JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE TRANSFORMATION OF JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE NEWS

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Abstract:

The evolution of social media has dramatically changed the way people access daily news updates. Instead of buying printed newspapers, nowadays, more and more people are getting news through social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, BuzzFeed, among others. As social media has become one of the dominant and growing sources of news and information for millions of people, it has also turned journalism's traditional one-way communication into two-way conversations where journalists find themselves being able to actively engage with audiences. This article shows how the way journalists and news organizations around the globe create and deliver news have changed to adapt to the new norms.

Keywords: news transformation, sources of news, news organizations, printed newspapers, media credibility, journalism, social media, news media quality

1. Introduction

With the rapid growth of social media, more and more people are turning to social media platforms as a source of information for their daily news instead of purchasing printed newspapers. In other words, the way people consume news is changing. While in the traditional world, newspapers, governments, or other types of news corporations play an essential role in providing news and giving out information, this method has now changed. Not only readers nowadays can contribute content and opinions on news, but they also are able to choose what they read. This has challenged news organizations around the world to adjust the way they operate to adapt to this new approach to accessing news. It has also asked journalists to actively put in a digital lens while reporting to better engage with today's readers. In addition, newspapers need to find a

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way to make the news profitable in this digital age where information can be accessed free of charge and faster than ever. This article discusses how social media has affected the way news is created and delivered nowadays, and which methods are being used by media organizations to market their news products and services to users.

2. The Social Media Evolution

Apart from entertainment, social media has become a major channel conveying news and updated information for the majority of people worldwide. This explains part of the reasons for the rapid growth of social networks and the so-called "social media evolution."

First of all, what is social media? According to Merriam-Webster, social media is defined as "*forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as video).*" In a broader sense, as defined by Boyd & Ellison (2007), social networking sites, apps or platforms allow individuals to create a public profile, build a network of connections and "*view and traverse*" these connections and profiles (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In 2019, a report done by the Pew Research Centre showed that 72 percent of American adults use some form of social media. In 2005, the year after Facebook went live, that number was five percent (Social Media Fact Sheet 2022).

So, how did it all begin? Social networks have evolved over the years to the modern days, but social media is not that new. The rise of social media usage did not start with the computer, but in fact, with the telephone. During the 1950s, phone phreaking began. Brett Borders explained it as a term used for the rogue searching of the telephone network. Phreaks were able to hack into corporate unused voice mailboxes to host the first blogs and podcasts. During the 1960s, the public saw the advent of email, but the internet was only available to the public until 1991 (Borders, 2009).

In 2000, with many social networking sites started springing up, social media received a great boost. This was thanks to the creation of social networking among individuals and groups who shared a common interest in music, education, movies, and friendship (Edosomwan, 2011). Some of the big names that were launched back in the 2000s included LunarStorm, Six Degrees, Cyworld, Wikipedia, MySpace, LinkedIn, lastFM, Facebook, Yahoo!360, and YouTube (Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2011).

Thanks to the speedy development of technologies and digital services, desktops and laptops were shifted to smartphones and tablets, and high-speed wireless internet service was made available and ready in homes, businesses and public spaces. Further, with the advent of social media apps that could run on smartphones, users have been able to access these social networks whenever and wherever they are (2021). Many since then have been adopting the habit of checking information available online as it is accessible via only a few simple clicks. That has led to a media shift from traditional outlets to digital news sources. It did not take long for media organizations to realize they

need to start considering how they should use social media tools to keep their audiences, and more importantly, to keep bringing in funds to support themselves (Harper, 2010). In the book *Mobile and Social Media Journalism*, Anthony Adornato says people are increasingly reading and watching the news while on social media sites and engaging with it in real-time as news happens (Adornato, 2022). Therefore, social media has also helped shape the way people view journalism nowadays.

3. The Relationship between Journalism & Social Media

In his social media literature review discussing the shift of traditional media outlets to digital news, Harper argues before being able to define the relationship between social media and journalism, there is a vital need to explain journalism's purpose and troubles within the media industry as a whole (Harper, 2010). In a letter in the *American Journalism Review*, Kevin Klose wrote journalism in its purest form is about witnessing an event and recording them for others to see and read (Klose, 2, 2009). Similarly, Pamela J. Podger wrote journalism is about listening to those who have something to say in another *American Journalism Review* (Podger, 36, 2009).

