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THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF NEWS – FROM GATE-KEEPING TO SOCIAL SHARING

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The supply of news is larger than ever, both due to economic developments in the media markets (e.g. the increase in commercial broadcasters) and technological innovations (e.g. the advent of the Internet and the wider access to producing news for existing media operators, citizens journalists and ordinary people). Further, the access to news has become ubiquitous. Computers (desktops and laptops) have facilitated easy access to all kinds of news and recently, the rise of mobile phones and tablets have made it easy to access news anytime, anywhere. We live in a world of ambient news (Hermida, 2010). Further, the easy options of spreading, sharing, altering, modifying and even faking news, not at least through social media sites, contribute to evaporate earlier distinction between production and consumption of news. Citizens can become journalists or, at least, news curators and, contrary, journalists often turn into consumers, for instance by tapping the grapevine of social media when looking for emerging news stories.

Although the breakthrough of citizen journalism still remains to come true, citizens play an increasing role in the news cycle by sharing, distributing, curating, commenting and even modifying news they get from elsewhere. This particularly takes place through social network sites Twitter and Facebook, which have become meta media for not only personal contacts but also wider societal agenda setting (Linaa Jensen & Tække, 2013).

This paper is a theoretical discussion of such issues and a first quantitative assessment of changing news patterns among Danish media users. The present paper is part of a larger project, Meaning Across Media (cmc.ku.dk) where we in other studies look at Facebook and also on wider aspects of cross media use in Denmark. This particular study is about sharing as an intermediary practice between production and consumption, which might fundamentally alter both. A later stage of this paper (and project) will encompass studies of news sharing practices through Twitter and Facebook.

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Theoretical framework

From a theoretical angle, the phenomenon of sharing can be analyzed on three levels: a macro-, meso- and microlevel.

On a macro-level it is interesting whether traditional patterns of opinion leadership (see for instance Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) are changing? Which media get their news shared through Twitter? It might be old established mass media but similar research from Australia indicates that new actors, for instance pure online media or blogs also get prominence in the social media news sphere.

On a meso level, it is relevant to return to the much-debated criteria of newsworthiness (for instance as outlined by Galtung & Ruge 1965). News are curated, commented upon or even altered according to the opinions, beliefs and interests of those who share them. Such peer-to-peer selection might differ radically from the priming of traditional mass media. The entertaining, the mundane or the profane might be a main focus when the selection is based on popularity, “likes” and “shares” rather than editorial filters. Further, social media users might frame the news stories differently than journalists. One might expect that emotions and sensations rather than facts dominate because social media have “different subjects, different narrative sensibility and different pathways to capture the attention (Rainie & Wellman, 2014: 214).

On a micro level one might ask about the motives and incentives for users to share and spread news. Do they do it for intrinsic reasons, for instance the feeling of empowerment and “being important” or do they do it for extrinsic reasons, for instance the ability to affect the societal agenda? One might also expect that users take up very different roles as sharers: some might be moderators or creators, altering the news stories, some curators, sharing but also commenting, and some might be mere distributors, passing on the news without comments. The understanding of roles and motives are crucial for an in- depth understanding of the citizens’ position as mediators between news production and consumption.

Methodology

Methodologically this investigation follows the three theoretical levels: macro, meso and micro.

On the macro level I rely on data on the general media use among Danes, of production as well as consumption and sharing. The data originate from a quantitative survey among Danish media users, part of the project “Meaning Across Media” investigating how media content travel across platforms. As such the approach is content based rather than media based, allowing us to take a first step looking at how the news cycle might be changing. I present data from this survey in my conference presentation.

Future methodology

Although data are not yet ready, I will briefly sketch the future research methodology of this project. On the meso level, I focus on the citizens and analyze their patterns of

news sharing through Twitter. I choose generic Danish hashtags like #dkpol to identify current news stories dominant on social media in the month of May 2014 and harvest all these hashtags by Twapperkeeper. The analysis is done in two steps: first, a network analysis is used to identify patterns of sharing: who are the most dominant sharers etc. Next, I do a quantitative content analysis based on word count as well as manual coding in order to identify dominant topics in the news shared. Hereby, we get an image of opinion leaders and other prominent participants as well as an overview of topics, which participants find worth sharing.

On a micro level I focus on the individual users. By qualitative interviews I aim at understanding patterns of sharing and not at least the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for sharing news.

Conclusion

The survey data reveal changing patterns of news consumption in Denmark as well as a steady rise in the sharing of news. Digital media play an important role in the news landscape but people tend to be media omnivores, rather than substituting old media with new ones. For the wider implications of the research, the findings will be the first step in a larger Danish analysis of the phenomenon. Further, the combination of studying macro-, meso- and micro levels is a pilot approach which might be relevant to replicate in other countries, for purposes of comparing and getting a wider picture of the changing world of news.

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