

How Audiences Affect News Production and Dissemination in Social Media Era

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Abstract: With the flourish of digital technologies, social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have penetrated deep into people's daily life. The ever-changing media landscape has influenced news production and dissemination. The very nature of social media which sheds light on the timely and convenient interaction makes it possible for audience to engage with the news production and dissemination, while in mass media age, these two processes are one-way and controlled by professional news producers. The empowerment of social media audience has challenged the monopoly of news organizations. The aim of this paper is to analyze how social media audiences played a significant role in reconfiguring news production and dissemination. In addition, it is also proposed that although the empowerment of audience makes news production and dissemination more participatory and inclusive, the negative consequences should be recognized and the re-evaluation of journalistic practice in social media age is necessary.

Key Word: Social Media; Audience Engagement; News Production; News Dissemination.

Date of Submission: 08-02-2020

Date of Acceptance: 24-02-2020

I. INTRODUCTION: THE CHANGING NEWS ECOLOGY IN SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

After being dominated by traditional mass media like newspaper, radio and television, the rise of accessible and interactive social media makes it possible to "change how media are used, adding a participatory or even production dimension to consumption practices" (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014, p.14). Social media is interactive Web2.0 Internet-based application which has facilitated the production and exchange of information through virtual communities (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Users can generate, tag and share various forms of media content which can be consumed on a wide range of digital devices only with several clicks (Miller, 2013). Therefore, the advent of social media has accelerated the development of user-generated content or so-called "produsage", blurring traditional boundary between production and consumption (Bruns, 2008). It is social media that provide audiences with an opportunity to become active producers since they can share their own opinions and knowledge; build and maintain relationships with others who share similar interests with them (Cho, Chen, & Chung, 2010), while in traditional media age, they can just be passive consumers of media content.

In social media age, as the news ecology has changed, which is partly due to the development of digital media technologies, especially the extreme popular social media like Facebook and Twitter, the very nature of news production and dissemination has been changed fundamentally.

"News, arguably the most prototypical form of mass communication, has traditionally been produced for and consumed by largely heterogeneous and disconnected mass audiences" (Lee and Tandoc, 2017, p.436). The journalistic functions of social media which refers to production, dissemination of news have given rise to the "transition of journalistic practices to the social media age" (Sacco and Bossio, 2017, p.177). Media organizations have gradually integrated social media into their daily news routines, taking advantage of the immediacy, interactivity and promotional potential of social media platforms. The primary use of social media in journalism is considered to be facilitating audience engagement and dialogue or disseminating content immediately (Sacco and Bossio, 2017). Under the condition of a changing news ecology which is more interactive and co-creative, media professionals and audiences are increasingly (expected to be) collaborating in journalistic practices. According to Andrew Chadwick (2011), the traditional "news cycle" which is controlled by professional news producers and resulted in centralized news production and one-way news dissemination has gradually evolved into a more complicated "information cycle" in which audiences play a more active and important role in the process of news production and dissemination.

It should be recognized that the mainstream media may still be powerful in journalism, but they cannot monopolize the journalistic practices any longer since audiences are empowered in the social media age.

Although the prevalence of social media does not mean the subversion of traditional patterns of news production and dissemination, journalists and media organizations still need to embrace social media (Hermida et al., 2012), adjusting themselves to the more participatory media environment and attempting to integrate social media audiences into the process of news production and dissemination. In following sections, how social media audiences have reconfigured news production and dissemination will be demonstrated separately.

II. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIENCES RECONFIGURE NEWS PRODUCTION

While both social media and mass media can provide audiences with news content, they are dramatically distinctive in terms of the relationship between audiences and professional news producers. In social media age, the journalistic practices have become more open and interactive since audiences have more opportunities to engage with the process of news production. There is an increasing number of formal or informal collaborations between media professionals and audiences by using social media, shaping an emerging type of “networked journalism” (Beckett, 2010).

