

**Unveiling information relevance in social media.
Bridging journalism theories**

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Abstract

In the digital era, social media platforms have become pivotal sources of news, reshaping traditional journalism paradigms and raising questions about the relevance of the information they host. This paper explores the multifaceted landscape of information relevance in social media through the lens of journalism theories. Drawing upon a synthesis of existing literature, this study delves into the theoretical frameworks underpinning journalism, including agenda-setting, gatekeeping, framing, and social responsibility. By examining how these theories manifest in social media, this study clarifies the intricate interactions among platform algorithms, user behaviour, and societal ramifications. Additionally, this study examines how algorithmic biases, viral dynamics, and user-generated content shape how information is perceived and shared on social media platforms. Through a comprehensive analysis, this study aims to deepen understanding of the evolving landscape of journalism in the digital age and to offer insights into the ethical, societal, and professional implications of information dissemination via social media.

Keywords: journalism, social media, newsworthiness

Introduction

In recent years, the proliferation of social media platforms has revolutionised news consumption, profoundly impacting traditional journalism paradigms. As more people turn to social media as their primary source of news, the role of these platforms in shaping information dissemination has attracted significant attention. Consequently, this shift has prompted scholars and practitioners alike to scrutinise the underlying information values inherent within social media environments. This paper delves into the multifaceted dynamics of information values in the context of social media, elucidating the complexities and implications of this transformative phenomenon.

The advent of social media has revolutionised how information is shared, consumed, and perceived. Traditional journalism, once the primary gatekeeper of information, now coexists with a myriad of social media platforms that empower individuals to disseminate information instantaneously. This shift raises critical questions about the values of information on social media and how they align with or conflict with established journalism theories. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by examining the impact of social media on journalism and exploring potential integrative frameworks.

Information relevance in social media

Considerations of “newsworthiness” have evolved in the modern media landscape, where the factors influencing how “news” is produced, shared, and understood have changed throughout time. Because of the advantages and circumstances of a networked, participatory media culture, the variety of information and narratives surrounding and maybe feeding into the daily news stream has significantly expanded. From a production perspective, there are now technologies that facilitate, and even demand, close observation of news flows for inspiration and story idea development, as well as audience (inter)activity, which determines which stories are liked, clicked, shared, or remarked upon, ultimately driving traffic.

Consequently, the editorial process and the selection and “de-selection” of news items are influenced by factors such as “clickability” and “shareability”, as well as search engines or social media optimisation. In terms of distribution and reception, a networked media culture involves various forms of “secondary gatekeeping”, whether through human interaction or (mostly) automated, with the result that “news diets” and corresponding perceptions of “newsness” became highly customised, personalised, and thus, in a sense, “de-industrialised”. These observations are also linked to the related phenomena of the “filter bubble” and “echo chamber” (Temmerman and Mast 2020). From a “meta” standpoint, these evolving habits and worldviews eventually lead to fresh discussions about the components of “news.” Alternative journalism has emerged in response to specific criticisms of the conventional standards and procedures that govern news production, particularly its foundation in “news values.”

The rise of social media platforms has disrupted conventional journalism practices, challenging established norms and frameworks. Traditional gatekeeping functions, once entrusted solely to professional journalists and news organisations, have been decentralised, enabling users to disseminate information widely. This decentralisation has blurred the boundaries between producers and consumers of news, reshaping the traditional hierarchical structures of information dissemination. Furthermore, the real-time nature of social media has accelerated the spread of news, often outpacing traditional news outlets and challenging their monopoly over breaking news coverage. As a result, traditional journalism paradigms, rooted in principles of objectivity, accuracy, and accountability, have come under scrutiny amid the rapid, unfiltered dissemination of information on social media platforms.

When it comes to raising questions about information values, the central discourse surrounding social media's role in news consumption concerns the inherent information values embedded in these platforms. Unlike traditional journalistic practices, which are guided by ethical principles and professional standards, social media environments operate within a more fluid and dynamic framework: algorithms governing content distribution prioritise engagement metrics, potentially amplifying sensationalism, misinformation, and filter bubbles. Moreover, the prevalence of user-generated content introduces subjective

biases and perspectives into the news ecosystem, challenging notions of objectivity and impartiality. Consequently, the proliferation of fake news, echo chambers, and algorithmic manipulation has raised profound concerns about the reliability, credibility, and integrity of information disseminated via social media.

The emergence of social media platforms as pivotal sources of news (Mitchell, Jurkowitz et al., 2020) has reshaped traditional journalism paradigms and prompted critical reflection on the information values inherent in these platforms. The decentralised nature of social media, coupled with algorithmic biases and user-generated content, has complicated the dissemination and perception of information, posing ethical, societal, and professional challenges. Moving forward, it is imperative to critically examine the evolving role of social media in shaping the public discourse and to devise strategies that uphold the fundamental principles of journalism while harnessing the potential of digital platforms for information dissemination.

