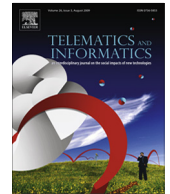


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Modeling the adoption of social media by newspaper organizations: An organizational ecology approach



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ABSTRACT

Although the ecological approach has been utilized in the field of communication, no prior research has applied this perspective to examine the organizational selection of social media. This study employs the framework of density dependence to understand what drives the adoption of social media by organizations. Fixed-effects negative binomial regression models were run to test the hypotheses that predicted the founding rates of 2007 Chinese newspaper organizations in 31 provincial units on Sina Weibo from August 2009 to June 2015. The results show that the founding rate of party newspapers exhibits inverted U-shaped relationships to local or non-local party newspaper density and non-party newspaper density. At the same time, the density dependence hypothesis is supported only for the effect of non-party newspaper density outside the provincial unit on the founding rate of non-party newspapers. Unexpectedly, non-party newspaper density within the provincial boundary exerts no significant influence on this founding rate. Both local and non-local party newspaper densities significantly and negatively influence the decisions to start homepages on Sina Weibo among non-newspaper organizations. Discussion and implications are provided.

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1. Introduction

The expansion of various new information and communication technologies has increased the consumption of digital online journalism and intensified the competition for scarce resources among news media (Boczkowski, 2004). In response to the environmental change spurred by technological innovations, traditional news media institutions have been initiating a wide range of strategies to increase their chance of survival. One such effort takes advantage of new organizational forms within the news media community to create online representations of their respective organizations (Ognyanova and Monge, 2013; Weber, 2012). For example, the New York Times has initiated its news website (nytimes.com), Twitter account (@nytimes), and Facebook account (<https://www.facebook.com/nytimes>) to enhance its influence in cyberspace.

This trend is also prevalent in China. As of July 2015, the China Internet Network Information Center estimated that 668 million people had Internet access, and 83.1 percent of them consumed online news (CNNIC, 2015), indicating a boom in online news. Newspaper organizations in China have been aggressively adapting themselves to the new information environment by utilizing new organizational forms within the news media community, although some of them are still wary of the potential risks. Recently, the rapid diffusion of Weibo has ushered in a new era of possibilities for Chinese newspaper organizations to disseminate news and attract audiences in a more direct and quicker way. Weibo literally refers to a microblog or miniblog in the Chinese language. It offers a new channel through which newspaper organizations can set up homepages and broadcast professional news of high quality to audiences. Weibo utilization has several advantages for newspaper

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organizations. First, it creates a new form of news. Although there is 140-character upper limit for each microblog update, Weibo allows media outlets to combine texts, photos, emoticons, hyperlinks, hashtags, videos, and music when distributing news. Second, Weibo enables a faster production cycle. Newspaper organizations can release news on Weibo at any time of day. Third, Weibo facilitates the interaction between news media and audiences. Weibo users are able to give feedback to newspaper organizations through direct comments and conversations. Given the advantages of social media and the importance of news organizations in societies, theoretical questions arise as to the conditions that drive the adoption of social media in the news industry as a whole.

Communication scholars have devoted considerable attention to developing and testing theoretical models that explain the organizational selection of social media (Nah and Saxton, 2012; Nitschke et al., 2014; Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Previous studies have addressed several aspects of this phenomenon including how a critical mass of users within organizations leads to organizational selection (e.g. Fulk, 1993; Rice, 1992; Treem and Leonardi, 2012), as well as the effect of organizational level governance (e.g. Nah and Saxton, 2012; Nitschke et al., 2014). The present study takes an ecological approach to examine the adoption of social media by organizations. Organizational communication scholars have taken ecological approach in examining organizational change (e.g. Dimmick, 2003; Monge and Contractor, 2003; Monge et al., 2008; Weber, 2012; Weber and Monge, 2014). However, no prior research has applied this perspective to examine the adoption of social media by organizations. By examining technology adoption from a population perspective rather than at the individual or organizational level, an ecological approach has the potential to provide insight into some aspects of technology adoption by organizations that are not addressed through other analytical approaches.

Specifically, an ecological perspective takes into consideration density dependence, or how many organizations can be supported in a given ecosystem by the existing set of resources. The objective of this study is to look at the density dependence process that drives organizational adoption of social media. Density dependence relates to the number of organizations that can be supported by an existing set of resources. Specifically, this research examines the adoption of Weibo by Chinese newspaper organizations. Although the findings are not readily generalizable to other industries and other parts of the world, the issues and possibilities discussed here are theoretically interesting and promising. The findings reveal the possibility of applying the ecological approach to adoption behaviors recorded by observational data on social media, thus expanding the theory to include the new media landscape. In addition, this study finds that the particular industrial and regulatory context is a boundary condition of the presence of density dependence. The results can aid organizations in strategically adopting and implementing social media platforms to satisfy their needs.

First this work reviews the traditional analytical approaches to the study of organizational selection of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and discusses the advantages of applying an ecological perspective to examining this phenomenon. Next, the two distinctive subpopulations in China's newspaper industry that are the subject of this study will be introduced. Taking into consideration population density, organizational founding rates, and the density dependence model in organizational ecology, this paper then develops a set of hypotheses based on the density dependence process.

2. Literature review

2.1. The ecological approach

Scholars in organizational communication have provided many insights on the mechanisms through which organizations accept and utilize new information and communication technologies. There are two major analytical approaches in the extant literature: one at the intra-organizational level, the other at the organizational level. The intra-organizational level approach focuses on the factors that drive individuals' adoption and usage of new technologies within organizations. Related theoretical frameworks in this area include Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Rice, 1992), Social Influence Theory (Fulk, 1993; Timmerman, 2002), Structuration theory (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski, 2000), Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 1995; Valente, 1995), and the affordance framework (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Individual-level approaches seem to be "better suited to explaining individual preferences for one technology over another—such as why certain employees would prefer Twitter over email—rather than the organizational selection of a given communication technology" (Nah and Saxton, 2012, p. 295). Adopting the organizational level approach, Nah and Saxton (2012) found that strategy, capacity, governance, and external environment were four key determinants of the adoption of social media by non-government organizations. Nitschke and colleagues (2014) confirmed that organizations from the environmental sector, insiders, older organizations, and those with individual members were more likely to be present on Facebook. However, there are two major limitations in the extant literature. First, the use of cross-sectional data makes it impossible to investigate adoption behaviors over time. Second, most researchers assume that earlier adopters of innovations do not discontinue their adoption in the future (Valente, 1995).

This study examines organizational selection of social media through the lens of ecological theories. First introduced by Hannan and Freeman (1977) in the late 1970s, the ecological approach to organizational inquiry utilizes insights from biology and economics to examine how the environment in which organizations cooperate and compete influences organizational behavior. According to this perspective, organizations are active agents of the larger environment consisting of other actual or potential actors (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1989). Moore (1993) further conceptualized the external context of organizations as a *business ecosystem*. In Moore's words, business ecosystem refers to "an economic community supported by a foundation of interacting organizations and individuals – the organisms of the business world" (Moore, 1996,

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