Social media and the public interest: Governance of news platforms in the realm of individual and algorithmic gatekeepers

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article seeks to identify the basic contours of how the notion of the public interest is taking shape in the realm of social media. Drawing upon social media governance discourse and research on the dynamics of how social media platforms are being used in the dissemination and consumption of news and information, this article argues that a *restrictive* and *individualist* model of the public interest characterizes the social media space. This article then considers the broader implications of this emergent model of the public interest in social media governance.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have evolved to become significant means by which news of social, political, and economic significance is produced, disseminated, and consumed (see, e.g., Copeland, 2011; Rubel, 2012; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). News outlets have established a powerful presence within social media platforms, utilizing these platforms to enhance the distribution of their content through the online media ecosystem. Recent research has found, for instance, that every U.S. newspaper with a daily circulation of more than 100,000 readers utilized social media platforms to distribute their content online (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014); and that over 95% of news sites allow users to share, like, or recommend content via social media platforms (Stroud, Scacco, & Curry, 2014).

These efforts appear to be achieving results. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have emerged as amongst the most important drivers of traffic to news sites, particularly amongst younger Internet users (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Christian, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014), with an upward trajectory clearly in evidence. Recent data from online traffic researcher Parse.ly indicate that Facebook went from accounting for 16% of referrals to online news sites in October of 2013 to accounting for 26% in January of 2014, dramatically cutting into Google's lead as the top referral source for news sites (McGee, 2014).

Such patterns suggest that social media are becoming an increasingly important means via which individuals are made aware of and access news stories. According to the most recent survey by the Pew Journalism Project, 50% of Facebook and Twitter users, and 62% of Reddit users, regularly obtain news through these social media platforms. A recent eight country study by Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that roughly a quarter of the respondents in each of the countries identified social media as a regular source of news (Nielsen & SchrÖder, in press). While these numbers still pale alongside those found for news sources such as television, newspapers, and web sites (see Nielsen & SchrÖder, in press),

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given the relative newness of social media platforms in the news ecosystem, these findings are significant, with an upward trajectory over time seeming likely.

Social media platforms also can serve as important mechanisms via which news is initially generated and disseminated into the broader media ecosystem (see, e.g., MacKinnon, 2012; Newman, 2009). That is, social media need not only serve to relay news from other news outlets; these platforms can serve as the originating source as well. The examples here are numerous (see MacKinnon, 2012), with recent examples including individuals living in Israel and Gaza disseminating via social media first-hand accounts of the conflict there, including photos and videos of property damage, and of victims injured and killed in the conflict; as well as immediate reports of rocket attacks (Gallop, 2014). Similarly, in Ferguson, Missouri, where police shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, social media platforms such as Twitter and Vine have been widely used by protesters to not only express their views, but to report on subsequent protest and police activities (Deutch & Lee, 2014).

However, like so many media technologies and platforms throughout history – these are not the kinds of functionalities that motivated the development of these platforms. In this case, a social media platform (Facebook) originally designed to help college students identify attractive classmates; and one (Twitter) that, by definition, was intended to facilitate the dissemination of a "short burst of *inconsequential* information" (Johnson, 2013, p. 1; emphasis added), have grown into globally significant outlets for the dissemination of news and information (see, e.g., Rubel, 2012; Youmans & York, 2012). Now these and other social media platforms help inform and coordinate revolutions, disseminate traditional and new forms of journalism, and serve as a point of origin for a variety of types of information that are important to individuals and communities (see, e.g., Braun & Gillespie, 2011; MacKinnon, 2012; Rahimi, 2011).

Ironically, as social media platforms have emerged as some of the most significant new media organizations of the 21st century, they often – in part through their own conscious efforts – are not perceived or treated as media companies, but rather as something fundamentally different – technology companies. Facebook, for instance, has steadfastly resisted being characterized as a media company (see, e.g., McMains, 2012; Ulanoff, 2014), as has BuzzFeed (Thompson, 2014), with both following in Google's footsteps in this regard (Carr, 2011). To the extent that this (mis)perception resonates with different stakeholder groups, it creates a potentially problematic gulf between the role and function that these platforms are performing in the contemporary media ecosystem and the way in which they are perceived and governed.

This contrast between the origins and self-perceptions of social media platforms and the increasingly important role they are playing in the flow of news and information in contemporary media ecosystems (and are likely to play in the future) raises the question of if or how the normative dimensions of their governance frameworks reflect the realities of their function and significance. As social media platforms emerge and evolve to function both independently of, and in conjunction with, both new and legacy news outlets as vital sources and distributors of the news and information that are essential to well-functioning democracies, it is important that we consider the normative frameworks by which their performance in this regard can be assessed and their governance debated and implemented.

Traditionally, such assessments of media performance and media governance have been grounded in the concept of the public interest (McQuail, 1992; Napoli, 2001). The concept of the public interest has a long, well-established tradition in the realm of the governance of traditional media, serving not only as a guidepost for policymakers in their formulation and assessment of policies; but also as a professional norm for certain categories of media professionals (e.g., journalists); as well as an evaluative and rhetorical tool for civil society organizations in their assessments of media performance and their advocacy efforts on behalf of the broader public (McQuail, 1992).

This evaluative orientation has continued relevance in the realm of social media. As Gillespie (2010) notes, "like the television networks and trade publishers before them," new media platforms such as social media are "increasingly facing questions about their responsibilities: to their users, to key constituencies who depend on the public discourse they host, *and to broader notions of the public interest*" (p. 348, emphasis added).

Consequently, the goal of this article is to try to identify the basic contours of how the notion of the public interest is taking shape in the realm of social media governance. This analysis focuses on the specific context of the production and dissemination of news, as it is this informational function of the media that has traditionally been most explicitly intertwined with the notion of the public interest (Napoli, 2001). As this article will illustrate, in the case of social media, the notion of the public interest is at this point more implied than explicit.

Toward these ends, the first section of this article provides a foundation in the concept of the public interest, with a particular emphasis on understanding this concept from a media governance perspective; and again, primarily in relation to the provision of news and information. The second section applies this media governance perspective on the public interest to social media platforms, and the evolving role they are playing in the production, dissemination, and consumption of news and information. This section argues that a *restrictive* and *individualist* model of the public interest characterizes the social media space, but that these conceptualizations may inadequately account for the realities of how these platforms function in the contemporary media ecosystem. The concluding section considers broader governance implications and potential research directions in light of this analysis.

2. Media governance and the public interest

First, it is important to articulate the linkage between the concept of the public interest and the concept of media governance, which, as many analyses have illustrated, has become increasingly prominent in the discourses surrounding