



## Full length article

# The effects of news consumption via social media and news information overload on perceptions of journalistic norms and practices



Sun Kyong Lee, Ph.D.<sup>a</sup>, Nathan J. Lindsey<sup>a</sup>, Kyun Soo Kim, Ph.D.<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Communication, University of Oklahoma, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, Chonnam National University, Republic of Korea

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## ABSTRACT

Given the widespread adoption of social media for sharing and accessing news, as well as the possibility of news consumers' direct interactions with journalists through social media, this study analyzed the relationships among news access via social media (NASM), perceived news information overload (NIO), news consumption, and perceptions of journalistic norms and practices. The results indicated that NIO moderated the relationships between NASM and selective exposure and between NASM and willingness to pay for quality news. Regarding journalistic norms and practices, participants valued the speed of journalism when they frequently accessed news on social media more so than traditional journalistic norms. Finally, there were statistically significant interactions between NIO and two types of news consumption behaviors (i.e., selective exposure and news avoidance) concerning participants' perceptions of news quality.

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The 2016 US presidential election has shown again the critical role of social media as a resource for informing citizens of news and information about the candidates and their campaigns. While pundits and the press jointly pointed out President Obama benefited from social media campaigns for his own election, President Obama himself recently warned, social media could erode democracy. Referring to then President-elect Trump's active use of Twitter as a direct channel of communication with the public, Obama criticized the quality of information from social media as "soundbites and snippets" that may serve to erode the public's ability to discern between serious arguments, facts, and propaganda (FoxNews.com, 2016). In addition, top "fake election news stories generated more engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined, including the New York Times, Fox News, and CBS News" (CBSnews.com, 2016) highlighting the role of social media even more in the public's news access, and suggesting the importance of the phenomenon as a research topic.

Traditionally, news delivery has occurred in a one-way, sender-to-receiver fashion, without the capability of obtaining rapid feedback from the audience. The widespread adoption of social media, blogs, and smartphones has changed this process. Now, as journalists instantly disperse their work directly to their audiences on social media, they can informally caption articles with their personal opinions and interact with readers through commentaries. This new process presents potentially negative effects. As news is separated from overarching media outlets, the veracity of the information may be called into question as the focus shifts from organizations to individual journalists; they may seem more subjective as their individual biases become evident to consumers through their direct interactions, calling into question their discretion (Ceron, 2015; Lee, 2015).

As more people access news through newer media platforms such as social media, and interact with journalists and news agencies more directly through such venues, the ways in which people consume news and think of journalism are likely to be influenced. Following certain journalists' and news agencies' social media accounts and receiving instant news updates from them creates additional layers of news information sources, because many consumers still use older media such as network and cable television, and radios as their news information sources (Pew

\* Corresponding author. 77 Yongbongro Bukgu Gwangju, 61186, Republic of Korea.

E-mail address: [kimk@jnu.ac.kr](mailto:kimk@jnu.ac.kr) (K.S. Kim).

Research Center, 2016). Therefore, having constant access to social media, and particularly its vast amount of news updates, adds to consumers' perception of news information overload (Allen & Shoard, 2005; Holton & Chyi, 2012). News consumers manage the perception of information overload by adopting certain news consumption behaviors (Tweksbury, Hals, & Bihart, 2008), which in turn could influence their views of traditional journalistic norms (e.g., transparency, objectivity, and credibility) and practices (e.g., speed of journalism, and news quality). The current research examines the impact of news access via social media and news consumers' perceptions of information overload on their perceptions of journalistic norms and practices.

One of the traditional journalistic norms, “transparency,” might become more important and salient to consumers who access internet-based media news sources (e.g., social media, blogs) as consumers can access “raw” forms of news through these venues prior to the development of full traditional news stories (Karlsson, 2011). Today, news is constantly edited and updated as novel information and sources are discovered. As such, news consumers witness the process of news development and production more transparently than before. Consumers may also fact-check the news using other sources on their own more easily than before.

Further, the traditional journalistic norm “objectivity” might be endangered as more journalists reveal their personal stance and opinions on news issues through their blogs and social media accounts (Meraz, 2009). Regardless of intent, news consumers have more information and cues with which to assess journalists' political orientations and perspectives on issues when utilizing such interactive and accessible (i.e., the distance between the journalist and audience is reduced) venues.

