How Did They Get Here? The Likeable Engine, Dark Referrals and the Problematic of Social Media News Analytics

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Sharing News Online: Analysing the Significance of a Social Media Phenomenon

Mi9/Share Wars
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The sharing of news via social media services is now a significant part of mainstream online media use and is an increasingly important consideration in journalism practice and production. This multidisciplinary project analyzes the scale, scope, forms and implications of online news-sharing on Facebook and Twitter.

Using methods from computing science, linguistics and audience research this study aims to develop an analytical framework for monitoring, classifying and interpreting news-sharing practices that can inform media industry development, journalism education and digital media policy.

The findings about social news value relate to the future shape of journalism and media policy-making.
Evolving Media Commodities: News/Audiences

- The commodity logic of news has long played a key role in selling ideology (as commodity fetishism), and
- Contributing to the economic structures of capitalist media production (as value and capital accumulation)
Commodities come into the world in the form of use-values or material goods, such as iron, linen, corn, etc. This is their plain, homely, natural form. However, they are only commodities because they have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value. Therefore they only appear as commodities, or have the form of commodities, in so far as they possess a double form, i.e. natural form and value form (Marx, K. (original 1867, trans. 1976 [1990] p.138)
Langlois and Elmer (2013) and Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) note a “double articulation” of communicative acts on social media platforms: interaction and creativity is promoted – so that companies can aggregate, pattern, commodify and transform those exchanges.

We see a triple articulation of communicative commodification in news sharing – of news, audience, and metadata:

- social media platforms integrated into P-D-P-C
- platforms enlist news users as ‘evaluative intermediaries’
- analytics services aggregate and re-present real-time news consumption
Social Media/Publishers

• In the 20th Century media companies operated independently and controlled the whole content supply chain, from writing to publication to distribution
• In the digital era, they built their own web sites
• Now media publishers increasingly depend on social platforms
• Facebook is now a major news industry actor
Impact on Journalism: the PE of news

- We ask therefore ‘how can critical Internet and social media studies explain the use of these kinds of tools by commercial media organizations, within a broader political economic understanding of the allocation of online news media resources?
- First, Social Media platforms have hundreds of millions of people visiting every day, and this drives a lot of the referral traffic for publishers
- Second, the location of online news within a digital advertising ecosystem cannot be underestimated
Impact Analytics

- Caitlin Petre’s ethnographic study (the *Traffic Factories Report*, 2015) of the *New York Times* and *Gawker* shows the extent to which impact metrics are altering reporters’ ideas about the value of their labour and products.

- Facebook wants media companies to start publishing articles on its platform first, = FB’s *Instant Articles*, and the publishers’ websites second.
How do SM analytics impact on News?

• Social media users are more intensely commodified than legacy audiences: their attention to information; social activities surrounding it; and their evaluative responses to it generate exchange value

• First, data about their individual attention to news consumption and their movements through news environments is on-sold

• Second, users are also coopted into visible regimes of referral and evaluation – liking, favouriting, retweeting and quoting
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<td>YESSSS! Arsenal - FA Cup winners 2015!</td>
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**Sun Gazing's post**

Full Strawberry Moon: June 2, 2015 Please Share

7 hours ago by Sun Gazing

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**KHOU 11 News uploaded a new video.**

Here's a look inside Minute Maid Park right now. Radars: Harris County - http://on.khou.com/1Hl9tu2 Montgomery County - http://on.khou.com/1HHzCjy Fort Bend

8 hours ago by KHOU 11 News

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**Higher Perspective with القيسي د. هيئنم**

Full Strawberry Moon – June 2nd, 2015 Spread the word so everyone can enjoy!

11 hours ago by Higher Perspective
CNN Breaking News - @cnnbrk
Breaking news from reporters and editors on the CNN Digital news team. Now 27M strong. Check @cnn for all things CNN, breaking and more.

Bleacher Report - @BleacherReport
#TeamStream

FC Barcelona - @FCBarcelona
Official account. Also follow us at @fcbarcelona_cat, @fcbarcelona_es, @fcbarcelona_br, @fcbarcelona_jap @fcbarcelona_id, @fcbarcelona_ara, @fcbarcelona_fra

Max Retweets
CNN Breaking News - 3,038
Bleacher Report - 2,633
FC Barcelona - 2,478
The Likeable Engine (LE)
Top 10 most-shared articles

- 6 signs you need to slow down
- Graham Lowe: Townsend for NSW
- Son of the Vice President and an Ex-Delaware Attorney General
- Prince Jackson I Graduated With High Distinction
- 'I informed him we are a breastfeeding-friendly establishment' Owner cheered after picky patron complained about mum nursing her newborn... and she asked HIM to leave
- 92-Year-Old Seeks to Become Oldest Woman to Finish Marathon 12 minutes ago
- NFL player Devon Still asks for prayers for his sick daughter
- 13 Ways To Deal With Hot, Sweaty Thighs During Summer
- Elizabeth Smart Is a Mom! Ed Smart Confirms She Gave Birth in February
- Adam Levine gets naked for new Maroon 5 video: Music 1 hour ago
The Likeable Engine - uses

• **Content filter** – identifies strong sharing and pre-viral content; potential new angles & reaction stories

• **Temporality filter** – suggests significance via social velocity; times when stories share better

• **Audience filter** – do stories share better on FB or Twitter, or on different publications in same stable

• **Competition monitoring** – who’s getting most attention on similar coverage?

• **Version performance tracker** – how are rewrites performing?
• Impact calculated relative to **rate of sharing**. More shares more quickly indicates greater intensity of interest = > impact.

• **Timeliness**: need to ensure sharing is optimised determines timing of content posting

• **Relevance**: sharing on specific platforms (FB/TW) indicates target audience

• **Shareable** items sit on either end of the spectrum: must be either novel e.g. from small publishers, not widely viewed or shared (and otherwise newsworthy) or ubiquitous & talked about (#dressgate)

• **Conflict**: focus on the controversial or polemic (what divides people)
Dark Referrals

- Atlantic magazine - ‘dark social traffic’ (2012). They were using the term to describe traffic that had been stripped of referrer data (metadata)
- This traffic is essentially invisible to most analytics programs
- Without the referrer metadata, news organisations ‘lose sight’ of where the people viewing their news stories are coming from: be it from email, IM or some mobile apps
- ‘Dark referrals’: they’re not on the radar and they tend to undermine any claims to hegemonic understanding of algorithmic power
- News is widely shared by emails, SMS, Twitter and now non-Western new media like Weibo, Line, Kakaotalk may escape detection too
The Guardian’s Problem

• *The Guardian* had a problem of ‘dark referrals’ and it’s social media traffic in late 2014.
• It was reported that a ‘massive chunk of The Guardian’s readers have become invisible’
• Unable to show advertisers who the readers were and where they come from.
• *The Guardian’s* problem was one of ‘lost’ mobile news distribution.
The brown area indicates an explosion of 'dark traffic' in an individual Guardian story. Its origin is a mystery.
The quantification of the news audience commodity has shifted focus from exposure to attention and engagement

Social media analytics, with its cooption of users in the work of news discovery and sharing represents a complex and imminent problem for critical media studies

The difficulty is in analyzing how audience data is generated, and what and whom it might represent – and what it means for commodification of capitalist news provision and thus news values
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• #sharewars