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Giving in or giving up: What makes journalists use audience feedback in their news work?

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the theory of planned behavior, this study sought to identify factors that lead journalists to monitor and incorporate audience feedback from Twitter and web analytics in their news work. Based on a survey of 360 online journalists in the United States, this study found that journalists' personal attitudes toward using audience feedback, organizational policy on the use of audience feedback, as well as how much knowledge and skill they think they currently have to use audience feedback in their work, affect their intention to use, and ultimately, their actual use of, audience feedback in their editorial decisions.

1. Introduction

New forms of audience feedback, communicated through new forms of information technology such as social media and web analytics, present journalists with a dilemma. Twitter, for example, allows journalists to solicit audiences' viewpoints and inputs, monitor what audiences are concerned about, and find news sources (Hermida, 2010; Molyneux, 2015). Web analytics programs, such as *Chartbeat* and *Google Analytics*, deliver quantified audience feedback that journalists can use to guide decisions on what topics to cover, what stories to write about, and what issues audiences would be interested in (Bright & Nicholls, 2014; Tandoc, 2014a). However, journalists have to balance incorporating audience feedback in their decisions with the journalistic norm of protecting their editorial autonomy.

While journalists have long considered audience preferences in how they do their work, they have traditionally relied on their imaginations of the actual audience (Ettema & Whitney, 1994; de Sola Pool & Shulman, 1959). Traditional forms of audience research, such as readership surveys and broadcast ratings, relied on a subset of the actual audience, leaving a lot of space for editorial guesswork (Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978). Thus, journalists have relied on their own preferences as well as those of their family, friends, and superiors to approximate what the actual audiences wanted. But new audience information tools now provide journalists with immediate feedback from the actual online audience (Napoli, 2011). Faced with detailed and real-time audience feedback, journalists are presented with an option to consider audience preferences in the different stages of news production (Anderson, 2011). But are journalists willing to incorporate audience feedback in their news work, which might compromise their editorial independence?

Guided by the framework of theory of planned behavior (TPB), this current study explores the different factors that affect the extent to which journalists open their gates, so to speak, to influence from the audience by incorporating audience feedback in their news work. TPB focuses on behavior as a result of psychological processes based on an individual's attitude, perception of norms, and perceived behavioral control (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). TPB has rarely been used to understand journalists' behavior. But as Donsbach (2004) argued, journalists' professional behavior can also be explained by psychological processes. While journalists operate

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under layers of routine and organizational structures (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), the influence of these structures are perceived, reflected upon, and internalized by journalists engaged in cognitive processes that ultimately influence their behavior (Donsbach, 2004). Based on this assumption, this study is using the framework of TPB to understand journalists' decision to incorporate audience feedback in how they do their work.

2. Literature review

Studies have established how audiences exert some influence on journalists, but scholars have long debated the extent of that influence. The audience can exert both direct and indirect influences on the news construction process (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), but what many studies highlighted early on is the audience's indirect influence on news content, only mediated by the degree to which a journalist is oriented to catering to audience preferences (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This assumption, however, is changing. New information and communication tools are allowing new means of communication between journalists and their audiences, allowing audiences a more direct channel to communicate their feedback not only to journalists but also to one another (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Therefore, journalism scholars and practitioners are recognizing that "the audience is no longer the ignored quantity it was in offline journalism: it has a clear impact on journalistic practice" (Bright & Nicholls, 2014, p. 178).

2.1. Audiences and journalists

Normative discussions of journalistic roles and functions consistently refer to the audience (e.g., Hanitzsch, 2011; Mellado, 2014; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007). Debates concerning what constitutes news highlight service to the public as an essential consideration (Bennett, 2003; Zaller, 2003). Indeed, journalists have always considered their audiences in their decision-making processes. For example, the influx of tabloidization was characterized by news organizations seeking to increase revenues by attracting readers with sensational content they thought would grab audience interest (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). However, journalists in the past knew little about their actual audiences (Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978). Instead, they relied on invented (Gans, 1979) or imagined (de Sola Pool & Shulman, 1959) audiences to guide their editorial decisions. These were based on their own construction of who their actual audiences were and what they wanted. Therefore, it was how journalists imagined and constructed their audiences, rather than their actual audiences, that affected their news work (de Sola Pool & Shulman, 1959).

