From "information" to "knowing": Exploring the role of social media in contemporary news consumption

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ABSTRACT

Using the conceptual lenses of information overload and sense making, this paper investigates the process of contemporary news consumption based on the qualitative content analysis of 112 interview transcripts from a diverse cross-section of US news consumers. We offer theoretical clarification of factors influencing news consumption and the role of social media in devising strategies for addressing information overload in order to facilitate news sense-making and the resulting civic knowledge formation. We provide news organizations with suggestions for appropriately designing offerings to compete in the era of new media and offer directions for future research in the domains of news, product, and brand information consumption.

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1. Introduction

The rise of the Internet as an influential communication medium has substantially changed the existing models of information and news consumption. The growing number of available information channels and sources, as well as greater possibilities for interaction and co-creation among consumers of information, has fundamentally affected consumption of news. We observe a number of important trends in this context. First, adverse effects on well-established print and broadcast mass media have transpired from loss of advertising revenue and the consequent decline in the quality of their journalistic offerings (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). Second, new Internet-based media, incorporating voluntary contributions by broad networks of self-selected participants that report, share and distribute news (e.g. blogs, political forums, and social networks), have acquired legitimacy. In addition to co-creating news, consumers curate news for their social networks, selecting and sharing those most worthy of attention, and filtering out irrelevant (or not conforming to their views) stories and items. These forms of bottom-up news "produsage" (Bruns, 2008), where consumers collaboratively create and curate news stories, offer a novel socially negotiated informational product that heavily relies on opinions, and substitutes the journalistic ideal of objectivity with that of balance (or "multi-perspectivity") (Gans, 1980). Third, and as a result, an avalanche of information from the soaring number of (frequently unverified) sources floods individual media spaces, potentially causing such negative consequences as information overload, suboptimal knowledge formation, and biased worldview. In connection with these developments, some writers caution against the so-called "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011), when those attempting to overcome news information overload and to make better sense of the contemporary events, increasingly rely on information curated by like-minded others populating their virtual social networks. According to this view, an unintended consequence of such "social filtering" may ultimately undermine civic discourse by confirming our pre-existing views and limiting our exposure to challenging beliefs.

The above trends have the potential to powerfully and significantly affect political knowledge formation, civic discourse, social and civic awareness and the individual's world-view (Pew Research Center, 2012). Understanding the prevailing processes of news consumption and media choices is therefore of particular significance for news organizations and their marketing strategists, as well as policy makers. The extant academic research on information curation online is concentrated in the communication literature and is limited to studies of curated content's interactivity (Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012) and engagement (O'Brien, 2011), and their impact on information credibility. Other research includes case studies on the role of individual social media sites (e.g. Twitter) in promoting citizen journalism (Greene, Reid, Sheridan, & Cunningham, 2011). To the authors' knowledge, only

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one study to date has addressed the role of the news delivery platform in impacting information overload (Holton & Chyi, 2012). However, no studies so far have attempted to explore or explain the mechanism of news consumption processes in the context of socially connected interactive participants, and their consequences in terms of information/news acquisition and societal or civic knowledge formation.

The current study addresses this gap and reports on a qualitative investigation of news consumption practices. We apply the information overload and sense-making perspectives to help indentify key aspects of contemporary online news consumption and the role of social media in facilitating news sense-making and overcoming information overload. Based on the reported findings, implications for policy-makers and practitioners in the domains of news production and marketing communications are also provided.

2. Paradoxical role of social media in news consumption

Possibly the most prominent characteristic of news consumption today is the sheer amount of information that consumers are exposed to. A single Sunday edition of The New York Times today contains more information than typical 19th-century citizens faced in their entire lifetime and more new information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the last 5000 (Pollar, 2003). A second characteristic is the soaring number of sources that provide news via print, broadcast, and interactive modes, spewing text, pictures and video at any time and in any place. As a result, we must cope with a surfeit of extra information, often unrelated to our interests and needs, including spam and scams (Denning, 2006). Third, the individual receives news and information from different sources simultaneously, while multi-tasking on multiple screens, and from various media (Kelly & Bostrom, 1995). There is thus a situation of too much news arriving in too many different formats, creating a potential for *information overload*, which in turn leads to news-related suboptimal information processing and decision-making. Trade literature suggests that social media (SM) play an important role in perpetrating news-related information overload. The amount of time spent by the world population in using SM continues to grow, with 20% of our PC time and 30% of our mobile time now spent on SM (Nielsen, 2012). In addition to sharing personal information, SM users increasingly post links to external content and express their opinions about the world, national and local news. In fact, in the past two years, the traffic to news sites from various SM grew 57% (Olmstead, Sasseen, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2012).

