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RANDOM ACTS OF GATEWATCHING

Everyday Newssharing Practices

"All media carry the same major events, but Twitter continues to be the pre-ferred medium for breaking news, almost consistently leading Facebook" (Os-borne and Dredze 2014: 611). In Chapter 3 we have already explored the role that the hashtag as a coordinating mechanism for the exchange of news and information, and as a rallying point for *ad hoc* publics (Bruns and Burgess 2015), plays on *Twitter* once an acute event has been recognised as breaking news. However, even before hashtags emerge to name and frame an event that has just occurred, the first reports from eyewitnesses and others about the event will already be circulating through the Twittersphere: the network composed of all follower/followee connections between *Twitter* accounts. To follow another user means in the first place to see the user's tweets show up in one's own timeline, and the centrality of this relationship logic to the platform means that for almost all users "it is impossible … to be on Twitter and not to be aware of other residents of this virtual place" (Gruzd *et al.* 2011: 1298). By continually monitoring one's timeline it is therefore possible to remain aware of the activities and interests of the accounts one follows, and the informa-tion gatewatching choices made by those accounts determine the view of the world that the user is exposed to. This is not necessarily limited to *Twitter*, of course, but the specific structural settings of the *Twitter* platform mean that

users may easily follow a wider and more diverse range of other accounts, from world leaders and celebrities to friends and family, and that they may therefore encounter a broader and more multiperspectival selection of news and information than they do on *Facebook* and other social media platforms.

As Crawford points out, therefore, "social media powerfully invoke an efficient listening subject" (2009: 526), following the communicative contributions of others. Such listening to the conversations about the news events, issues, and topics that are reintermediated by social media, even if it does not result in a user posting their own views about the event, is a fundamental prerequisite for any more active engagement; "it is an embedded part of networked engagement—a necessary corollary to having a 'voice'" (2009: 527). Social media users have been shown to value such listening to the ambient news feeds provided by social media to an increasing extent; as the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* of 2015 points out, for instance, users under 35 years of age find "social media … particularly valuable for alerting [them] to stories they didn't know about" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 53; also see Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2014: 636). Such discovery of unknown and unexpected information, driven by the gatewatching choices made by the various accounts that are followed by a given user, may in fact be especially important as a means to counteract fears about the narrowing of information flows to a handful of major sources in the current news environment: "serendipitous news discovery … is essential to forming public opinion and creating informed consensus and stable cohesion around public policy that makes governing possible" (Purcell *et al.* 2010: 29). It is notable that from this perspective, the collective processes of information amplification through gatewatching on social media supplement or supplant the journalist's "occupational role as gatekeeper" which had similarly been seen as "vital to a properly informed electorate" (Singer 2015: 85).

But it is not only ordinary social media users who are able to use these platforms to maintain an ambient awareness of the news, of course: for journalists, too, they provide "more complex ways of understanding and reporting on the subtleties of public communication" (Hermida 2010b: 301). Journalists might take a more strategic approach to using social media by employing *Twitter* and other platforms to keep an eye on current developments in the world; to do so they would need to follow a range of accounts that are relevant to their news beat, and regularly monitor the information posted by these accounts. Hermida describes this approach as "ambient journalism", which "frames Twitter as a social awareness system that delivers a fragmented mix of

information, enlightenment, entertainment, and engagement from a range of sources" and which is used for the explicit purpose of utilising that information as input to journalistic reporting (Hermida *et al.* 2014: 482).

Such ambient journalism potential is also available to ordinary users seeking to engage as para- or citizen journalists, however: "ambient journalism concerns the collection, selection, and dissemination of news by both professional [journalists] and non-professional para-journalists, where users undertake some of the institutional tasks commonly associated with the journalist" (Hermida 2014: 361); because all of these activities are taking place in the shared space of the social media platform, professional and citizen journalists are operating side by side here and cannot necessarily draw on any fundamental competitive advantage that stems from their institutional positioning. "Users become part of the flow of news, reframing or reinterpreting a message through networked platforms that extend the dissemination of news through social interaction, introducing hybridity in news production and news values" (Hermida 2014: 361). This selective gatewatching and redistribution of specific content can therefore be described as "always-on or ambient framing", as Meraz and Papacharissi (2013: 146) put it.

