



SHARE, LIKE, RECOMMEND

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SHARE, LIKE, RECOMMEND

Decoding the social media news consumer

Alfred Hermida, Fred Fletcher, Darryl Korell, and Donna Logan

This study examines the impact of social media spaces on news consumption, based on an online survey of 1600 Canadians. News organizations are rushing into social media, viewing services like Facebook and Twitter as opportunities to market and distribute content. There has been limited research outside the United States into the effects of social media on news consumption. Our study found that social networks are becoming a significant source of news for Canadians. Two-fifths of social networking users said they receive news from people they follow on services like Facebook, while a fifth get news from news organizations and individual journalists they follow. Users said they valued social media because it helped them keep up with events and exposed them to a wider range of news and information. While social interaction has always affected the dissemination of news, our study contributes to research that suggests social media are becoming central to the way people experience news. Networked media technologies are extending the ability of users to create and receive personalized news streams. Investigating how networked publics are reframing the news and shaping news flows would contribute to our understanding of the evolving relationship between the journalist and the audience.

KEYWORDS Canada; Facebook; journalism; social media; social networks; Twitter

Introduction

Social networking has become a “global phenomenon” (Pew, 2010, p. 1). In countries such as the United States, Poland, the United Kingdom and South Korea, almost half of adults say they use social networking sites (Pew, 2010). Media organizations have embraced social media as a way to distribute news and connect with audiences, providing a range of mechanisms for users to share and recommend news content (Singer et al., 2011), and individual journalists have incorporated social media into daily routines as a way to share content, develop relationships and build community (Farhi, 2009).

Much of the research into the impact of social media on news flows and media consumption has focused on how mainstream media are responding to changes in technology, consumer preferences, and cultural habits (Harrison and Barthel, 2009; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Newman, 2009; Singer et al., 2011). There are also scholarly studies about how journalism practices are being influenced by social media platforms such as Twitter (Hermida, 2010; Holton and Lewis, 2011; Lasorsa et al., 2012). Yet surveys suggest that for a growing number of citizens, sharing and discussing news takes place through social media (Purcell et al., 2010). Olmstead et al. suggest that “if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next” (2011, p. 10).

This paper looks at how social media are affecting the flow of news and information, based on a survey of online Canadians that examined the interaction between audiences, social media and the news. Our findings indicate that a significant number of social media

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users value their personal network as a way to filter the news, rather than solely relying on the professional judgment of a news organization or journalist. The results provide indications of how hierarchical relationships between mass media consumers and producers of media content are being further unravelled. Social networking sites represent an evolution of the public sphere, where the dynamics of publication and distribution of news are being reshaped by networked publics. The results suggest that social media are affecting the role of the journalist as the traditional regulator and moderator of public discourse.

Literature Review

The audience has traditionally been viewed as the receiver of news and information created, packaged and distributed by professional media organizations. In a broadcast model, the audience is an unidentifiable mass brought into being by its passive consumption of media (Livingstone, 2005). Scholars have argued that far from being passive, the audience actively makes sense of media, by bringing individual interpretative lenses (Fiske, 1987; Radway, 1984). But traditionally, individuals have had limited ability to directly affect the construction of media messages or communicate with the producers of the media (Ha and James, 1998).

Internet technologies, collectively described as Web 2.0, have facilitated the involvement of audiences in the observation, selection, filtering, distribution and interpretation of events. Social media are "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" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Harrison and Barthel argue that what is new about social media is not simply the active media user, but rather "new media technologies now enable vastly more users to experiment with a wider and seemingly more varied range of collaborative creative activities" (2009, p. 174).

Social media spaces allow for new relations that disrupt authorial structures and established flows of information. Marwick and boyd (2011) describe Twitter as an example of a technology with a networked audience, where users create and exchange content in a many-to-many model. The networked audience is connected not just to the person who sends a message, but also to each other. What emerges is a networked means of communication that alters the publishing dynamics of a media system premised on the idea of a broadcast audience. Marwick and boyd suggest that, "in contrast to the imagined broadcast audience, which consumes institutionally-created content with limited possibilities for feedback, the networked audience has a clear way to communicate with the speaker through the network" (2011, p. 129).

Social network sites have been theorized as the latest generation of a form of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962; Schudson, 1998), where individuals "construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Users of these sites are mediated publics, and conversely, social networking sites provide environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology.

