

Social Media as a News Outlet and Research Tool

The 21st century has been defined by a digital revolution in which online technology has increasingly replaced other means for communication, labor, and everyday tasks. Many would go as far to say that society now relies on computers and the development of the Internet to function properly on a daily basis. Especially with the explosion of mobile devices like smartphones and tablets, people are now connected at all times of the day and in all places. One of the biggest effects of the development of the internet, which has escalated due to the rise in use of mobile devices, is the creation of social media websites and applications. Social media is defined as the social interaction among people in which they create, share, or exchange information, ideas, and pictures or videos in virtual communities and networks. Andreas Kaplan, professor of marketing at the ESCP Europe Business School, defines social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Haenlein et al., 2010). With these types of sites growing in popularity, businesses, government agencies, news groups, and other professional organizations have a new and effective way to reach the public. Because of this fact, social media has been a growing medium for consumers to stay up to date with current news as well as for use in business and academic research. This paper explores how, why, and how widely social media is used as a news outlet for consumers as well as an avenue for conducting business-level and academic research for professionals.

The distribution and consumption of news stories has evolved over time and continues to do so today. From simple spoken word, to newspapers, to radio, to television, and now to the internet, people have had a changing preference for the way they stay up to date on the current news of the world. As such, news organizations have had to adapt to these changing trends to give their consumers what they want and allow them to stay informed. Obviously, depending on what was the dominant media for most of their life, different generations have different preferences for media consumption. Older generations tend to prefer print media such as newspapers and magazines, others younger than them look to the radio or television, and, finally, much of today's young adults are relying on the web. The American Press Institute, in a joint research study with the Associated Press, also found that the media people go to for news “depends significantly on the topic of the story — whether it is sports or science, politics or weather, health or arts — and on the nature of the story — whether it is a fast-moving event, a slower-moving trend, or an issue that the person follows passionately” (The Personal News, 2014). Based on the study, the dominant news medium for most Americans is still television with almost 90 percent of the public turning on televised news programs for the updates on current events. Laptops and computers were the second media device used by most Americans with cell phones and tablets falling last behind radio and print.

However, despite cell phones and tablets having the lowest percentage of usage, “the rapid growth in mobile technology is changing the mix” (The Personal News, 2014). Of smartphone users, 78 percent report using the device to get news, while tablet owners share a similar statistic. This is a large majority of mobile users who utilize their devices for news and as the number of users continues to increase, so will the numbers of those who use them for news. Furthermore, there is a large correlation between mobile technology and social media. “Smartphone owners are two and half times as likely to get news through social media...and more than twice as likely to share news.” The same study found that “overall...social media is becoming an important tool for people across all generations to discover news” (The Personal News, 2014). Around 40 percent of Americans say they get news directly from social media on average. The percentage is larger, around 70 percent, among those under the age of 30, but decreases as the age demographic also increases. Most importantly, perhaps, is that social media is not replacing other media outlets but is instead adding to them. People are still using traditional ways to access news in addition to using social media. Around 50 percent of those young adults under the age of 30 who use social media for news also read newspapers, and 75 percent watch news on television (The Personal News, 2014).

Nevertheless, of the social media sites used to access news stories, Facebook leads the way with the largest percentage of news followers, around 30 percent, followed by YouTube, 10 percent, and Twitter, 8 percent (Anderson, 2014). About half of those people who read news on social media, also ‘share’ it with their friends and followers and/or use the sites to discuss the news. Twitter, due to its real-time functionality, is more often used to follow breaking news stories. The entertainment category leads the type of news most often read and shared on social media, followed closely by local community events, sports, and government and politics, which indicates social media is largely an avenue for social and local news (Anderson, 2014). Interestingly, despite the social sharing quality of social media, users were less likely to converse on social media about important, potentially-sensitive issues than they were in person, mostly because they thought their friends and followers may disagree with them. It seems social media is seen as a more public-facing and permanent forum, which thus may deter these types of actions.