Traditionally, in the workplace and in organizational contexts, information overload has been addressed with the help of computerized tools. These include email prioritizing software that sorts email based on sender identity, message urgency and recipient receptiveness to an interruption (Hemp, 2009); decision support and modeling tools that can manage and analyze data (Carver & Turoff, 2007); and knowledge management tools through which an individual can organize, express, capture, and retrieve the personal knowledge he or she has acquired. These tools help to organize and aggregate information from various sources, and store and retrieve the acquired knowledge (Davies, 2011). Increasingly however, and especially in the domain of non-work related information processing such as news consumption, social media applications are being developed to address information overload. Social media applications have a number of distinctive technical characteristics (Lee & Ma, 2012). They allow individuals to create, share, and search content, communicate with each other, identify and choose to communicate with specific people, and "pull" the relevant information. Social media also enable specific types of interactions between individuals. They can connect people based on similar needs, tastes and backgrounds, and facilitate the building of information networks where information publishers can deliver content to a set of information consumers, addressing current concerns or interests (Denning, 2006). Such human-mediated information processing helps individuals to identify which information is of value and to whom. Social media can thus gather, select, and value information for individuals. They can expose individuals to selective sources of news while delivering greater cognitive variety and diversity. They can also enable the individual to engage in social interactions, directly with members of the immediate network, and indirectly with members of related or connected networks. These tools can potentially address the problems of information overload by enabling the consumer to make *sense* of it – with the help of social filtering and collectively negotiated sense-making.

We are thus faced with a paradox in contemporary news consumption, one that is expected to persist. On the one hand, use of SM fuels information overload by exposing the individual to an ever-increasing barrage of news content. On the other, it has the potential to help the news consumer deal with information overload through socially-mediated information selection and organization. A number of questions regarding the role of SM in democratic societies thus acquire prominence. For instance, there is a concern that because of social filtering, exposure to alternative and challenging views can be limited. In his recent book "The Filter Bubble" Pariser (2011) argues that the increasing customization of search and personalization of social media experiences may undermine civic discourse by providing more information that confirms our preexisting views and limits our exposure to challenging beliefs. His opponents disagree, saying that "information bubbles" have always been imposed on news consumers by commercial TV networks and local newspapers that demonstrated narrow consensus. They argue that current reality, such as the role of Twitter in the Arab Spring events, in fact, confirms the enriching function of SM (Weisberg, 2011). From the current and, primarily, trade literature in this area, we thus note that the role of SM in information and news consumption is a complex and potentially far reaching one. Additionally, the phenomenon of "social filtering" may have major implications not only for news consumption, but also for consumption of other product and brand information. Better understanding the role of SM in contemporary information consumption can thus inform not only the competitive strategies of news organizations and offer guidelines for internet policy makers, but can also assist businesses with their content marketing efforts and brand development strategies.

From our discussion thus far, we note that research on online news consumption is emerging and limited. Studies show that higher levels of Internet use are associated with higher levels of interpersonal trust and lower levels of information overload (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004). Based on uses and gratifications theory, we also know that higher levels of socializing, information seeking and prior social media experience are associated with higher levels of intention to share news online through social media (Lee & Ma, 2012). On the other hand, it is reported that consumers with frequent exposure to news on their computers, e-readers and on Facebook perceive greater information overload than those exposed to news via TV and iPhones (Holton & Chyi, 2012). These somewhat contradictory findings suggest that new media may play a more nuanced role in news consumption.

Traditionally, newsgathering was mainly considered a purposeful, directed activity (Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001), and assumed some level of intention behind most news exposure. The Internet and social media, with their limitless possibilities of content integration, co-creation and sharing, have intensified more incidental news exposure, whereby individuals "stumble upon"