Over the years, social media has proven to be persistent among journalists. Nearly all of them include social media in the process of reporting and publishing news, and many say it is essential (Weaver & Willnat, 2016). Multiple ideas have emerged by journalists and news organizations worldwide as the means of improving journalism in the age of digital networks, including practicing multimedia storytelling, customization and personalization, online video (especially for newspapers), mobile devices (at one time, the iPad was the future of newspapers), mobile apps, paywalls, and now virtual and augmented reality (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). Each has come with overinflated expectations that were eventually tempered by a more modest appraisal (Creech & Mendelson, 2015). However, in a relationship with the profession of journalism, some may argue that after a decade of social media was seen in some quarters as journalism's savior as well as a vital catalyst for connection and social change broadly, it is being decried as a cesspool of misinformation and fake news (Frish & Greenbaum, 2017; Haig, 2017).

According to Lewis and Molyneux, "*studies of social media and journalism frequently rely on two overarching narratives, one addressing normalization and one addressing control. Normalization focuses on changes in how journalists themselves relate to their profession and its institutional role, while control focuses on changes in journalists' relationships with their audiences and content. In both cases, the focus is on change, with the advent of digital communication - and specifically social media - being the fulcrum about which these changes have occurred. For instance, a greater adoption of social media is usually juxtaposed with a diminishing emphasis on "traditional" journalistic practices or roles*." (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). This narrative suggests that some journalists who use social media as a tool to support their reporting "*imposed existing journalistic norms on the new platforms and in others adopted elements of social media as newly journalistic*" (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012), which has

been called a "*hybrid normalization*" (Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2018). In *The SAGE handbook of digital journalism*, Hermida says "*the new normal on social media is characterized by the hybrid mixing of contexts and practices as boundaries collapse between personal and professional, public and private*" (Hermida, 2016).

With news organization's increased presence on social media creating a two-way communication between journalists and audiences, it is proven to help journalists do their jobs more effectively with better audience engagement. Adornato argues journalists who interact with their followers are seen as more credible and are rated more positively than journalists who use social media solely to distribute news (Adornato, 2022). In a blog, Alyssa Rosenblatt says the two-way communication allows journalists to shift the once formal news outlet into a conversation by utilizing social media platforms, thus creating an openness between audiences and journalists. Rosenblatt listed the American journalist and author Keri L. Blakinger, who reports mainly about issues surrounding the American prison system, as an example of a journalist who actively engages with her audience, allows her audience to talk to her in a more conversational manner and shows her true self while also reporting news in an effective way, which helps create a sense of credibility in her report to her audience (Rosenblatt, 2020).

Similarly, Kurt Wagner argues in his article that social media makes it easier for journalists to build a reputation. "*The standard newspaper byline now includes other elements, like Facebook and Twitter profiles where journalists can interact with readers, share unfiltered thoughts, and amass a following that can travel with them from one job to the next.*" The drawback, however, is that "*moving fast means people are more prone to making mistakes, or worse, careless reporting*" and "*the race to be first is real*" but "*does not always correlate with getting things right.*" (Wagner, 2017).

Journalists and news organizations are not the only ones who benefit from the shift from one-way communication in traditional journalism to two-way conversations. It gives audiences a tool to voice their opinions to the world (Harper, 2010). In a book titled *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff argue social media has empowered individuals and has forced the idea of "*news media*" to morph whether or not the industry has desired this change (Li, 5, 2008). In the book *Twitter Power*, Joel Comm states social media allows anyone to publish ideas at a relatively non-existent price (Comm, 1, 2009). By creating a two-way communication approach between journalists and readers, Rosenblatt states that the readers get to know the journalist on a more personal level and not just what they cover, allowing the readers to see that there is a real person behind the news (Rosenblatt, 2020). However, it allows certain readers to personally reach journalists they disagree with, and some journalists can be the target of aggressive harassment (Wagner, 2017).

4. The Implementation of Strategies

In the digital age where information is accessible in a free and much faster way with just a click, newspapers need to find a way to make the news profitable. And one of the easiest

solutions is through online advertisements. For example, social platforms like Facebook or Twitter are some major traffic-driven networks most publications look for for free online distribution. Generally, each social platform has its own software algorithm to determine which content or articles get the most traffic and distribution. In Facebook's case, the platform prioritizes posts that include videos or stories that publications publish directly to the network. This makes Facebook become the host of these stories, so that users are not leaving for other websites as Facebook is advertising alongside these articles and sharing that advertising revenue with the publishers as an incentive. According to this, publishers can then come up with strategies which help boost those specific content and articles online in order to gain more clicks and readers' screen time. Although these algorithms do not change the way newspapers and journalists define news, but it has an impact on the types of content being created, in what forms news is delivered, and where readers can find news (Wagner, 2017).

In the age of digital networks, social media is a cost-effective method for marketing activities (Paridon & Carraher, 2009) and is used by media companies to market products and services at a minimal cost, as well as to offer a place to interact with customers or readers to try and solve their problems through two-way communication (Edosomwan, 2011). In an article discussing ways to use social media in a business model, Aliaa ElShabassy shows four different methods being used by four big names in journalism, including The Washington Post, The Guardian, BBC, and The New York Times.