These networked public spheres are becoming spaces for audiences to share, discuss and contribute to the news. In 2011, the two main platforms for networked publics were Facebook and Twitter. Purcell et al. (2010) found that 75 per cent of online news consumers in the United States receive some of their news via email or posts on social networking sites such as Facebook. A study of traffic to the top 25 US news websites pointed to the growing importance of social recommendation, with Facebook emerging as a major source of traffic for the five most visited sites (Olmstead et al., 2011).

Audiences are engaging in similar behaviour on Twitter. Smith and Rainie (2010) found that sharing the news was common on Twitter, with 55 per cent of users posting links to stories. A study into the diffusion of news links on Twitter by An et al. (2011) also highlighted the value of social recommendation. They found that a message from a news organization or journalist was sent on average 15.5 times, concluding that social recommendation could increase the audience reach of media sources significantly.

News organizations have sought to facilitate the dissemination of content by adding social networking functionality to websites, encouraging users to "like" or "tweet" a story (Singer et al., 2011). Journalists have also adopted social media tools to promote their content in an effort to extend audience reach and foster brand loyalty. A prevailing practice is tweeting a headline with a link back to its website (Lasorsa et al., 2012).

Sharing news and information predates the Internet, from conversations in the office to newspaper clippings sent through the postal service. Donath suggests that digital communication technologies have fostered the emergence of new forms of media that enhance communications and the formation of social ties, leading to a situation where "for millions of people, mediated sociability will be with them at all times, no matter where they are or what they are doing" (2004, p. 631).

The flow of news and information among networked publics through social recommendation raises questions for a media industry traditionally based on a hierarchical model of communications. As Schudson notes, journalism has been a "dominant force in the public construction of common experience and a popular sense of what is real and important" (2003, p. 13). Its practitioners have had a significant degree of control over deciding what is important through the selection and distribution of news. The flow of news on social media reshapes the industry's relationship with audiences in that it weakens the authority of the journalist as the professional who decides what the public needs to know and when it needs to know it. With the recommendation of news emerging as a form of cultural currency on social networks, Olmstead et al. suggest that "understanding not only what content users will want to consume but also what content they are likely to pass along may be a key to how stories are put together and even what stories get covered in the first place" (2011, p. 1).

Methodology

This study examines how social media are affecting news habits in Canada, based on an online survey on attitudes to the news and news sources. Much of the research into social media, particularly social networking sites, is US-focused (see boyd and Ellison, 2007), and concerns young users. In order to understand the long-term implications of these tools, boyd and Ellison (2007) argue that there is a need for much broader quantitative and qualitative research into who is and who is not using these sites, why,

and for what purposes. Canada offers a good case study in how audiences are using social media for news. Facebook is the most popular social networking site in the country, with 16.5 million users, accounting for 63 per cent of Canada’s online population as of August 2011 (SocialBakers, 2011). By April 2011, 18 per cent of Canadians were using Twitter, accounting for one in five Internet users over the age of 15 (comScore, 2011).

For this study, the researchers commissioned Angus Reid Public Opinion to conduct an online survey of 1682 randomly selected Canadian adults who use the Internet, including 400 Francophones. The survey sample included 1059 Internet users who visit social networking sites at least once a month (63 per cent). The survey was conducted from 26 to 30 August 2010. The margin of error—which measures sampling variability—is ± 2.5 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

The results were statistically weighted according to the most current Statistics Canada data on age, gender, region, and education to ensure a representative sample. Discrepancies in or between totals reflect rounding. Respondents were recruited from the Angus Reid Forum, Canada’s premier national access panel of online respondents. All results reported here are statistically significant, based on two-sided tests with significance level 0.05. Tests were adjusted for all pairwise comparisons within a row of each innermost sub-table using the Bonferroni correction. If the cell counts of some categories were not integers, they were rounded to the nearest integers before performing column proportions tests.

Findings

Social Networks as News Sources

Our study indicated the extent to which links and recommendations circulating on social networks such as Facebook have become a source for news and information for a significant number of Internet users (see Table 1). Two out of five Canadians (43 per cent) who use social networking sites said they received news and information on a daily basis from family, friends and acquaintances they follow on social networks. Gender was a factor in the use of social media for news, with the figure rising to 49 per cent for women, compared to 36 per cent for men. There were also occupational differences, with students (51 per cent) and retired people (59 per cent) among the largest groups who use social media most often for news filtered by their social circles.

By comparison, a smaller number of social media users cited Twitter as a source for their daily news and information. This is not surprising as Twitter has far fewer users than

TABLE 1
Use of social media for news and information on a typical day (%)

Source	Yes	No	Unsure
Individual/organization followed on social networking sites, including friends and family	43	55	2
News organization/journalist followed on social networking site	20	78	2
Twitter updates from another individual/organization, including friends and family	18	79	3
Twitter updates from news organization/journalist	10	88	2

Internet users who visit social networking sites at least monthly; *N* = 1059.