This institutional construction of the audience by journalists was based on limited information about the actual audience pooled together by traditional forms of audience research (Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Napoli, 2011). Newspapers monitored circulation rates and commissioned readership surveys (Beam, 1995). Broadcasters subscribed to audience ratings provided by research companies (Gans, 1979). These traditional information systems provided journalists with not only a limited idea of who their audiences were, but also a limited form of audience feedback concerning what audiences wanted. Circulation rates did not include actual pass-on readership figures (Beam, 1995), and readership surveys and audience ratings relied on small samples of the population and dated information (Tewksbury, 2003). Audience data from these sources were also found to be fickle (McManus, 1994).

Since journalism is a field existing under several layers of influences, journalists are indoctrinated to protect their autonomy from such influences, including the audience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For example, many journalists feared that focusing on results of readership surveys and adjusting editorial operations based on such feedback can hurt journalistic quality (Beam, 1995). Thus, what journalists did not know about the audience, they filled with their own notion of professionalism by relying on traditional news standards that guide news content (Schlesinger, 1978). In doing so, journalists felt they shielded their output and their editorial autonomy from the influence of the audience.

But new forms of information and communication technologies have allowed new forms of audience interaction and participation previously unseen. The audience is no longer composed of passive media consumers. Individuals, or whom Bruns (2003) called *produsers*, now consume and produce messages at the same time. Napoli (2011) outlined two important changes that challenge the traditional conceptualization of a passive audience: the fragmentation of the audience and their increasing autonomy over which messages to attend and when. This evolution of the audience is also changing the relationship and the power dynamics between journalists and their audiences, fueled by new forms of audience feedback mechanisms, such as social media and web analytics.

2.2. Social media as feedback mechanism

News audiences can now produce and disseminate their own content via social media (Hermida, 2011). News audiences also increasingly take part in disseminating content from news organizations by sharing links on their social media accounts (Hermida, 2012). They also contribute information, leads for stories, and photos to news organizations, helping out, in a way, in the news construction process (Jewitt, 2009). Such audience behavior has affected how journalists do their work, by tailoring their stories to trending topics and embedding social media into their routines (Bastos, 2015; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2011). But the extent to which journalists incorporate social media in their news work varies. Early studies found that journalists were passive in their use of social media. A content analysis of tweets from 500 journalists found that 19.1% of the tweets were promotional in nature: Journalists just tweeted links to redirect audiences back to their respective news websites (Lasorsa et al., 2011).

But recent studies have found other ways journalists are normalizing social media, embedding them in their news work. For example, news organizations now pay close attention to how stories are shared or distributed by audiences through social media, going so far as actively changing routines to increase audience dissemination (Batsell, 2015). Journalists also use social media to generate news sources and story ideas (Poell & Borra, 2012). Some journalists also turn to social media to check how the public feels about a situation by asking questions via Twitter, embracing the audience as a means of gathering information and perspectives. Thus, social media have become a necessary tool for journalists at all types of organizations (Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010). Social media are not just altering routines, but they are also eliminating many normative routines and replacing them with new ones (Batsell, 2015). They are not only changing how journalists do their job and how audiences play a role in this process, but are significantly changing journalism as a whole by giving more power to the audience and allowing journalists to understand their audiences in ways that were, before the advent of social media, impossible (Kennedy, 2013).

2.3. Web analytics as audience feedback

The internet is not only changing the nature of interaction between audiences and journalists, but it is also a "powerful research tool, one that allows researchers to observe news reading behavior more reliably and less obtrusively than had been possible before"