In the BBC's case, to increase traffic and attract more advertisers, they convince readers to visit their website over their different social media platforms in every possible way. For example, BBC uses Facebook to provide an overview of the news, with a link linking directly to the full article on the website, where readers will be asked to sign in to encourage revisiting. Readers, whether loyal or fly-by, are also encouraged to click on the *Contact Us* button to share their perspectives on the news or if they have an interesting piece of news to contribute. Sharing a similar method, The New York Times makes the *Sign-Up* button available on their Facebook page, which will lead readers to a list of interesting newsletters and options for subscription. The idea is to attract readers from their social media platforms with free stories, only to redirect them to paid content (ElShabassy, 2020).

Like never before, The Washington Post shows creativity by using TikTok to attract a younger audience. Aiming at familiarizing viewers with their newsroom, they put the description "*We are a newspaper*" in every TikTok video they release to build their brand name in the minds of young viewers. These viewers will serve in one way or another as potential future subscribers to their website. Another example of implementing the creative method in using social media is The Guardian as they use their social platforms to revive a financial picture by spreading a message of "hope" over different platforms. The Guardian has an independent investigative journalism channel which asks users to donate or subscribe to maintain the quality of the content. By redirecting users to the website, the newspaper also offers different subscription types

for users to choose from. It was reported recently that The Guardian has 655,000 regular paying supporters (ElShabassy, 2020).

5. Trust in News

The citizenship only works on the basis of common knowledge. Hence, not only do we need to be informed ourselves, but we also need to trust that others are informed "*unless we can trust the news media to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public – a collective entity possessing shared concerns – starts to fall apart*" (Coleman et al., 2012). The news can only be effective with relevant information given to the public in a timely manner when the public trusts the news. Studies find that in general, people's trust in news media is declining (Newman, 2018).

Trust in news media, however, differs between individuals (Hanitzsch & Steindl, 2018). To explain trust in the media, some studies find different patterns can dictate the way people choose to trust news (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2022). Some studies find that education is a positive predictor of media trust (Bennett, 1999), while others find the opposite (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Some studies find women trust the media more than men (Jones, 2004; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), and others that men trust the media more (Gronke & Cook, 2007). In turn, trust in news also drives news consumption (Tsfati & Ariely 2014; Fletcher & Park 2017). Those with low levels of trust tend to prefer non-mainstream news sources, such as blogs and social media (Fletcher & Park 2017).

It is also well established that people's trust varies between different news outlets. Some outlets, such as public broadcasters and traditional broadsheet papers, receive much trust, while tabloids and commercial TV channels, in general, receive less (Newman, 2018). Trust in the news also varied based on the source of distribution. For example, many find the news is less credible when it is shared via platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. However, the effect of distribution is stronger when the news story is shared by a politician (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2022).

Via social media, news travels at lightning-quick speeds. It thus has challenged journalists and news organizations to not only get the news right, but have to get there first. When news breaks, it is expected to be covered and shared online immediately. As a result, the old practice of submitting a story for the morning's newspaper is all but dead (Wagner, 2017). But it also raises a major question surrounding the credibility of the information or news. To answer this question becomes particularly important for social media users, as the gatekeeping function switches from producers to consumers of information for newer technologies (Haas & Wearden, 2003), because to "*get there first*" does not guarantee to "*get there correctly*." Furthermore, the public should be largely educated on fact-checking information and public awareness on how to verify news to support the affected societies in combating the impact of fake news (Olan et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

The age of social media and online news has challenged journalists and news organizations to evolve to adapt and keep up with the new norms. Besides creating a two-way communication method that helps journalists and readers actively engage, social networks offer readers a place to provide opinions on news. Social media also allows readers to access news and information faster than ever with a few clicks and free of charge. Thus, one of the biggest questions media organizations and journalists need to answer is to make a profit from online news while ensuring to maintain the life of printed news. Reporting techniques that involve digital storytelling for better audience engagement are also encouraged to be used.

Further, as social media becomes one of the dominant and growing sources of information, readers are encouraged to fact-check the information and make credibility judgements on the news they receive online based on sources of contribution to avoid spreading fake news or unverified information, such as "*the gatekeeping function of that information also falls more into the hands of the page users, rather than the page creators*" (Westerman et al., 2014).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Nguyen Minh Ngoc is working as a Multi-media Journalist and Content Creator at the SaltWire Network Inc. in Canada. She is currently conducting research on the relationship between journalism and social media in the digital age to understand the transformation and adaptation of news organizations and journalists around the world nowadays.

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