Facebook in Canada. We found that 18 per cent of respondents said they received news and information from their social circles on Twitter. The social messaging service had a greater uptake among younger adults. The highest users of Twitter for news were aged 18–34 years old, with a quarter citing it as a source for daily news.

There was a divergence in terms of the source of recommendations preferred by social media users. Canadians were twice as likely to prefer news links and recommendations from friends and family than from journalists or news organizations on both Facebook and on Twitter. While, as has been cited, 43 per cent said they received their news from friends and family on social networks like Facebook, only 20 per cent cited the account of a news organization or a journalist as a source. On Twitter, only 10 per cent of social media users said they followed a journalist or news outlet, compared to 18 per cent from personal connections. The results suggest that a significant number of social media users tend to rely on the people around them to tell them what they need to know rather than relying solely on institutional media.

However, our findings suggest that younger news consumers may be more receptive to receiving the news from professional news accounts on social media. Students were more likely to get their news from professional media accounts on both Facebook (31 per cent) and Twitter (17 per cent). This might be explained by the fact that students are heavily represented on social media and are more likely to be heavy users of social media. In our survey, 94 per cent of students said they visited sites like Facebook when they were online.

The Appeal of Social News

For our study, we wanted to explore the reasons for the growth of news as a social activity and understand what was driving the dissemination of news through online interactions. Keeping up with the news emerged as a strong driver for the use of social media. More than two-thirds of social media users (71 per cent) said that getting news and views was one of the main reasons for taking part in sites like Facebook (see Table 2). This might be explained by the fact that maintaining an awareness of the news was important for 88 per cent of our overall sample of all Internet users.

The idea of news as a shared social experience was important for online media consumers. Close to two-thirds (64 per cent) said they valued being able to easily share content with others. Sharing was most important for younger adults aged 18–34, with the figure rising to 83 per cent. Sixty-three per cent said one of the main reasons they use sites like Facebook was to obtain first-hand information about important events, with little variation across gender or age groups. The figure was higher for finding out about social or community events, at 76 per cent of social media users.

TABLE 2
Main reasons to visit and/or participate in social networking sites?

Reason	%
Find out about social or community events	76
Keep up with news and views	71
Find first-hand information about important events	63
Exposed to more news and information	59

Internet users who visit social networking sites at least monthly; *N* = 1059.

While there may be concerns that social networks may limit the breadth of information people receive, our data suggested that news consumers have a different perspective. A majority of social media users believe their social circles provide them with a broader range of news and information than if they relied solely on traditional media. Almost two-thirds (59 per cent) said they were exposed to more news and information via their social networks, with the figure rising to 69 per cent for younger consumers. A diverse news diet appears to be important for all Canadian online news consumers. Nearly 90 per cent told us they come across unexpected news online at least sometimes. Only 18 per cent admitted they prefer news that shares their point of view and 75 per cent said they preferred journalism that did not express a particular point of view.

Our results found few differences in the use of news sources between the overall sample of online news consumers and social media users. All respondents were asked where they went to obtain news online. We then subdivided the data for social media users, dividing the figures based on the rate of usage. High users visited social networking sites several times a day or at least once a day. Medium users visited social networks at least once a week or once a month. Low users visited social networks less than once a month or not at all. We found that use of social media did not impact the use of traditional sources of news (see Table 3). Social media usage was not a determining factor in readership of national or local newspaper websites or in the usage of news aggregator websites. Similarly, social media use had a negligible impact on the use of TV or radio news websites. By comparison, we found that social media users were more likely to access websites from international news outlets, websites that mix news and commentary such as the *Huffington Post* and the website of an individual blogger not affiliated with a major news outlet.

Attitudes Towards Journalists on Social Networks

Our study included a set of questions to examine audience attitudes towards the way media organizations have adopted social media to gather news, distribute content and connect with users. We asked consumers if they would trust user-generated content more or less if edited by a professional journalist for a news organization. Overall, 37 per cent of news consumers expressed a preference for curation by a trained journalist,

TABLE 3
Where users get their news and information on a typical day (%)

News sources	Online news consumers	High social media users	Medium social media users	Low/none social media users
National or local newspaper website	66	70	70	64
TV news outlet website	52	54	54	45
Radio news outlet website	33	34	36	28
News aggregator	64	66	65	62
International news outlet website	36	46	43	32
Website that mixes news and commentary	8	27	16	9
Website of an individual blogger	16	26	18	8
N	1480	658	476	346

with the figure rising to 58 per cent for students. But 44 per cent of news consumers said they were unsure. There was a statistically significant but very weak relationship between heavy social media use and higher levels of trust in professionally curated content. Experience with social media was not a key factor in trust in professional editing.