News is not the only industry which is seeing change due to the rise of social media, businesses have also been transformed as a result of these social sharing sites. Social media has allowed companies to interact with their consumers more efficiently than ever before. By operating on the internet, consumers are able to post content about a business in real-time, allowing those businesses to see, analyze, and react to that content if they so choose. As a result, this feature has enabled companies to use social media to conduct market research. On many sites like Facebook and Twitter, “[businesses] can gain insight into emerging trends and see what customers are talking

In addition, traditional market research methods like surveys or focus groups, which could take months to execute, can now be conducted using social media and completed in a matter of minutes, hours, or days. One of the major benefits of using social media sites for this purpose is knowing with confidence that the collected information is current and accurately reflects the market. Traditional forms of market research often yield outdated information due to the amount of time it takes to plan, develop, and execute them. By the time useful information is extracted from the research, trends may have already changed along with consumer attitudes. Moreover, social media eliminates the need for question-based marketing research. With surveys or interviews, “simply rewording a question can result in drastically different answers,” which means the collected information could be inaccurate and non-representative (Nelson, 2013). As an interactive medium, social media enables businesses to simply observe discussions about their products, services, or brand, ensuring honest and accurate information. Finally, the largest investment companies must make to use social media for market research is time. Membership on these sites is free, and many of them even offer tools to gather, analyze, and extract useful information for no charge. This is unlike traditional research which can be very costly (Nelson, 2013).

Academic research is also realizing the benefits of social media in relation to data collection, collaboration, and distribution of findings. With an extremely large user base, “approximately 80 percent of people with internet access,” the ability to reach individual people and the capability for users to create and post original content, social media is a great medium for data collection (Nelson, 2013). In a similar way that businesses use social media to study different markets, academic researchers can search key terms or “hashtags” and sift through conversations and posts about their topics. In addition, they can pose questions of their own and get immediate responses as more of their followers comment on, respond to, or share posts. Because of this “volunteer participation,...greater authenticity of responses may be obtained” (Matoke, 2014).

The benefits of social media extend further than just data collection. “The principal benefit [researchers] gained from using social media [is] related to connections or networks they had established with other academics, students, and also those outside academia”(Lupton, 2014). Nature, an international journal of science, reports that the largest percentage of scientific researchers (40 to 50 percent) use social media to “discover peers,” “follow discussions” of other research projects and topics, and “post [their own] work” (Van Noorden, 2014). Twitter is the most popular social media site among researchers because of its real-time structure, network-building ease, and ability to comment, endorse, or ‘retweet’ posts from their network. In a survey of research professionals at various stages of their career, 90 percent of respondents said they use Twitter as a part of their professional academic work, as opposed to roughly 60 percent

using LinkedIn and 40 percent using Facebook (Lupton, 2014). With these benefits in mind, there have also been social media sites developed solely for academic researchers and the purpose of connecting researchers around the world. Some examples of these sites are Academia.edu and ResearchGate which are online forums that allow researchers to post unpublished content, get feedback, discuss ideas, and build their professional network. ResearchGate has more than 4.5 million members and is still growing, which shows how much researchers believe in the benefits of social media and are continuing to utilize this new technology (Van Noorden, 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the numerous benefits social media provides as a research tool, there are a few negatives which keep some researchers from using the medium. The biggest concern with using social media in research is privacy. More particularly, many scientific researchers think social media sites “[blur] the boundaries between an individual’s private life and his or her professional persona” (Lupton, 2014). Academic professionals do not want their work to be undermined by their personal content on social media, which may happen if viewers cannot decipher between the user as a professional or a peer. This is one of the main reasons other sites were established solely for professional researchers, thus allowing academics to separate their private and professional lives on social media. There is also a lack of credibility associated with social media since anyone can acclaim to be a professional and post whatever they want. Traditional media like scientific journals that have been established for years give credibility and merit to researchers and their publications. Finally, because of the open forum style of social media, which is in many ways a benefit for research, can also be a negative in terms of cyber-attacks or harassment from people who disagree with posted publications. Many researchers fear becoming a target for “such attacks [descending] into outright aggression, hate speech, or harassment” (Lupton, 2014).

As social media continues to grow and expand it will become an increasingly large part of everyday life for consumers, businesses, professionals and the like. News and business or academic research are only pieces of the many uses for social networking sites besides pure entertainment. Social media allows people to stay up-to-date on real-time events and news as it happens. It also enables professional researchers to connect with peers, collaborate, and share findings, which will ultimately lead to new scientific breakthroughs which may not have been discovered without social media. There may be arguments about social media’s strengths and weaknesses in these industries, but one can be certain that in this age of digital connection social media has the potential to change the way people interact with the world.

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