Social media audiences as news “producers”

Under the dominance of traditional one-way media, audiences almost have no opportunity to engage with news production, while on social media platforms, audiences can actively participate in and contribute to news production by updating content from various sources. In this term, social media audiences are empowered, transforming from passive consumers to active “producers” which refers to the combination of “producer” and “user” (Bruns, 2006). In the era of internet participation and citizen journalism, media professionals share space and sometimes attention with the public.

“With the fast diffusion of digital technologies across the world, legacy media and the public increasingly expected and relied on the media contributions of ordinary people in breaking and making news”. News organizations begin to outsource the role of eyewitness to pretend that “they ‘have been there’ as witnesses of events they have not witnessed” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 425), especially during the breaking news events like terrorist attacks and natural disasters. The rise of social media and the easy-to-use tools provided by them enable the publish of “personal media”. By deploying the frame of citizen journalism, the information updated by social media audiences has been used to report news events (Allan, 2013). In addition, the comments from social media audiences are monitored and filtered by media professionals and subsequently reflected back to the mass media audiences as a part of the news reports, which indicates that social media have been normalized as an important source of news material. In order to adapt to the new wave of user-generated content, some news organizations have created specialized teams to manage and filter the information updated by audiences and deliver the suitable materials to output teams. For instance, BBC has created a user-generated hub to monitor and filter the user-generated content as well as engage in social networks. Such emerging type of news professional whose work is dependent on networked practices indicates a gradual liberation of news production from strict control by media organizations (Van Der Haak et al., 2012).

As Sambrook (2005) notes: “When major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on news coverage is a partnership.” The partnership in news production has led to the rebalance of traditional relationships between audiences and professional news producers. Through the use of social media, the boundary between professional producers and audiences has been blurred “amid a compelling tide of interconnected news sources and outputs” (Lazaroiu, 2014, p.105). In other words, the adoption of crowdsourcing by professional news producers indicates that social media audiences have changed the process of news production.

Audience feedback can influence the news production

In social media age, audience are active “producers” who can directly engage with the news production by updating information about the news events. At the same time, their feedback online can also affect the process of news production. As Paul Saffo (2005) points out: 50 years ago, the mass media revolution made it possible for people to learn about the whole world through watching television, but it was a one-way trip. In the mass media age, what people can do is pressing their nose against the glass and receiving the information. Traditionally, the attention paid to the feedback from news audiences is insufficient. Journalists’ understanding of audiences is mostly from people around them like family members, friends, and fellow journalists, affecting what kind of topics they will give priority to (Gans, 1979). Although there is feedback from a tiny subset of audiences via phone calls to the newsroom, it is professional journalists that dominate the process. In contrast, activity on social media is a “two-way trip”, which means the relationship between media professionals and audiences is more interactive.

The digitization of news provides audiences with opportunities to proactively take part in the Internet-based interactions with media professionals via social media platforms, strengthening participatory journalism which sheds light on the collaborative and collective nature of news production (Lee & Tandoc, 2017). The

participation facilitates communications between professional producers inside the newsroom and audiences outside the newsroom, affecting how news is selected and processed. “Traditionally, journalists shielded the process of news production from external influence to protect their editorial autonomy” (Lee & Tandoc, 2017, p.438), but now they try to integrate audience feedback into the process of topic selection. Editors also proactively encourage audiences to update information and opinions about the ongoing events and ask them to post some questions that they hope to know in the news report (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Except for the verbal feedback proactively posted by audiences, the numeric feedback about their online activities aggregated by computer systems can also provide news professionals with valuable guidance. Social media platforms can provide journalists with the most heated discussed topics, since algorithm can trace what people are publishing and sharing, as well as the real-time data on the volumes of comments, likes and reposts. Previous study has demonstrated that the research query volumes or public discussions on social media platforms can indicate the topics that audience are interested in and subsequently influence news production (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). In other words, trending topics which attract more clicks and discussions will be selected and followed up by journalists more often. These new forms of audience feedback indicate a “reversal to traditional notions of agenda setting, as journalists respond to the topics in which audiences are interested, not the other way around” (Tandoc & Vos, 2016, p.439).

III. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIENCES RECONFIGURE NEWS DISSEMINATION

In mass media environment, the content that audiences can receive is mainly determined by professional producers who dominate the process of news dissemination. News dissemination on mass media is a “one-way, top-down and sender-driven” process (Weeks & Holbert, 2013, p.214). Audiences are mere passive consumers at the end of the dissemination process. However, social media platforms have changed the traditional pattern of news dissemination by providing opportunities for audiences to share news online. Recently, using search engines to seek information is reduced, while the importance of social media as a news dissemination channel is increasing dramatically (Newman et al., 2012). There is a clear trend that an increasing number of people receive news through referrals from social media. Audiences who are interested in the snippets of news on social media can make further exploration via the link to the news websites. Take the Guardian as an example. In late 2012, approximately 30 percent of Web traffic of the Guardian was attracted by Facebook. However, social media is not only an emerging routine source of news content, but also a way for audiences to share news within their own social networking. In social media age, news organizations have lost their dominance of news dissemination, which requires them to integrate social media in the process of news dissemination. It is social media that afford audiences the ability to act as efficient content distributors by proactively sharing news within their social networks.

As Pew Research points out: “if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next.” News sharing is “the practice of giving a defined set of people access to news content via social media platforms, as by posting or recommending it” (Kümpel et al., 2015, p.2). In mass media age, it is difficult for audiences to share news since the absence of effective dissemination channel, while social media can facilitate news sharing by providing audiences with accessible dissemination channels. Audiences can share the news by just clicking the reposting or retweeting buttons provided by social media platforms. Although social media audiences are separated by physical distance, news items can be disseminated and discussed across online social community which is consisted of people sharing similar interests and needs. With the use of social media, audiences maintain much more control over their news environment. They can not only select news items in terms of their interests and needs, but also quickly disseminate news within their social networks online. This distinction exemplifies the nature of social media, making news dissemination an accessible process for audiences. Consequently, the traditional hegemony of news producers as gatekeepers has been challenged.

In the sections above, it has been demonstrated that the deep penetration of social media into people’s everyday life has changed the process of news production and news dissemination. Media organizations have lost their dominance of news production and dissemination, while social media audiences have come to play a more significant role in these journalistic practices, which leads to a more participatory and inclusive news ecology. The emergence of social media has created a complicated environment for news production and dissemination, since audiences have been involved in these two processes. However, it should be recognized that the empowerment of audiences does not simply mean the subversion of traditional pattern of journalistic practice. “Sometimes both academic and public discussions of their relative importance for contemporary media users suggest that the glass is full to the brim when in fact the data suggest more of a glass-half-full-half-empty situation” (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014, p.16). On the one hand, as Sonia Livingstone (2013) claims that we should not assume that the potential offered by social media to reshape a more participatory news environment will necessarily lead to audience engagement. On the other hand, the current researches propose that although an increasing number of media organizations claim that they are attempting to integrate audience in the news

production and dissemination, most of them only take advantage of the delivery function of social media while the audience engagement is almost absent. In sum, the impact of social media audience is still relatively limited.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA: THE FRIEND OR THE FOE OF JOURNALISM?

The aforementioned sections have demonstrated the potentials for social media audiences to engage with the news production and dissemination, which can jeopardize the monopoly of professional producers. It is acknowledged that audiences have contributed to creating a more participatory news environment, but there are still some negative impacts generated by the trend that integrate audiences in the process of news production and dissemination.