Journalism theories

The multifaceted landscape of information values in social media, viewed through the lens of journalism theories, reveals a complex interplay of factors shaping the dissemination, reception, and perception of news content. Several key journalism theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding these dynamics:

1. Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory posits that media organisations have the power to influence the public agenda by determining which topics and issues receive attention and prominence in news coverage. In the context of social media, algorithms play a significant role in shaping the agenda by determining the visibility and prioritisation of content in users' feeds. Moreover, the virality dynamics of social media platforms can amplify specific topics or narratives, shaping public discourse and perceptions. Thus, understanding how agenda-setting processes operate in digital environments is essential for comprehending the information values embedded within social media. However, the decentralised nature of social media also allows grassroots movements and alternative narratives to gain prominence, challenging traditional media gatekeepers' dominance over agenda-setting.

Agenda-setting theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), suggests that media do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. By highlighting specific issues, media organisations influence the public's perception of what is important.

2. Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory traditionally refers to the process by which media professionals select, filter, and prioritise information for dissemination to the public. In the context of social media, gatekeeping functions are decentralised, with users themselves serving as gatekeepers through content creation, sharing, and engagement. However, platform algorithms also serve as gatekeepers, determining which content reaches a broader audience and which remains confined to a smaller circle. This decentralised and algorithmic gatekeeping introduces new dynamics into the information ecosystem, influencing the diversity, authenticity, and credibility of news content.

Gatekeeping theory examines the mechanisms through which media organisations control the flow of information by selecting, shaping, and disseminating news content. In the digital age, social media platforms have disrupted traditional gatekeeping functions by empowering users to create and share content autonomously. While this decentralisation has democratised information dissemination, it has also raised concerns about the proliferation of misinformation, sensationalism, and echo chambers. Platform algorithms act as virtual gatekeepers, determining which content reaches users' feeds based on engagement metrics and user preferences. As a result, the gatekeeping power once held by traditional media institutions has been diffused across a network of users and algorithms, fundamentally altering the dynamics of information control in social media environments.

3. Framing Theory

Framing theory explores how media organisations frame news stories to shape audience perceptions and interpretations of events. In the context of social media, framing occurs not only through editorial decisions but also through user-generated content and algorithmic curation. Social media users selectively share and comment on news stories, thereby shaping diverse frames and interpretations. Moreover, platform algorithms employ framing techniques to prioritise certain narratives and perspectives, influencing users' understanding of complex issues. The proliferation of user-generated content on social media introduces a plurality of frames, enabling a broader range of voices and viewpoints. However, algorithmic biases and echo chambers can also reinforce existing frames and perpetuate misinformation.

Framing theory, articulated by Erving Goffman (1974), involves presenting information in a particular way that influences how audiences interpret it. Media frames shape the narrative and provide context, affecting public understanding and attitudes toward issues.

4. Social Responsibility Theory

Social responsibility theory emphasises the media's ethical obligation to serve the public interest by providing accurate, fair, and balanced information. In the context of social media, this theory highlights the ethical dilemmas and challenges posed by the decentralised nature of information dissemination. While social media platforms have the potential to democratize access to information and facilitate civic engagement, they also raise concerns about privacy, algorithmic bias, and the spread of harmful content. Journalists and media organisations have a responsibility to navigate these challenges ethically and transparently, upholding principles of accuracy, accountability, and public service in the digital age.

By applying these journalism theories to the analysis of social media dynamics, we gain insights into the information values embedded within these platforms. Understanding how agenda-setting, gatekeeping, framing, and social responsibility operate in digital environments is crucial for addressing the ethical, societal, and professional challenges associated with news consumption on social media. The theoretical frameworks of agenda-setting, gatekeeping, framing, and social responsibility offer valuable insights into the evolving landscape of information values in social media. By examining how these theories manifest in digital environments, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics shaping news dissemination and consumption on social media platforms.

Impact of social media on journalism theories

Journalism theories have been significantly influenced by the emergence of social media, especially those concerned with agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and the public realm. The public agenda can now be influenced by individuals and non-traditional media outlets, challenging the traditional gatekeeping role of professional journalists. Social media platforms have democratised the sharing of information. The result of this change has been the rise of "networked journalism," in which the public and journalists work together to produce and distribute news. Additionally, consumers' exposure to and perception of news relevance are shaped by algorithmic biases and echo chambers, which have introduced new dynamics to agenda-setting in algorithm-driven content curation on social media. As a result, theories of journalism need to change to account for the intricacies of information sharing, the dispersion of audiences, and the consequences of user-generated content in the digital age.

The intersection of social media and journalism necessitates a reevaluation of established paradigms to better understand how news is produced, consumed, and perceived in an increasingly interconnected and participatory media environment. The complex interplay among platform algorithms, user behaviours, and societal implications underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to understanding the dissemination and reception of news in the digital era. Algorithms that prioritise content based on engagement metrics can create echo chambers and filter bubbles, reinforcing users' preexisting beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. User behaviours, such as selective sharing and the virality of emotionally charged content, further complicate the landscape, often leading to the rapid spread of misinformation. The societal implications of these dynamics are profound, influencing public opinion, political polarisation, and the overall quality of democratic discourse. Therefore, there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary research that combines insights from computer science, psychology, and media studies to develop strategies to mitigate negative outcomes, promote media literacy, and foster a more informed and engaged citizenry.

