Conference Papers   School of Media

2015-03-26

Digital Takeover of News: Journalism as a Public Service in the Social Media Age

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26 March, 2015

As anyone looking at the news will have noticed in recent year, news media are no longer the sole domain of professional journalism but have in part become colonized by content published on social networks. Contemporary news media, both new and old, are increasingly reliant on news content produced by social network users in the form of eye witness reports, videos, photos and citizen-journalism. While news media are 'harvesting' this cheap content to form parts of their own coverage, it logically follows that social networks would strive to become the port of call for news audiences in themselves. In many respects social networks are outgrowing their roles as forums for public discussion and 'cables' through which either news organisations promote their news products, or information from citizen journalists, bloggers and others pass before it is picked up by established traditional media, that forge it into their own reports. Instead, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and others are becoming the go-to source for news.

So far, traditional news media have seen the worth in social media mainly as an advertising platform to reach online news audiences and a source for mostly free and half-finished news content that they can absorb into their own reporting. The potential audience active on Twitter is in many ways highly desirable, as its members are usually smart, media-savvy, technology-rich and interested in current affairs. By advertising their news products on Twitter or Facebook, news media aim to redirect news audiences to their own websites to read or view reports.

However, several large news events in recent years have illustrated the change in how news is consumed on social networks, with news organisations often struggling to compete with a deluge of information that is published by those directly witnessing or involved in news events. Populated with a potentially huge number of eyewitnesses, activists, bloggers and citizen-journalists, social networks are morphing into a type of newswire in themselves.

Although the response by professional journalism has been quite slow, new news ventures such as First Look's reported.ly have recognised this trend and developed a business model based on delivering news directly to audiences on social networks without a website of their own. On Twitter, for example, reported.ly reports on news event by publishing fact-checked tweets and photos or videos that originate from social media. Similarly, it posts videos and photos along with short reports on Facebook, or publishes stories through the community platform Medium. In doing so they attempt to bridge the space between citizen-journalism and blogging on social media and professional journalism.

New media technology is the system around which journalists have begun to operate, accepting it as its master in the same way that the 19th century factory labourer did the machine (Marx & McLellan 1995). Contrary to the claim that it is a tool for the journalist it is in fact becoming the new form of journalism itself.

Facebook, in particular, has become active in developing a service, that it says is a tool for journalists, to showcase newsworthy content uploaded by their users covering current and breaking news. The FB Newswire page is accessible to everyone, providing bite-sized updates on news events with photos, videos or posts that were originally uploaded to Facebook. It markets Facebook as a news service, promising to provide closer, more 'authentic' news coverage, through the eyes of its many users.

The service does not spell out any specific editorial guidelines. It describes itself as a source of newsworthy content for journalists, which suggests that it broadly follows the news agenda of traditional news media in selecting its content. The selection process for what constitutes news appears as natural and self-evident as Facebook portrays itself simply as a business providing public news content from across its far-reaching platform.

While it targets journalists, Facebook enters the news arena as a primary distribution platform for its content (Ingram 2014) , leaving no doubt about who owns this news. News organisations are instructed to either embed the content on their own website or contact the owner through Facebook for permission to use it in another form, such as broadcast. In this way, the social network has clearly placed itself in competition with traditional news media, as they select and market their own content not just to journalists but anyone who is interested.

Similarly, Google runs a politics and elections blog that updates on its activities in covering elections. The blog promise to make participatory democracy easier by providing information about upcoming elections, deliver live news on polling day, encourage discussion and connect voters with politicians. On Google+ many of the updates posted appear to market Google's own services. It offers analysis of the amount of page views each candidate received in Google searches; what topics in relation to the elections were most searched on its browser; and connects to Google searches for the location of polling stations. Google presents a self-enclosed environment and whatever you click on, you're likely to be directed towards another Google service.

This is symptomatic of the technological elite's belief that the widespread use of technology will eventually deliver a true representation of wider society and direct democracy. To be crass, citizens are alleviated of the need to collectively decide how politics should be discussed and communicated, assured that a simple mouse click will register their position. Kevin Kelly (1998), founding executive of Wired magazine, described this as 'the hive'. Through the contribution of each individual in a networked world, democracy and collective intelligence is reduced to a mathematical equation. Technology traces individuals' actions and pools this data to create more complex and useful information. The seductive quality of this argument lies in the fact that it

promises a perfect system of democracy without the hard graft of conscious and deliberate decision-making by citizens as a collective.

The video-sharing platform YouTube, each day, provides playlists of videos for viewers covering breaking news events, entertainment, sports and various other topics. They usually consist of videos uploaded to the channels of news organisations or well known public sources. In short, it selects a variety of news videos on any particular topic for YouTube's own news audiences to view, so that they may consume the news they want without having to leave the confines of YouTube to access it.

