computer laptops did people cease using these communication technologies separately to get news information.

**The smartphone has become the primary source of getting news due to its convenience**

The invention of the smartphone, which provided the capabilities of computers in a more convenient fashion, revolutionized the way people access information. With our smartphones in our pockets or somewhere within reach, people always have immediate access to unlimited information right at their fingertips.

The convenience and accessibility of smartphones are not bound by time or location. Researchers found out that smartphones are now as important for getting news inside the home as outside: up to 46% of smartphone users now access news in bed, which is much higher than using the device when commuting. Audience does not have to wait until a certain "TV news" period to see what is happening today, but can receive the news by simply browsing their smartphones at their sofa, kitchen, bed, even bathroom.

Therefore, television or radio news stations are losing their power to attract audience for their relatively low convenience. Legacy media have responded quickly to this change. They are putting more resources (i.e. money, human factors) on the development of smartphone news. In this way, smartphones have become an extension for media to disseminate their news content.

### **News providers are using smartphones as their devices to produce reports**

Considering the relatively low entrance level of smartphones and convenience mentioned above, news consumers nowadays are adopting smartphones as the major communication technology of getting news. In response to this change, the news media has also been through changes. Journalists from legacy media are switching their way of producing news from using heavy devices to the portable smartphones, which provide digital-first news stories and lower the latency of transmission. In another word, news stories travel at a faster speed than before.

When breaking news happens, smartphones allow journalists to do the reports without the help of photographers, which saves time waiting for their colleagues carrying cameras or recording devices from offices to the spot. With the help of internet or satellites, videos taken from smartphones can be transmitted quickly to the office for further editing work within several clicks. The notion of "office" is relatively unimportant compared to "news timeliness" because journalists can get their work done all by using their smartphones to connect with the home office, get their assignments and record their reports.

Besides the changes to professional journalists, the rise of citizen journalists is also worth mentioning. The concept of citizen journalism has expanded not only content

creation for online news outlets but also citizens' follow-up participation in the news process. Thousands of ordinary people started using smartphones to film what they saw around them. Also, reporting news became a basic act of resistance for ordinary Syrians in their revolution against Assad regime because Syrian president has tight control on the freedom of the press. Today, most of the western journalists covering Syria are based in Beirut or Turkey, and have several semi-permanent sources from citizen journalists inside Syria.

A citizen journalism project, iReport, has done a good job in CNN's coverage of the Japanese earthquake and the subsequent tsunami, winning its best rating in more than five years. The project, which encourages sharing of open resources, including maps of locations, timelines, and comments from readers, gives a more comprehensive view of natural disasters.

### **The line between production and consumption is blurred**

Friedman has pointed out that what makes the digital media revolution unique is its tendency to create new communities and "flatten" global culture. As one of the digital media, the smartphone allows users, who can both produce and receive messages, to interact actively. Those who consume the news which is made from legacy media can also "produce" news stories on social media. Smartphone revolutionizes the world of "mass media": media is no longer a one-way deal, from top-down to mass markets. It has become networked, allowing many-to-many conversations.

User generated journalism is another type of journalism, distinct from professional and citizen journalism. People who do not intend to report news but share

information using their own media outlet may be considered to be creating user-generated content in the news industry. The user generated content is raw and unedited material sent by amateur eyewitnesses who happened to be there. Different from citizen journalists, UGC posters are in the situations of being reporters by chance. In 2005 London bombing, when a human made disaster took place underground, a lot of footages become available thanks to the wide usage of people's smartphones.

However, the blurring line processure between news consumption and news production is inevitably happening which may endanger the credibility of news. Recent smartphones do not have such high quality for taking video or photograph as digital cameras do. The authenticity of blurred images or shaky video shoots may be questioned. Furthermore, although immediate transmission reduces the latency, social media like Twitter and Facebook help amateur journalists capture and post the events with their smartphones, even they convey some biased views.

**With the help of smartphones, people are getting high exposure to news but the time they spend is relatively little, pushing media to attract audience attention**

With the diffusion of iPhone in 2007, smartphones as well as the mobile internet have found their way into everyday life. People have their smartphones with them on nearly every occasion. As exposure time has increased, so has the probability of getting news notices on their smartphones. In this case, technology is the main cause of the change.

Whatever content is presented, the news on smartphones ought to fit into consumers' schedules. The average timespan people spend on mobile news before

moving on to something else was less than 12 minutes. A study by Nieman Lab from Harvard University measured the time participants spend with their eyes fixated or engaged. It shows that compared with computers, people spend less time on news story content, and are less likely to notice links when they are on smartphones. Owning a mobile device can increase access to news but not necessarily increase deeper understanding of the news.

Due to the high exposure but fragmented attention of the audience, media has changed their production strategies in order to catch attentions and beat other competitors. One strategy is to produce quick headlines and short brief articles which mainly gives the information covering what has happened but hardly goes deep inside the stories. In another word, investigative stories have become fewer because they demand a lot of time to read, which the audience is not willing to spend. Investigative stories also require longer time and greater amount of cost to produce because the hidden facts cannot get easily compared to some quick headlines such as trade war announcement from Trump government.

What is more, formats are varied. News media are seeking ways other than simply providing words and photos. In 2018, *Financial Times* created a game which depicts a day of an Uber driver and allows the audience to “play” as a passenger. Based on data analysis and visualization skills, *Financial Times* finds another strategy to let their audience emerge in the news stories, which is interactive game that can play on smartphones. Although reading remains an attentive news practice, many other activities have emerged, such as sharing, liking, recommending, commenting and voting.