This, then, is the foundation for Hermida's description of *Twitter* (and, by extension, of other, similar social media platforms) as "awareness systems that offer diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information in the periphery of a user's awareness" (2010a: n.p.). He notes that "these systems are always-on and move from the background to the foreground as and when a user feels the need to communicate" (2010b: 301)—or, we might add, the need to listen in to what everyone else is currently talking about—and they are therefore also "ambient", in the sense that they are always available, but not necessarily always at the centre of a user's attention. As Crawford points out, "listening … captures the experience that many Internet users have. It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and disclosing online; both are necessary and both are forms of participation" (2009: 527). Arguably, the practice of gatewatching describes specifically the pivot point between listening and posting: from the perspective of the individual participant, when the news stories circulating through social media advance beyond a merely ambient state and—through repetition by other users—become visible and important enough to draw the user's attention, gatewatching takes place, and the user is now confronted with the opportunity to make their own contribution, either by simply resharing an existing message or by posting an original message of their own.

As hundreds or thousands of social media users individually make this decision in the context of the same event, issue, or topic, they are also increasingly likely to become aware of and be influenced by each other's decisions, of course. As a result,

> larger, looser groups can now take … some kinds of coordinated action … that were previously reserved for formal organizations. … One of the main forms of coordination is what the military calls "shared awareness," the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too. Social media increase shared awareness by propagating messages through social networks. (Şen 2012: 493)

As such shared awareness of an issue, and of the participants' collective reaction to and engagement in the issue emerges, in fact, the group gradually transforms into a public in the true sense of that term.

The social media publics that are generated through these dynamics are therefore not constituted by members who each have encountered exactly the same identical collection of information; in this they are unlike the publics for conventional media texts (a newspaper, a television broadcast, a book, a movie); rather, they share a general awareness of the unfolding events, but the specific details that they have encountered differ. This imperfect degree of awareness may appear problematic when compared to the ideal picture of a media public that is fully informed, but as Hermida points out, for social media "completeness of awareness is not the goal …. Instead of overwhelming an individual with an endless stream of tweets, Twitter as an always-on, asynchronous awareness system informs but does not overburden" (Hermida 2010b: 303). At the same time, it is also important to point out that even in conventional media complete awareness is nothing more than an unachievable ideal: the widely differing levels of attention paid to the news media by individual citizens also mean that different individuals will be more or less fully aware of current news events and issues. The use of social media as news sources simply results in a different distribution of news knowledge across the wider public, and in different dynamics of information dissemination, but not inherently and inevitably in worse (or better) levels of awareness. Indeed, more research is still necessary to explore "the extent to which such systems of ambient journalism allow citizens to maintain an awareness of the news events", as Hermida points out (2010b: 303).

From Acute Events to Everyday Engagement

In the previous chapter, we encountered the emerging patterns of news consumption that are now commonly established in the context of acute news events, when potentially large publics accumulate around major breaking news stories—and we saw how such events are now often driven on social media platforms both by the immediate eyewitness reporting that accidental bystanders engage in, and by the collective curation efforts of diverse communities of social media users, including some journalists, who are potentially more distant from the scene of the events. We have even encountered the phenomenon of secondary eyewitnessing, where users are re-sharing screenshots of mainstream media reporting through social media; this demonstrates the deep and complex interlinkages between social and mainstream media that exist in our contemporary, hybrid mediasphere.

But self-evidently, news engagement is not limited to the context of major breaking news stories, in social media any more than in the conventional mainstream media. Hermida's idea of ambient news imagines social media as an always-on background murmur of news updates, and demands greater user attention and engagement when acute event information begins to circulate at ever higher volumes and thus pushes into the foreground. But so far we have focussed on what happens after this move from ambient to acute, after what Lehmann *et al.* (2013b) call "transient news crowds" accumulate around the hashtags associated with breaking news stories from terrorist attacks to television awards. Arguably, such acute events have also been studied in considerably greater detail by existing research—we understand better how social media contribute to the circulation and evaluation of the news when stories are no longer ambient than how they are being used in news-related contexts before that point. This chapter therefore addresses this second question, and examines everyday newssharing and news engagement practices.