And so, it becomes apparent that the line between news media and the digital industry is rapidly blurring, as both exist in a parasitic relationship with one another. At the core of this development is the crucial question, how this might affect the public service role of news media, both new and old. Is the 'virtual free market of information' able to deliver a socially responsible media model?

Technophile ideologues argue that the virtual free market of information in its present form is the best protection against state repression and censorship. In the Californian Ideology, Barbrook and Cameron, examined the ideological roots of Silicon Valley, that are steeped in the libertarianism that sees individual private property rights as the only effective frontier against authoritarian governments. On the Net both leftist and neoliberal agendas are mysteriously reconciled through their shared anti-statism. Ironically, as the left struggles to crush corporate capitalism through community activism in an electronic agora, neoliberals are pulling the rug under their feet by crushing any limitations to the virtual market through state regulation. What has emerged is a virtual free market that promises to deliver media freedom. (Barbrook & Cameron 1995)

New media, many critics have pointed out, has successfully managed to absorb technological determinism in the cultural hegemony of media communications. The 'will to virtuality' (Kroker & Weinstein 1994) is taken for granted and made to look like a natural progression. In her analysis of the ideology of Wired magazine, feminist Melanie Stewart Millar, wrote at the end of the 90s that in western societies "technological change is seen as an issue of efficiency and progress - not political democracy" (1998: 138) and by removing it from political debate, citizens are effectively denied a voice in one of the most pertinent issues of our time. Rather than accepting technological advances as a neutral process, she examined the cultural hegemony that it emerged from, forcefully driving home the point that it does not empower across social and gender divides, but clearly privileges some over others.

The popular American myth of the self-made man is thriving in the virtual public sphere. Individuals are told they have the equal ability to broadcast, to organise and to debate, forging their own agendas and influencing the elitist traditional news media. However, the free market ideology strictly limits and repels public input in any form other than as consumers and producers of news. Citizens may operate within social networks, but are refused any means to influence the overarching structure of these new media. Whatsmore, any claim to egalitarianism is dependent on each individual's ability to effectively participate in the information market, discounting any social or economic inequalities. Yet, despite these obvious disparities, it is nearly impossible to ask, how virtuality in the realm of news media should be shaped and what function it should have.

Freedom of speech is the only tenant of the Internet, and while this is undoubtedly an important cornerstone of democracy, it is diminished when participation does not reflect the diversity of society. The illusory flattening of social inequalities in the virtual space, has fuelled the belief that everyone has an equal voice on social media. Yet, social realities become hidden, not only because people can adopt an online persona that distorts their lived realities, but because the single parent working two jobs, is believed to be as equally represented in the electronic agora as the media and tech-savvy communications professional, who can devote time to trawling Twitter, sharing content and expressing themselves online (Goode 2010).

From the perspective of a professional journalist, there are very few checks and balances on what is amplified through social media. This is the result of the strongly market-oriented characteristics of social networks and opaque algorithms that favour one piece of content over another. Issues surrounding verification, contextualisation and meaning arise as reporting through social media harks back to a time preceding the professionalization of journalism, at the start of the 20th century. Mainly, whatever content manages to gain the most momentum through hits and sharing dominates on social networks. Advertising also plays a key role in what is amplified, as some content is considered too sensitive or graphic to be used as a means to market products.

While everyone can, in theory, publish and broadcast today, the platforms for expression are in the hands of a small virtual elite. Social networks are multi-faceted in that they collect data on users, market products and services through advertising and also try to get their share of the news media market. When social networks portray themselves as a public sphere, they are so closely intertwined with the virtual free market, that any distinction between the two becomes impossible.

The trend towards deregulation towards the end of the last century has been blamed for setting in motion an increasingly corporate media model, that justifies itself by arguing that demand in the

market should dictate supply. This model has been derided by many critics and the defence for Public Service Media (PSM) as a means to represent the interests of citizens across the spectrum, including the marginalised, survives. Contrary to the hoped-for decommodification of information (Keane 1991), social networks have been able to create vast monopolies in the information age.

Although the PSM model is not unproblematic, it does make a crucial distinction in how audiences are perceived and addressed. While for-profit media operate in the economic realm, PSM operates in the social and political realm. Here, the audience is seen as a citizen, defined by communal interests, rather than as an individual driven by private interests as a consumer. (Garnham 1995) As such it at least opens up the possibility of a public debate on how media can achieve this social goal, independent of economic factors, even if it may never have succeeded in realising this fully.

As I have argued here, social networks are entirely market-driven entities that covet not only news but all types of information and data exchange, turning them into commodities. While their popularity obviously originates in the dissatisfaction with traditional media and its one-way flow of information, the emerging trend also does much to fail the interests of citizens. The hi-tech free-market of information threatens to further diminish any normative approach to the public service role in media. At best struggling traditional news media are forced into competition with a system that is founded on different objectives in order to preserve audiences. At worst they are able to use social networks as a figleaf to dispose of the shackles of their social roles in pursuit of a wholly corporate and market-led agenda.

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