We found similar attitudes towards the use by news organizations of material sourced from social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Overall, news consumers were evenly divided between those who valued this approach (36 per cent), those who did not (32 per cent) and those who were unsure (32 per cent). Students (50 per cent) were more likely to value the use of social media content by journalists. Social media usage affected the results. High and medium users of social media placed greater value on the integration of social content by news organizations.

The online audience was also divided over whether journalists should use Twitter to report on events; 39 per cent said yes, 34 per cent said no and 26 per cent were unsure. Once again, students (53 per cent) were more open to journalists using social media tools in their work. The regular use of social media played a considerable role in influencing a more favourable attitude towards the use of Twitter by professional journalists.

Discussion

While the dissemination of news through social interaction has always played a role in the diffusion of media, our study contributes to a growing body of work that suggests sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news. Networked digital media technologies are extending the ability of news consumers to both create and receive personalized social news streams. Our analysis found that familiarity with social media is related to comfort with crowd-based information and its use by professional news organizations. Users who are immersed in social media are likely to be more open to receiving news and information via their networked circles, from both peers and journalists. Editorially, the traditional gatekeeping function of the media is weakened as a significant proportion of news consumers turn to family, friends and acquaintances to alert them to items of interest. Essentially, a person's social circle takes on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story, video or other piece of content is important, interesting or entertaining enough to recommend.

Social networks are evolving from being more than spaces for personal exchanges. They are becoming one of the mediums for sharing and recommending news as users appropriate computer-mediated technologies for their own purposes. For now, audiences prefer to receive news and links from family and friends than from journalists. But this may change as people become more used to the idea of "liking" a news organization on Facebook or following a journalist on Twitter.

Social recommendation can benefit news organizations in extending their reach but further undermines established business models based on delivering large, aggregate audiences to advertisers. Newman warns that just as Google became a key intermediary in the news business, "history may be about to repeat itself, with social networks reinforcing the trend towards disaggregation and putting further pressure on the funding of journalism in traditional news organizations" (2009, p. 49). While search remains a key source of traffic for the news media, sharing is increasingly influential in driving audiences (Olmstead et al., 2011).

Social recommendation is intensifying the trend towards the unbundling of editorial products. Online, readers can “bypass the newspaper’s front page altogether, using search engines, feed readers or headline aggregators” (Carr, 2009, p. 153). Social sharing means that users bypass professional editors and instead receive news based on the recommendations of people they trust. However, there are unanswered questions as to whether networked audiences are exposed to news that is popular rather than important, and how far social recommendation limits exposure to a variety of news sources.

One area of debate is homophily, the tendency of individuals to connect with others who validate their core beliefs rather than be exposed to opposing viewpoints (McPherson et al., 2001). While our study did not investigate the content shared on social networks, our findings indicate that users believe that social recommendation makes them aware of a broad range of news. This could be because Canadians appear to regard a diverse news diet as important. Such findings are at odds with arguments that online, we as news consumers “like to embed ourselves in the reassuring womb of an echo chamber” (Kristof, 2009). Other studies have suggested that a more nuanced approach is required to understand user behaviour on social networks. A study of conversations on abortion conducted on Twitter identified both homophily and heterogeneity taking place (Yardi and boyd, 2010), while a study of news flows on Twitter noted that users tended to receive information from multiple media sources (An et al., 2011).

Furthermore, our analysis revealed that social media users share similar news habits to the overall online news consumer. Users are adding social networks to their sources of news, but not at the expense of mainstream media outlets, in which they have retained a degree of trust. Our results suggest that social media users are also more likely than non-users to have a diverse news diet, turning to non-traditional news sources such as the *Huffington Post*, as well as individual bloggers.

Social media are becoming ever more ingrained in the news experience, both from the perspective of audiences and the journalism profession. The impact of audiences in curating and framing news content through social networks was beyond the focus of our study. There is scope to examine how social media users are reinterpreting news content and how their followers are receiving these messages. Social media recommendation removes a news story from its original context, with a user attaching their reputation to the link. As Hogan and Quan-Hass suggest, “how users curate data is meaningful and carries a signal to their audience” (2010, p. 313). Investigating how networked publics are reframing the news and shaping news flows would contribute to our understanding of the evolving relationship between the journalist and the audience.

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