By analogy with physics, we might say that the study of social media news practices during acute events observes these platforms in their excited state, when there is enough energy in the system to reduce the barriers that resist the rapid flow of information. In their ordinary, ambient mode, on the other hand, social media exist in their ground state, where the mechanisms that can rapidly connect *ad hoc* publics (such as *Twitter*'s hashtags functionality, for instance) are used less prominently, and less effectively, and other, more fundamental platform features play a considerably more important role in determining how news and information flow across the network. During such

times, "a major and most convenient usage pattern is to read only content from people the user has selected to follow" (Himelboim *et al.* 2013: 158), and exposure to the news "is based on foraging and opportunism. [Users] seem to access news when the spirit moves them or they have a chance to check up on headlines" (Purcell *et al.* 2010: 2).

In contrast to the context of breaking news, where *Twitter* is widely recognised as playing a particularly prominent role—due especially to its flat and public network structures, and the importance of its hashtags in rapidly providing a rallying point for interested news followers—in everyday newssharing both *Facebook* and *Twitter*, along with a range of other social media platforms, are both relevant platforms; given its vastly larger userbase *Facebook* may in fact be considered to be the most important network here. However, "choosing to follow news organizations, reporters or commentators … is more common on Twitter (46% of users) than Facebook (28%)" (Pew Research Center 2015: 14), and this means that *Twitter* users are more likely than their *Facebook* counterparts to come across news reports on a number of key topics (Pew Research Center 2015: 3). As a result, *Twitter* is "seen much more as an active destination for news by an audience that is deeply interested in latest developments" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 14); or as Ju *et al.* put it somewhat more succinctly, "Twitter is more newsful" (2014: 12). Yet in spite of these differences, even the less 'newsful' *Facebook* still reaches—and engages—a vast population, especially in its key markets: "Facebook is by far the largest social networking site, reaching 67% of U.S. adults. The two-thirds of Facebook users who get news there … amount to 44% of the general population" (Gottfried and Shearer 2016: 4). There is also considerable overlap between the two, of course: in 2015, "one-in-five Facebook news users also get news on Twitter, and fully 78% of the smaller population of Twitter news users also get news on Facebook" (Pew Research Center 2015: 6).

In each of these platforms, everyday engagement with the news begins with an individual user's choice to share a news item (of whatever provenance) with their network connections; this in itself is an act of gatewatching as we have defined it in Chapter 2, of course, and in itself is not dissimilar to the gatewatching choices made by news bloggers and citizen journalists during the first wave of citizen media. The initial contributor's connections (the gatewatcher's *Facebook* friends or *Twitter* followers) may in turn decide to engage further with the news item, for instance by liking, sharing, or commenting on it in the *Facebook* environment, by retweeting it on *Twitter*, or also by crossposting it from here into another social network altogether. Each

of these actions distributes the news item horizontally, making it available to a new set of network connections that are different from the first user's, and thereby increasing the reach of the initial news story.

In addition to such horizontal sharing at what Bruns & Moe (2014) have described as the meso-level of the social network—made up of the individual, overlapping friend and follower networks that surround each social media account, which in their totality constitute the network's social graph—subsequent newssharers may also decide to share the news item in a more vertical direction, either by decreasing its visibility and circulating it less publicly through direct messages, @replies, personal chats, or closed groups (the micro-level of the network), or by increasing its reach with the addition of a prominent hashtag or the posting on a public page (the macro-level). Such choices are made on an individual basis by each subsequent sharer (but are potentially also influenced by the choices of others that are already visible in the sharer's network), and the range of options available here demonstrates that such "networked digital media technologies are extending the ability of news consumers to both create and receive personalized social news streams" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 821).