First, the independence and quality of professional journalism may be threatened. Social media have transcended television, becoming the major news sources in daily life. Despite the advantages of social media in interactivity and immediacy, the quality of news in social media is found to be lower than that in traditional mass media. Since the “wisdom of the crowd” contributes to gathering information and understanding public opinions in time, journalists have increasingly recognized the usefulness of social media as a huge pool of collective intelligence and the information posted by audiences have been considered as an important support for news production. However, this trend of relying on social media has been dismissed by some journalists. On the one side, it will take journalists more time to keep up with and verify the blowout information from various sources to avoid the spread of misinformation and fake news (Hermida, 2010). On the other hand, although social media make it more timely and less expensive to obtain information and opinions from audiences, the quality of news in social media is lower than that on traditional mass media (Shu, 2017). Faced with the press to survive amid the financial strain, it is common to see that editors will change the editorial decisions based on web analytics to obtain more economics benefits from higher readership (Vu, 2013). Journalists complain that the newsroom are turning into a “copy factory” since sometimes they are just circulating ready-made material from social media to meet audiences’ demands (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 40). According to the data from Pew, a majority (57%) of journalists who are interviewed propose that social media are “changing the fundamental values of journalism,” including a “loosening of standards”. “As the audiences and social media platforms continue to harness agency in the news production network, this will continue to erode journalists’ sense of professional control, which could significantly affect the conceptions of professional norms”(Ferrucci, 2018, p.9).

Second, for news dissemination, social media is a double-edged sword. The social media has become a vital channel for people to receive, seek and share news. Compared with the pattern of news dissemination in mass media era, audiences can actively engage with the process of news dissemination for their own purposes on social media platforms, rather than being passive consumers. However, this trend may make audiences to be more selectively exposed to certain kinds of news, giving rise to the echo chamber effect which may amplify the prejudice. “An echo chamber is created when individuals seek to find information and sources that support their viewpoints and filter out countervailing information” (Newman et al., 2012, p.2). Under the condition of echo chamber effect, audiences continue to consume and share what they prefer. In a similar vein, audiences on social media platforms prefer to follow like-minded people, and thus constantly receive news which contains opinions that they are agreed with. The echo chamber effect contributes to “segmented and homogeneous communities with a very limited information ecosystem” (Shu, 2017, p.4), which facilitates the polarization of opinions. In addition, the proliferation of fake news is another negative result which is partly due to the echo chamber effect. Previous studies have found that people are more likely to generate a positive attitude towards the idea that they are frequently exposed to (Zajonc, 1968). Therefore, audiences who are stuck in the echo chamber may favor the news which is repeatedly recommended or liked by others in their social networking, even if it is fake news.

V. CONCLUSION

In social media era, journalism is evolving toward a “post-industrial” model (Anderson et al., 2015). Professional producers lose their dominance of news production and dissemination since audiences have gained more power in these two processes. In the process of news production, the traditional boundary between producers and consumers has been blurred. On the one hand, audiences have transformed from passive consumers into “producers”, engaging with the news production directly. On the other hand, the verbal and numeric feedback of audiences on social media platforms can serve as the guidance to select and process news topics. In the process of news dissemination, social media facilitate and simplify the process of news sharing, making it possible for audiences to become news senders rather than passive receivers, thereby challenging the one-way news dissemination. In sum, there is a trend that the journalistic practice is becoming more conversational and accessible as the empowered social media audiences can engage with the news production and dissemination, reconfiguring these two processes. In this way, it should be acknowledged that social media offer the potential to challenge the dominance of news organizations. However, the growing use of social media in journalistic practices does not mean an end to professional journalism (Usher, 2010), but indicates that new

tactics should be deployed to adapt to the new media environment, reversing the traditional one-to-many pattern of news production and dissemination.

Although audience engagement make news production and dissemination more open and inclusive, the negative impacts brought by audiences' empowerment should not be ignored. First, in the process of news production, the over-reliance on user-generated content and audiences' feedback may threaten the quality of journalism. Second, the news sharing amplifies audiences' selective exposure to the news, thereby giving rise to the echo chamber effect, which may strengthen polarization of opinions and proliferation of fake news. To this end, the professional news producers should be more cautious when integrating audiences into journalistic practices. Therefore, the future research can investigate how to find a balance between audience engagement and quality of journalism in the social media era.

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Zihan Wang. "How Audiences Affect News Production and Dissemination in Social Media Era." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(2), 2020, pp. 07-12.