Based on a review of previous research examining the perceptions of information overload and journalism, Nordenson (2008) concluded media sources must “rethink their role and give consumers the context and coherence they want and need in an age of overload; otherwise, consumers will continue to avoid information-seeking behaviors” (p. 42). With this in mind, the present study proceeds by assuming news consumers' perception of information overload has an influential role, and seeks to analyze the relationships among news access via social media, and three types of news consumption patterns (i.e., news avoidance, selective exposure, and willingness to pay for news), and perceptions of journalistic norms and practices.

## 1. Literature review and hypotheses

### 1.1. News access via social media, news information overload, and news consumption

Thus far, scholars have examined antecedents (e.g., demographics, news interests, news access media) and consequences (e.g., news fatigue, news avoidance) of news information overload (NIO). For example, Holton and Chyi's (2012) study of different news platform usages and their effects showed social media (e.g., Facebook) as a major source of overload for news consumers. Consumers seem to experience overload due to the overwhelming nature of the modern state of news delivery; as such, “news surplus forces consumers to tune some content out at the risk of wasting potential benefits, increase filtering habits and devices, cope with frustrations, develop stronger storage methods, change their learning techniques, or simply ignore the news all together” (Holton & Chyi, 2012, p. 622).

In their extensive interview study of American news consumers in the Midwest, Pentina and Tarafdar (2014) found social media played a nuanced role in relation to consumers' experiences of information overload. As participants felt more overloaded with

information due to its sheer amount coupled with the impossible task of avoiding news posted by their friends on social media, news consumers raised concerns about the reliability and objectivity of news they were exposed to on social media. Their experience with “news” on social media was largely stories that turned out to be false rumors or gossip (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). However, some participants pointed out the filtering capability, by which consumers attend to relevant (or socially curated) information on their social networks on social media, can be used as a strategy for coping with news information overload (Pariser, 2011). These participants believed filtering through the customization of their social network sites would reduce the amount of news they were exposed to and provide more reliable news sources, once verified, as well as offer social legitimacy to said sources (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014).

An exploratory study of American citizens' perception of information overload and its relevance to their news consumption by Lee, Kim, and Koh (2016) found perceived “news” information overload (NIO) was a unique construct that should be examined separately from general information overload. News consumers felt overwhelmed by the amount of news they accessed daily and felt more overloaded when they paid more *attention* to news via newer media such as social media, blogs, and podcasts (Lee et al., 2016). Lee and her colleagues studied three types of news consumption variables related to NIO: selective exposure, news avoidance, and willingness to pay for news. After controlling for the effects of attention level, interest in news, and demographics, those who perceived a higher level of NIO tended to avoid news or selectively exposed themselves to certain news sources more frequently. Highly overloaded news consumers were also more willing to pay for news to increase the quality of news to which they were exposed among overflowing sources of news.

As mentioned, news consumers were previously unable to see the process of news production from the journalists' or news agencies' perspective. With the widespread adoption of social media, there are more opportunities for direct interaction between journalists and consumers in these venues. As such, news consumers nowadays are likely to form distinctive patterns of news consumption and have different perceptions about journalistic norms and the practices of news production (i.e., the process of news production from raw material to a full story).

In the study by Lee et al. (2016), the level of attention given to news via newer media (e.g., social media, blogs, and podcasts) was significantly associated with perceived level of news information overload (NIO). The authors suggested individual news consumers' cognitive processes (i.e., attention level) related to newer media platforms might cause the perception of overload. Similarly, Ji, Ha, and Sypher (2014) found traditional news media and Internet-based news media differed in that traditional news media already filtered and organized information for consumers, whereas the Internet offered more of the raw content. As such, when consumers attend to news through internet-based media, their perceptions of NIO are influenced and there are likely consequential effects on their news consumption patterns (York, 2013).

First, accessing news via social media (and feeling overloaded with news information) could lead to increased selective exposure; consumers purposefully filter content they find irrelevant to their interests. Furthermore, as the embedded algorithms of social media become more sophisticated in directing users towards news that meets their consumption patterns (i.e., filtering out irrelevant information; Pariser, 2011; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014), it is likely that perceived NIO will diminish as social media usage increases. Social media, given current trends, will increasingly filter information by utilizing users' histories of interactions (e.g., search, comments, likes, etc.), resulting in exposure to other users who share similar interests and views, as well as similar news consumption patterns.

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