The material being shared here is inherently diverse; each act of sharing is the result of an individual user's decision about what information triggers their personal interest, and what they think may also be of interest to their network connections. For the most part, such interests are unlikely to relate only to the issues addressed by breaking news stories or trending topics; instead, they will represent the whole gamut of social media users' personal and professional information practices. Many such practices may address niche interests that are unlikely to attract a wide audience; as a result, Chadwick notes, they may "have previously fallen beneath the radar of studies of news, in both old and new media environments" (2011: 8).

Indeed, as Purcell *et al.* report from a U.S.-based study, news has always had a social dimension:

> getting news is often an important social act. Some 72% of American news consumers say they follow the news because they enjoy talking with others about what is happening in the world and 69% say keeping up with the news is a social or civic obligation. And 50% of American news consumers say they rely to some degree on people around them to tell them the news they need to know. (Purcell *et al.* 2010: 4)

In light of such attitudes, it is no surprise that everyday newssharing on social media is now a major practice in its own right. "The overall ubiquity of social

media means that they are not just something people 'visit' on occasion in order to seek something special, [but that] they form increasingly a central terrain of our daily lives" (Dahlgren 2014: 196); if news engagement is already inherently social, and if important elements of our day-to-day social activities are shifting to social media, social media must thus necessarily become important platforms for the everyday engagement with the news.

There is growing empirical evidence, therefore, that social media "sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 821). The Reuters Institute's annual *Digital News Report* for 2015, for instance, reports "a sharp increase in the use of social media for finding, sharing, and discussing the news" (Pew Research Center 2015: 5), and another study from the same year reports that "nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults who use Twitter get news on the platform" (Barthel and Shearer 2015: n.p.). Some such sharing activities already look back on a long history in previous more or less social media channels, in fact—for instance, one 2010 study found that "more than 8 in 10 online news consumers get or share links in emails" (Purcell *et al.* 2010: 2)—, but the widespread adoption of the current generation of social media platforms has turned such newssharing into a more visible and more communal practice.

The impact of these shifts has been profound, for users themselves as well as for the news outlets and other sources whose news they share. In 2012, for instance, Newman *et al.* reported that "the raw numbers" of users coming to news sites as a result of social media sharing "are still relatively low compared to traffic driven by search" (2012: 11); by 2015, however, the picture had shifted considerably: "social media traffic has grown significantly in the past year and for some publishers has become more important than search" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 15). This is a remarkable turnaround, given the significant and growing influence over Web users' information access practices that search engines had enjoyed for most of the new millennium: "if searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next" (Olmstead *et al.* 2011: 10).

These patterns appear to be repeated in many developed and developing nations. For instance, U.K. "traffic to the BBC from Facebook and Twitter has more than tripled between 2009 and 2011" (Newman *et al.* 2012: 10); in 2012, "two out of five Canadians … who use social networking sites said they received news and information on a daily basis from family, friends and acquaintances they follow on social networks" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 818); in 2014, Dutch users "check (46 percent), share (30 percent), and discuss (27 percent) news"

on *Twitter* (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2014: 637); and in 2015, "clear majorities of Twitter (63%) and Facebook users (63%)" in the United States "now say each platform serves as a source for news about events and issues outside the realm of friends and family" (Pew Research Center 2015: 2). Recent years have seen especially significant growth in these numbers; in the U.S., between 2013 and 2015

> the rise in the share of social media users getting news on Facebook or Twitter cuts across nearly every demographic group. Use of Twitter for news, for example, grew among both users under 35 (55% to 67%) and those ages 35 and older (47% to 59%). And on Facebook, news use grew among both men (44% to 61%) and women (49% to 65%). (Pew Research Center 2015: 3)

At the time of writing, the multi-national *Digital News Report* for 2016, produced by the Oxford-based Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, offers the most comprehensive overview of current social media news engagement practices. It reports that over half of the Internet users across its 26-country representative survey "say they use social media as a source of news each week"; perhaps even more remarkably, "around one in ten (12%) say it is their main source" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 8a). The latter percentage is even greater in countries such as in Australia (18%) and Greece (27%) (Newman *et al.* 2016: 9), perhaps because of the comparative lack of diversity in the two countries' respective mainstream news media markets.

