

Beyond the Scroll: Social Media and the Transformation of News Consumption

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Social media is rapidly changing the way we consume news and media. Historically our main sources of news were newspapers and television, but social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and X (Twitter) are becoming main sources of news and conversation. Social media has changed the way people interact and access news and information, but it also brought many challenges such as misinformation, bias in the algorithm and media literacy.

The rate at which information is distributed and received is perhaps one of the more noticeable characteristics of the world of social media. News travels in minutes and sometimes seconds through the channels of re-tweets, the hash tag and ‘viral’ information. This allows citizens to obtain breaking global news in real time. The flow of information on social media has been described by Hermida (2010) as creating an environment of ‘ambient journalism’ whereby the news and information that audiences receive on these platforms are constant and flowing in the form of a social network of news objects. Hence, as well as being channels of distribution for journalism, social media can also be seen as spaces that allow the reception of information by the public in a more dynamic way.

Another concern is that the speed of modern information dissemination also facilitates the spread of misinformation. Because information can be circulated very quickly, unverified content is often being shared with the public before journalists or fact-checkers have had a chance to examine its validity. More recently, a study published in the journal *Science* found that false or misleading information can disseminate more rapidly on social media than true news, particularly when it evokes strong emotions in users (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).. So, when people are exposed to false information, they are often encountering it before fact-checkers and journalists have the chance to correct it. And that’s why media literacy is becoming more important. Media literacy is an umbrella term that refers to a set of skills used to interpret,

understand and evaluate the content that people encounter in mass media, including print, online, broadcast news and other sources. While being media literate is not a guarantee of being resistant to misinformation, it is likely to be important for helping to mitigate the effects of false information.

A significant number of studies examine the impact of algorithms on the way users interact with news in social media platforms. Most studies indicate that the social media platforms use content filtering algorithms that are based on user preferences, behaviors and interaction patterns. The algorithms are used in order to maximize user engagement. Yet, by maximizing engagement they reduce the exposure of the users to alternative points of view. According to Pariser (2011) users are being locked into a unique online ecology that is tailored to their personal views. He terms this effect “filter bubble”, and claims that by filtering and ranking information, and by adapting the home page of each user to the information that it believes is important for him, creates a “bubble” in which the user is faced with information that matches his worldview, and is prevented from encountering alternative worldviews and ideas. As such, social media platforms can be seen as one of the sources that hinder critical and open thinking and increase the phenomenon of the fragmentation of the public sphere due to polarization along ideological lines.

Social media has increased opportunities for citizen participation in news production processes. The old journalism paradigm where professionally trained journalists acted as custodians of news has made way for social media platforms where citizens can be part of the news distribution process. Citizen journalism has emerged as an important phenomenon, especially during protests, social movements and disasters. It enables citizens to share first-hand stories, photos and videos to counter-narratives of mainstream news narratives and to give a

diverse perspective to the breaking news. While the trend of participation in news distribution processes by citizens has opened up new possibilities of getting more information to the people, at the same time, it also raises questions regarding verification of news, accountability and media ethics.

Social media is a challenge and an opportunity for journalists and media outlets. These days many media outlets are using social media to publish their content, communicate with their audience and expand the outreach of their reports. Journalists are also using social media to disseminate information in different forms of visual and multimedia content, to use short videos and to adopt new ways of interaction with the public. At the same time journalists should maintain credibility to protect professional reputation and adhere to fact checking and ethical standards in this new and dynamic environment.

In conclusion, social media has revolutionised the modern news and information system. While increasing the efficiency of information dissemination and communication between media outlets and the public, social media poses the challenges of preventing the spread of fake news, preventing media outlets from being marginalized by algorithms and the fragmentation of public opinion. With the constant development of the media and communication technology, it is more important than ever to cultivate media literacy in order to efficiently navigate the new media system with an ever-changing structure of news and information distribution.

References

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