NEWS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR

Información de actualidad y redes sociales: comportamiento de las audiencias

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Abstract

Based on a quantitative approach, this paper presents some of the preliminary results of a research project focused on the analysis of the motivations that encourage citizens to actively participate in online news media, using the mechanisms provided by their websites, and through open social network platforms. The findings show that, although there is a widespread discourse of distrust in connection to journalists and the traditional media institutions, as well as general criticism of the actual practices of journalists, the common understanding of the participatory dimension of the media does not entail discourses of change or modification of the existing hegemony. Instead of turning to alternative sources, such as citizen journalism or non-traditional media, or taking the lead by creating their own content, citizens prefer to continue to respect journalism as a profession and the traditional media institutions as the main producers of news as well as the most trusted sources of information. Furthermore, although in previous studies audience participation “in” the media has been highlighted, the findings of this research show that the practice of user recommendation or dissemination of media content through social networks has been adopted by a large number of citizens.

Keywords

Participatory journalism; Active audiences; UGC; Online journalism; Social networks; Surveys.

1. Introduction

Symbolic power, as Thompson defined it (1985), is no longer exclusively a media monopoly thanks to the advent of web 2.0, social networks, and active audiences. The participatory potential of new media enables citizen generated content to be produced and disseminated. This development has led to the frequent prediction of the demise of traditional media (Negroponte, 1995; Sabadin, 2007; Nerone, 2009) and a deluge of what is referred to as citizen journalism (Gilmor, 2007; Rosen, 2006). Other authors envisage hybrid scenarios, based on co-operation between professional and citizen journalists (Bruns, 2005).
Over and above the discussion about a future without professional journalists or the media, the fact is that in a little less than a decade professional journalists have sought to turn the audience into more than just readers. The public are invited to share their views—even though they are not always listened to (Masip; Micó, 2010)—and encouraged to develop and contribute their own content (Guallar, 2007). The new relationship between media and audiences, despite having been driven by the newspaper companies, was received with an ambivalent attitude by journalists (Chung, 2007; Domingo et al., 2008; Singer, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Wardle; Williams, 2010). Aware of the enormous potential of audience participation, particularly as a source, journalists gladly welcomed comments, although sometimes bemoaned the tone used, and opened the doors to citizens to send in their material. Journalists were aware that, with unplanned news, journalists would always be the last ones on the spot and that the images captured by witnesses added immediacy, spontaneity, authenticity, and proximity. On the other hand, journalists have been critical of any initiative that could compromise their gatekeeper role or bring changes to their routines and pre-existing values (Harrison, 2010; O’Sullivan; Heinonen, 2008; Quandt, 2008; Wardle; Williams, 2010; Williams et al., 2010).

Despite the potential professionals offer for journalism, the prevalence of participatory mechanisms is mainly due to economic motivations (Singh et al., 2011; Vujićević et al., 2010; Rosenstiel; Michell, 2011; Becker; Clement; Schae del, 2010). The participation of citizens “in” and “through” the media (Carpentier, 2011) is conceived as a strategy to generate traffic, attract visitors and, as far as possible, build their loyalty. In contrast, academic discourse tends to study the phenomenon of participation from a regulatory perspective, linked to the democratic role of the media, taking for granted the audience’s desire to participate and criticizing the lack of enthusiasm of most media and journalists in implementing formats that enable the public to participate more directly in news content (Borger et al., 2013).

As noted above, social networks have often been perceived as a way to challenge the hegemony of the media because they channel participation from media-controlled platforms to open ones. However, at the same time social networks have also materialized as an interesting tool for the media, given that they enable dissemination of content, encourage interaction, and are cheap.

Certainly, social media, together with blogs, facilitate the proliferation of voices, which are often ignored by the media (Lowrey, 2006; Domingo; Heinonen, 2008). However, research shows that social media have not altered the essence of professional practice. Bloggers who are not journalists are reluctant to define themselves as agents of change in journalism or in competition with journalists (Mattheson, 2004). And when they seek to become established as authors online, they replicate the routines of the profession, rather than creating new ones (Lowrey; Latta, 2008).

Researchers have given great attention to exploring the use of social networks in journalistic practice (Hermida; Thurman, 2008; García-Torres et al., 2011; Herrera-Damas, 2013; Palomo, 2014; Palomo; Meso, 2014). However, there is little information regarding the public’s attitude towards the participatory options and the use of social networks as a source of news. Many of the studies that have focused on the audience were limited to describing their usage preferences (Boczkowski; Mitchelstein, 2013. Haise et al. (2013) took a more comprehensive approach, comparing the attitude of journalists and audiences in relation to participation and motivation to participate. While there is consensus between the two groups on the role of journalists and participation, the differences are more significant with reference to motivation. Journalists attribute audience participation to emotional motivations and self-interest, whereas users stress that they take part to develop their knowledge and to contribute topics of interest to them.