It should also be noted in this context that responses to questions about the role of social media as news sources may indeed still underestimate the extent to which social media serve as conduits to the news. As the 2015 *Digital News Report* pointed out, "social media are not seen as a destination for accurate and reliable journalism but more as a way of getting access to it" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 11); a better question to ask, therefore—and one that could result in even higher results—is "how many people actually use social media … to find news?" (Nielsen and Schrøder 2014: 483).

Random, Serendipitous, Habitual News Engagement

The sharing of news, by users and for users, is an important element here. News reports are increasingly also posted on social media by the official accounts of news outlets and journalists, of course, "and while news media ac-

counts [make] up a relatively small proportion of the accounts a Twitter user … follow[s], tweets from this type of account [make] up a significant portion of a user's feed" (Barthel and Shearer 2015: n.p.)—but it is the on-sharing of such posts by ordinary users' accounts that considerably amplifies their reach across the social network.

Indeed, there may well be a kind of trajectory from following to sharing here: as the *Digital News Report 2016* notes, "most of those [who] have recently started using social media as a source of news are doing so as passive consumers" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 99), yet to advance from here to active on-sharing requires little more than the click of a 'share' or 'retweet' button, as we noted in the previous chapter. Compared to previous forms of newssharing—from sharing news via email to news blogging, both of which required the user to author a new post from scratch—the move to such on-sharing is a considerably smaller step to make. From this perspective, then, "the act of news sharing can be described as a new phenomenon that lies somewhere in between news creation and news reception" (Trilling *et al.* 2016: 2).

Indeed, we might well consider such low-involvement forms of on-sharing, which simply pass on an existing post from a more active contributor (perhaps from an official, institutional account), as akin to the "random acts of journalism" that JD Lasica had envisaged in 2003: representing a gatewatching decision that is internal to the social media platform and affects the likelihood that the on-sharing user's followers will encounter a given piece of news, each individual act of on-sharing may indeed be relatively random, and is likely to be affected by the user's current levels of attention, distraction, or boredom as much as by their long-term commitment to the news topic. Nonetheless, they do directly affect the public circulation of journalistic content, in the sense envisaged by Lasica (2003).

This comparative randomness of the many acts of everyday gatewatching committed by social media users also results in a very different news media logic (Klinger and Svensson 2016) that applies on these platforms. "Twitter is very much a stream of many consciousnesses uttering messages" (Gruzd *et al.* 2011: 1303), but the same goes for *Facebook*: here, too, "news … is just something that happens", as one of the Pew Research Center's respondents put it (2013: 5); it "is a common but incidental experience" (1). *Facebook* and *Twitter* users may be active on these platforms for a wide range of reasons, few of which are to do predominantly with following the news or seeking out information on specific news events—but nonetheless on these platforms the news finds them, serendipitously, because of the work of news organisations,

journalists, and fellow social media users in posting and sharing news items. "The vast majority of Facebook news consumers, 78%, get news when they are on Facebook for other reasons" (Pew Research Center 2013: 1).

But even if the specific news items that users feel motivated enough to share remain somewhat random and unpredictable, the fact that many of them do indeed share news is anything but. More than half of the U.S.-based *Twitter* users in Barthel and Shearer's study for the Pew Research Center tweeted about news, for instance (Barthel and Shearer 2015: n.p.), with many of them opting especially for retweets of other users' posts. Researchers at the Reuters Institute have pursued this line of inquiry even further, to classify the news users in its representative multi-country study across three major categories:

> we define proactive participators as those [who] have made an original or public contribution to news coverage. Reactive participators are those [who] have contributed by disseminating existing news coverage or leaving feedback. Finally, passive consumers—who make up just under half (48%) of our whole sample—are those [who] do not actively participate in news coverage at all. (Newman *et al.* 2016: 100)

Using these categories, they find that during an average week, more than half of all users are actively engaged in sharing: fully 31% are classified as proactive sharers, and another 21% are reactive sharers (Newman *et al.* 2016: 101).

