

Social Media News as Disruptive Technology

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Abstract

The Internet with its many innovations has transformed how humans interact with their environment and with each other. It has had serious impact on much of our socio-cultural fabric and has restructured our relationship with technology. Within the broader framework of the Internet as a technology, there is the concept of social media, which is changing, how we access the news and our news consumption habits. With the number of people turning to the Internet for news are increasing substantially and steadily, understanding how Internet users access the news could be informative of whether social media news is or could potentially be disruptive to the established institutions of traditional news media. This paper seeks to investigate the idea of social media news as being disruptive for traditional news media by investigating various aspects through the theoretical framework of “disruptive technology”.

Keywords: Social Media, News, Social Media News, Disruptive Technology, Disruptive Innovations

1. Introduction

News consumption has changed tremendously from the pre-satellite days of waiting for the bulletin at a particular hour to 24-hour news channels that flash breaking news every now and then. The act of reading the news from newspapers, the very routine of waiting for newspapers in the morning and flipping through the pages to find interesting content is changing. With the advent and subsequent proliferation of digital technologies, newspapers now have digital versions that allow people to access their pages at any time of the day, while also allowing them to jump directly to specific issues of interest. With the number of people turning to the Internet for news increasing substantially and steadily (Beheshti-Kashi & Makki, 2013),

understanding how Internet users access the news could be informative of whether social media news is or could potentially be disruptive to the established institutions of traditional news media. Even though media such as print, radio and television are still popularly used, these traditional sources of news are constantly faced with competition from online interactive media (Briggs, 2007). This paper seeks to investigate the idea of social media news as being disruptive for traditional news media through the theoretical framework of “disruptive technology” as professed by Christensen (1997).

2. Theoretical Framework

The Internet has transformed how humans interact with their environment and with each other. It has had serious impact on much of our socio-cultural fabric and has restructured our relationship with technology. One could argue that it is one of the



most disruptive technologies, the tentacles of which have spread through various institutions- social, economic, cultural and political. Within the broader framework of the Internet as a technology, there is the concept of social media which has been defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) 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”. However, Tom Standage’s *Writing on the wall* (2013) contextualizes the idea of social media where he perspicaciously points out that social media is anything but new and dates back at least to the times of the Roman commander Cicero where “information circulated through the exchange of letters and other documents which were copied, commented on, and shared with others in the form of papyrus rolls”. It is only after years of dissemination of information through mass media such as print, radio and television, that the Internet has facilitated a reemergence of social media, driving public discourse in new ways. In this context, social media includes various platforms and tools that allow users to gather information, interact and also build and regulate niche communities (Donoghue, 2015). So the term social media news refers to information available as news that is accessible on popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest.

Christensen (1997) famously coined the term “disruptive technology” to refer to “a new technology having lower cost and performance measured by traditional criteria, but having higher ancillary performance” (Utterback & Ance, 2003, pg.1). What this implies is that disruptive technologies refer to those that enter and expand niche markets, ultimately improving with time and

thereby, attacking established products in their traditional markets. Christensen (1997) also differentiated between sustaining technologies that refer to products that “improve the performance of established products, along the dimensions of performance that mainstream customers in major markets have historically valued” and disruptive technologies that “underperform established products in mainstream markets. But they have other features that a few fringe (and generally new) customers value”. Christensen further discussed the idea that disruptive technologies are often cheaper, simpler, smaller and more convenient to use, ultimately replacing traditional technology. Within this basic framework of Christensen’s theory of disruptive technology, this paper attempts to make an inquiry into whether social news media are disruptive media, or if they have the potential to be. It is essential to note that there are online formats of television (eg. www.ndtv.com) and radio channels (eg. Radio City 91.1 FM on www.onlineradios.in) as well as of newspapers (eg. www.thehindu.com) and magazines (eg. www.outlookindia.com). There are also newspapers and magazines that are published exclusively online such as scroll.in, homegrown.in, huffingtonpost.in and raiot.in. Some publications even have apps designed for their content (eg. Times of India, The Hindu, The New York Times etc.) In the context of this paper all these formats are categorized as traditional media. This paper specifically looks at news that originates, are accessed and circulated on social media sites through different sections which attempt to unpack and present social media news as breaking away from and perhaps, disrupting the more traditional forms of news media.

3. Functionality

Christensen (1997) pointed out that disruptive technologies generally tend to be “typically cheaper, simpler, smaller, and, frequently, more convenient to use”. News on social media essentially indicates that it is accessible on different platforms that have connectivity to the Internet. When a user connects to the Internet, s/he has immediate access to a platform that is global and free (Alejandro, 2010). This is especially true of social media sites, the most popular of which, offer free services world wide. What this translates to is that one no longer needs to ‘pay’ to have access to the news unlike the payment made for some forms of traditional news such as newspapers and television news, both of which are accessed by users for a fee. Apart from largely free access to news, this also means that users have access to an extraordinarily vast amount of news from different parts of the world. In other words, users have unlimited, free access to an unprecedented amount of news.

The technology that drives social media news also allows for increased mobility. This is an important functional aspect of social media news which is accessed not only through computers, but increasingly more so through smart phones which reinforces the need for news companies to “rethink the way they handle information, deal with commentary and engage with both their audiences and their customers.” (Griessner, 2012,) Social media news is also available to users 24/7 and unlike is available with an immediacy that media outlets like news agencies cannot ignore. The traditional practice of media outlets waiting to out-scoop each other is no longer followed in a competitive environment that, through social media, also includes amateur

bloggers, citizen journalists and twitteratis (Alejandro, 2010).