The use of social networks is associated with friends and relationships, however, the second most popular activity in social networks is accessing news.

2. Objectives and methodology

This article is part of a broader research project1 with the general objective to study audience’s attitudes to digital media who interact through the participatory mechanisms made available to them by news companies—these attitudes, their motivations, their habits, and the content they produce. In this context, it also aims to determine which media, in the public’s opinion, best achieve the democratic function assigned to the media, and the media role in a networked society in which any member of the public is a potential source of news.

This general objective has been subdivided into five specific objectives, which relate to the study of: a) access to news through social networks; b) digital media as a source of news; c) audience participation as a counterweight to the media; d) the relationship between participation and credibility; and e) the relationship between the media, pluralism, and democracy. This article sets out the findings that relate to the first of these specific objectives—that of access to news through social networks.

To meet the objectives described, in this research a dual approach to the subject matter was selected, both quantitative and qualitative. This article only presents the findings of the quantitative approach based on a panel conducted in cooperation with the Association for Media Research (AIMC). The qualitative approach was subsequently implemented by bringing together twelve focus groups, which are currently being analysed.

Therefore, the quantitative study was developed through an agreement with AIMC, a consortium created in 1988 by media companies and advertisers to measure and monitor audience ratings. This cooperation allowed, firstly, questions related to this research project to be included on the
questionnaire used by the AIMC in its 2013 study on internet users, Navegantes en la Red, and secondly, the creation of the panel which is the subject of this article.

The panel consisted of 591 individuals who were interviewed by the AIMC team between December 2013 and February 2014. Participants answered a questionnaire including 67 questions, which had previously been discussed with the AIMC technical committee to ensure that it met the pre-requisites for the methodological tools used. To select the sample, a multi-stage, stratified random sample procedure was employed, guaranteeing the representativeness of the sample for the internet user population (all over 14 years old).

The questions used pursued a general aim of obtaining detailed information on online news consumption habits, understanding the motivations leading citizens to participate in social networks and through participatory mechanisms in digital media, and learning about the role they ascribe to their involvement in the operation of the media. The 67 questions were grouped into the five major areas described above and this article is based on data from the first major area.

3. Findings

In the Internet era, television is still the most popular news medium for Spaniards, cited by 56.8% of the population (CIS, 2013). However, the Internet plays an increasingly larger role in citizens’ news experience. The Navegantes en la Red study (AIMC, 2014), more than half of Internet users, 66.4%, consider the Internet to be a key source of information, and 29.1% consider it a secondary but important source. The percentages of individuals for whom the Internet is not an important source of information or who simply never use it are extremely low, 3.0 and 1.2%, respectively.

The data from Navegantes en la Red, supported by our panel, confirm that social networks have penetrated very significantly in Spaniards’ use of the Internet. 74.2% of Internet users use social networks daily and 11.6% at least once a week, which is a higher percentage than those who have never used them. We set out below the results of the panel carried out in our study.

### Use of social networks

In line with the trend observed in other countries (Newman; Levy, 2014), the most popular social networks are Facebook, used by 91% of Internet users, and secondly, although quite a long way behind, Twitter, used by 39.8%. The next most popular are LinkedIn (19.4%), Google+ (17.3%) and Instagram (13.6%).

Having confirmed the widespread use of social networks by the Spanish population, it is of interest to learn, from the point of view of the objectives of this study, how big a role they have in accessing news. To do so, several questions were posed to the individuals who reported being users of either of the two biggest social networks, Facebook or Twitter.

First, respondents were asked what they used social networks for (table 1). It was found that the leading use is relationships with friends and acquaintances (88.1%), but after this, it is striking that the second principal use is to access news (48.1%). This confirms that in the new social media world, citizens still have the same need to access news content, or at least half of users state that they use social networks for this purpose.

The data from the survey highlight the dual role of social media users with regard to news: as consumers and as recommenders.

### Social networks and news

In terms of how users access news on social networks, friends are the principal channel, 81.2% of users receiving news recommendations from friends. In second place is the media, almost half of users (47.5%) stating that the media recommended the news items (table 2).

The findings are consistent with the fact that more than half of social network users state that they “follow” at least one news medium, and, in addition, 30.2% follow at least one individual journalist (table 3). The first figure highlights the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. What do you use social networks for?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships with friends / acquaintances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data weighted by the AIMC, in thousands. Percentages do not add up to 100 because more than one answer could be given.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Source of the news received through social networks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations, NGOs...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data weighted by the AIMC, in thousands. Percentages do not add up to 100 because more than one answer could be given.
The findings confirm the importance of news on social networks. However, different patterns of behavior are observed, depending on whether news is received or shared. For the sharing of news, significant differences were detected, confirming that users are not as active as certain authors have maintained (Bruns, 2005), but are still a significant minority.