(1) Platform algorithms play a pivotal role in shaping the information landscape on social media. They determine which content users see on their feeds based on various factors such as relevance, engagement, and user preferences. Research by Pariser (2011) illustrates how algorithms create filter bubbles, limiting users' exposure to diverse viewpoints and reinforcing existing beliefs. Pariser explores how personalised search algorithms and social media feeds, designed to tailor content to individual preferences, can isolate users from information that challenges their viewpoints, thereby narrowing perspectives and increasing polarisation. The filter bubble concept highlights the unintended consequences of algorithmic curation on the diversity of information exposure and public discourse. Additionally, studies by Bakshy et al. (2015) and Ribeiro et al. (2020) demonstrate that algorithmic amplification can drive the viral spread of misinformation and polarising content on social media platforms.

(2) When it comes to user behaviours, including content creation, sharing, and engagement, they significantly influence the dissemination and reception of information on social media. Research by Vosoughi et al. (2018) highlights the role of social influence in the spread of false news stories, showing that false claims are more likely to go viral than true ones. Moreover, studies by De Choudhury et al. (2016) and Ferrara (2020) explore how user interactions and engagement patterns contribute to the formation of echo chambers and online polarisation, exacerbating societal divisions.

The interplay between platform algorithms and user behaviors has profound (3) societal implications, shaping public discourse, political opinions, and societal attitudes. Research by Barberá et al. (2015) demonstrates how social media platforms serve as conduits for the spread of political misinformation and propaganda, influencing electoral outcomes and democratic processes. Furthermore, studies by Pennycook and Rand (2019) highlight the prevalence of cognitive biases and the diffusion of misinformation on social media, underscoring the need for interventions to mitigate the societal impact of misinformation and echo chambers.

In summary, the complex interplay between platform algorithms, user behaviours, and societal implications underscores the intricate dynamics shaping the information landscape on social media. Social media has disrupted the traditional gatekeeping (decentralisation of gatekeeping) role of journalists. Anyone with internet access can now publish content, leading to a more decentralised and participatory model of information dissemination. This change challenges the gatekeeping theory's assumption of media professionals' centralised control. Algorithms on social media platforms create personalised news feeds (which means personalised agenda-setting) based on users' preferences and behaviours. This personalisation affects the media's agenda-setting role by fragmenting audiences and creating echo chambers where users are primarily exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs. Social media provides a platform for a multitude of voices (diverse framing), resulting in diverse and often conflicting frames on the same issue. Influencers and ordinary users contribute to shaping narratives that can enrich and complicate public discourse. This multiplicity of frames contrasts with the more unified framing typically seen in traditional media.

Examples as the Arab Spring (1) exemplify the power of social media in mobilising and disseminating information. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in organising protests and sharing real-time updates, highlighting the role of social media in bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and setting new agendas, or misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic (2), which underscores the challenges of misinformation on social media. False information about the virus and vaccines spread rapidly, demonstrating the difficulty of maintaining information veracity in a decentralised information environment.

User-generated content, while democratizing information production, raises questions about credibility and accountability. Citizen journalism can provide valuable perspectives and on-the-ground reporting, but it also lacks the editorial oversight and fact-checking processes of traditional journalism.

Conclusions. Information relevance: bridging journalism theories and social media

To bridge the gap between traditional journalism and social media, hybrid models (1) are emerging. These models integrate the strengths of both paradigms, combining the credibility and editorial standards of traditional journalism with the immediacy and participatory nature of social media.

Collaborative journalism initiatives (2) involve professional journalists working alongside citizen journalists and social media users. This collaboration can enhance the depth and breadth of reporting, leveraging the unique strengths of both groups.

The ethical considerations (3) primarily address misinformation and fake news. The prevalence of misinformation on social media highlights the ethical responsibility of both

platforms and users to verify information. Journalists and media organisations must adapt their practices to address the challenges of the digital age, ensuring that accurate information prevails.

Maintaining journalistic integrity and ethical standards (4) is crucial in the digital landscape. Journalists must navigate the complexities of social media while upholding principles of accuracy, fairness, and accountability.

The future trends imply AI and algorithms for certain. Artificial intelligence and algorithms are increasingly shaping news consumption. Understanding and mitigating the biases inherent in these technologies is essential to ensuring a balanced, diverse information ecosystem. Social media platforms must take greater accountability for the information they disseminate on their platforms. This includes implementing robust content moderation policies and supporting initiatives to combat misinformation.

The relationship between social media and journalism is complex and continually evolving. By examining the intersections of traditional journalism theories and social media dynamics, we can better understand the changing landscape of information relevance and its dissemination. Bridging these paradigms requires innovative approaches and a commitment to ethical standards, ensuring that the values of accurate and credible information are upheld in the digital age. Moreover, such insights can inform the development of strategies and interventions to promote responsible, informed news consumption practices in the digital age.

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