4. Content

Traditionally, news media have existed for news from authoritative sources that provide a deeper view of news (Alejandro, 2010). Also, apart from a few forums such as letters to the editor, the flow of information was linear. However, readers, listeners and viewers are not just passive consumers anymore and actually engage with news and provide feedback, sometimes instantaneously through comments, videos or other means. In other words, the content of news is changing becoming more user/reader/listener oriented to the extent that audiences now play an important role in shaping the content of news. Greissner (2012) suggested that for traditional media firms to stay relevant, it is crucial for them to engage social media platforms so they can keep pace with their consumers. Content on social media is also not limited by boundaries created by categorization of newspapers or news channels into international, national or regional. Social media news content transcends geographical and often, political barriers that sometimes limit the content on traditional news. The content is also tailored to suit individual tastes and preferences. Citing the example of how some of the first compelling reports of the March 2011 earthquake in Japan emerged from Twitter, Newman, Dutton and Blank (2012) asserted that the role of social media news can be particularly significant in the event of a breaking news. However, Greissman (2012) argued that in general, news distributed over social media tend to be more successful (in terms of likes, comments and sharing) if they are soft or lighter news which implies that people perhaps still trust traditional news media more when it comes to hard news. Social media makes

it possible to users to also be news generators. As Newman et al. (2012) further elaborated, this unique source of content called UGC (User Generated Content) has not gone unnoticed or unharnessed by media outlets such as the BBC, Sky News et al. that have assembled teams who are assigned the task of sifting through colossal quantities of UGC and engaging on social media. However, there is another aspect to the proliferation of UGC on social media. Chapman and Nutall (2011) stressed that the ultimate challenge for journalism in the 21st century is finding a balance between efficient markets and good journalism. They further warned that in the rush for monetary profits, internet-based news organizations (such as social media) often lose sight of what is good, ethical, balanced, respectful and innovative journalism. In their study, Beheshti-Kashi and Makki (2013) also found that this was one of the major reasons why non-users of social media (82.2%) do not intend to use social media as the articles are not written by qualified journalists. Subjectivity and lack of authoritative review of news content was also cited by 66.7% of non-users as the reason why they distrust social media news.

5. Convergence

Convergence is a key word when discussing media, and specifically new media today. Media organisations are coming to the realization that convergence is a key, common strategy (Alejandro, 2010). "In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms." (Jenkins, 2006). In one sense, social media may be viewed as a convergence between conversation and journalism with many of the news articles/videos on social media sites allowing for users to comment or even continue the

thread with other related news items. In another sense, there is undeniably convergence that is taking place between old and new media about which much has been written (Greissner, 2012). Technological convergence has allowed social media to enter new markets (for instance, the news industry) by tailoring its form and content to suit individual tastes and requirements. The prospect of being able access news on the same platform that allows users to chat with friends, while also looking at pictures of loved ones, is a tempting one, and perhaps one of the key reasons why social media news has achieved the level of success it has today. The convergence of different functions, content and technology enable users to glean a lot more from social media platforms. In other words, convergence takes place in the three levels as identified by Murdock (2000), which are the technological level (communication systems), the content level (cultural forms) and the economic level (related to companies, employers and the media market). The manner in which social media have accommodated and in some ways even expedited innovative convergence means that it offers certain ancillary functions that are enjoyed by users.

6. What the Data Reveals

A technology can only be disruptive in so far as the data or the numbers reveal that it is. According to the Christensen's theory, disruptive technology often leads to the displacement or ultimately failure of the leading firms in the market. Data drawn from various studies in the field would help to gauge whether social media news show indication of being disruptive. Reuters Institute conducted extensive studies which spanned across 26 countries to compile the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2016). Some of their key findings include:

- ❖ Half of the total sample (51%) use social media as a source of news each week. Around one in ten (12%) say it is their main source. Facebook is by far the most important network for finding, reading/watching, and sharing news.
- ❖ The growth of news accessed and increasingly consumed via social networks, portals and mobile apps means that the originating news brand gets clearly noticed less than half the time in the UK, and Canada.
- ❖ Television news still remains most important for older groups but overall usage has continued to decline, particularly for 'appointment to view' bulletins and amongst younger groups.
- ❖ In terms of devices, smartphone usage for news is sharply up, reaching half of our global sample (53%), while computer use is falling and tablet growth is flattening out.
- ❖ Media companies that have nailed their colours to a distributed future like BuzzFeed are gaining ground in terms of reach. But these new brands and platforms are mostly used as secondary sources and for softer news subjects. Main usage online remains with brands that have a strong news heritage and have been able to build up a reputation over time. .

Certain things become quite clear from the key findings of the report. While traditional news media such as television are still relevant, the popularity of social media news continues to grow. With increasing numbers of people switching to smart phones for all their media-related entertainment and work requirements, it is a safe assumption that the number of people who access their news through social media will continue to grow. However, it is

interesting to note the skepticism with which hard news on online companies are viewed. The key findings reveal that most people still look for strong news heritage and a reputation built over time

7. Conclusion

Social media news certainly has changed and challenged traditional new media. It has brought about innovations, which make news more democratic both in terms of access and content. It is also fair to say that the technological innovations that drive social media news have made it a fairly cheaper, mobile and convenient option for accessing news from around the world with unprecedented immediacy and specificity. It has also been truly convergent in nature that, in the long run, only ensures the longevity of its shelf life. A notable reason for the growing popularity of social media news is because it enables people to do a variety of tasks from a single platform. Access to infinite variety of personalized content is also another big draw for users. That being said, social media news is far from completely taking over the market dominated by traditional news media. At best, it is making inroads into an industry that has been formidable through the years. All things considered, it is difficult to say with absolute certitude that social media news is disruptive for traditional news media. However, given time, it certainly has potential to be.

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