Various studies confirm there is a significant minority of users who actively participate in the news reporting process, providing information to journalists, commenting on news and redistributing it on social networks, for example, 37% of internet users in the US (Purcell et al., 2010). In fact, users are more likely to respond to another’s contribution than contribute original ideas.

The recommendation and receipt of news is complemented by another illustrative indicator, the percentage of users who read the news they receive. In this case, it is noteworthy that 59% of users state they usually read it and 22.7% occasionally (table 7). These figures contradict the supposition that audiences read little of the content shared or received from other Internet users.

The responses to the question on the news topics accessed from other Internet users confirm that users are not as active as certain authors have maintained (Bruns, 2005), but are still a significant minority.
Tables 8 and 9 show the news topics shared through social networks and the source of the news received through social networks, respectively.

Table 8. News topics shared through social networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local news</td>
<td>15,048</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local political news</td>
<td>8,517</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National political news</td>
<td>12,172</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International news</td>
<td>8,185</td>
<td>34.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>7,592</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>8,133</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and medicine</td>
<td>7,323</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>5,439</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and technology</td>
<td>6,317</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>1,009</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>10,203</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>8,976</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity news</td>
<td>2,880</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2,383</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data weighted by the AIMC, in thousands. Percentages do not add up to 100 because more than one answer could be given.

Table 9. Source of the news received through social networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media usually consulted</td>
<td>18,637</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media not usually consulted</td>
<td>6,281</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media with different ideological posi-</td>
<td>1,741</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tions to the user's own</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data weighted by the AIMC, in thousands. Percentages do not add up to 100 because more than one answer could be given.

Social networks are part of the digital menu of Spanish Internet users. Over 74% of regular Internet users had accessed social networks the previous day (AIMC, 2014). Following the trend in other countries, Facebook has become the dominant social network, followed a long way behind by Twitter.

As expected, the use of social networks is associated with friends and relationships, however, significantly, the second most popular activity in social networks is accessing news. The media, although often criticised, still play an important role, since more than half of users follow at least one news medium through social networks and almost a third follow a journalist.

As a result of the homogenisation of content (Boczkowski, 2010) the media brand loses importance. Readers obtain news through search engines and now also through social networks. The important thing is what is said, not who says it or how they say it, therefore the brand ceases to be crucial. This, along with the credibility problems suffered by the media, might lead one to think that the media and journalists would lose importance online. However, in fact that is not the direction things are developing in. Citizens rely more on professional journalists than on what non-professional citizen journalists can produce. Professional journalists, whilst criticised, are recognised as a fundamental institution of democratic systems and have a known affiliation, which is not the case of citizen journalists. As a result, a significant proportion of the public follow individual journalists who build a personal brand necessarily based on their professionalism and credibility.

The data from the survey highlight the dual role of social network users with regard to news: as consumers and as recommenders. 81% of the news items received through social networks come from “friends”. Here we have a paradox, as the journalist is no longer the sole gatekeeper. Although journalists cling to this function, it is apparent they are progressively giving way to new players. The public become what Singer (2013) calls secondary gatekeepers. Even though initially it is the media who determine the news content, in practice it is the public who with a “like” or tweet define the interest of a piece of news.
Despite the pessimism that sometimes pervades discussions on the future of journalism, encouraging trends can be drawn from our findings. In the era of web 2.0, participation and social networks, citizens continue to demand news. People want information, they want to be informed, especially in matters of public interest, and they share the information they consider to be relevant or interesting.

What has changed is the means of accessing the news and the way of relating to it, which is no longer a unidirectional flow. Although the media still retain a central role, other players such as search engines and social networks are becoming increasingly important. The information reaches us, therefore, through multiple channels and the public are empowered by determining what will be treated as news and what will not. In addition, the data from this study draw attention to audiences’ limited desire to participate. While traditionally a greater value has been given to the participation of citizens “in” the media (Carpentier, 2011) through forms which have a limited take-up by the audience such as the creation of news content, the practices of recommendation or dissemination of content previously produced by the media are being adopted by a greater number of citizens. They involve a lower participatory intensity, but have the potential to impact more heavily on the political and media agenda. The citizen is no longer subject to the passive consumer-active producer dichotomy, and in the new media environment intermediary roles and low-intensity participatory practices assume greater importance.

Social networks instigate access to news media that are not part of their regular news diet and even from ideologically opposed media.

Notes
1. This work is part of a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Ref.: CSO2012-39518-C04-01
2. The findings set out in this article are original and have never been published. The tables show data from surveys conducted for this research according to the AIMC Q Panel methodology. The data have been weighted by the AIMC in thousands; for example, in the first question in table 1, the estimation of users who use the internet to interact with their friends and acquaintances is 19,645,000 people, representing 88.1% of the Spanish population of internet users over 14.

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