In light of these substantial percentages, it is somewhat surprising that the *Digital News Report 2016* authors themselves suggest that "sharing and commenting on the news is still largely the province of a small group of dedicated and highly motivated users" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 100), and that, in the previous year's report, they similarly accentuate the negative: "a quarter of us (25%) may comment about news online each week but three-quarters don't" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 84). Some longer-term historical perspective, as we have established it in the previous chapters, may be valuable here: the combined 52% of users who each week are proactive or reactive 'participators', in the Reuters Institute's terms, and even the 25% of weekly active news commenters seen in 2015, undoubtedly represent a vastly larger—and almost certainly also significantly more diverse—population of social media users committing random or not-so-random acts of journalism than the first wave of citizen media ever managed to attract.

Viewed in this way, then, we must conclude that the social media platforms of the current generation also represent a second wave of citizen media that has pervaded news engagement practices well beyond the acute, breaking news context: ambient, serendipitous, everyday news discovery, sharing, and

discussion, random though it may be, is now a fundamental practice within and across these sites. Further, the very serendipity of news discovery through social media platforms, and especially the social filtering which their networked structures offer, is seen by many users as a major advantage of this form of news engagement: "a significant number of social media users value their personal network as a way to filter the news, rather than solely relying on the professional judgment of a news organization or journalist" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 815–16).

In light of such developments, Newman suggests that "big media haven't just lost their monopoly of the creation of news; they are also in a fight to maintain their control of distribution, as social media offer alternative ways to find and discover news" (2011: 10). Yet at the same time the very random and serendipitous nature of news discovery that is prevalent in social media environments may also be criticised for resulting in a disorganised, chaotic, and downright incomprehensible mélange of unrelated news items all flowing through a given user's feed. From this perspective, the use of social media simply intensifies some of the problems already identified during the first wave of citizen media:

> citizen journalists may engage in news-making and news-use processes such as issue selecting, collecting, reporting, disseminating, and sharing for the purpose of informing others of knowledge and information; however, these processes are often unsystematic, as they lack widely agreed-upon principles and guidelines for practice. (Kim and Lowrey 2015: 300)

It is at this point that we must advance beyond the old idea of *random* acts of journalism. Much as during the first wave of citizen media, what individual users decide to select, share, and comment up on may be a matter of personal choice that will appear random to an outside observer—but the fact that all of these apparently random acts now take place within the standardised global networking environments of a handful of major social media platforms and not across a loose network of individual sites means that there is a much greater potential for common approaches to emerge. As Castells puts it, "in the new world of mass self-communication and highly segmented audiences, there are few instances of simultaneous mass sharing of media messages; instead, what is broadly shared is the culture of sharing messages from multiple senders-receivers" (2011: 780), and the universal technical infrastructure upon which that culture is built. Indeed, this is another dimension of what Hermida has described as the ambient "awareness system" of social media:

"broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on communication systems such as Twitter are enabling citizens to maintain a mental model of news and events around them" (2010b: 301), by observing the individual acts of news-sharing in aggregate.

If in the current social media environment it is therefore the case that the majority of users are engaged as both proactive and reactive newssharers; if the networked structure and ambient affordances of these platforms make it increasingly likely that users observe and learn from each other's sharing practices; if these practices in aggregate result in the potential for widespread serendipitous news discovery; and if such news discovery is now overtaking search engines as the major driver of traffic to leading mainstream news sites—then these processes can no longer be regarded as merely random. Instead, it is more appropriate to describe them instead as *habitual acts of newssharing*—and it becomes important to fully understand the typical motivations, practices, and consequences of habitual newssharing through social media platforms.

Newssharing

Newssharing of any form is in the first place a product of the sharers' interest in a given news topic; sharers "are people who tend to be passionate about subjects like politics, business, technology, or the environment. The super sharers tend to be heavy news users, often using multiple devices and a significant proportion use the smartphone as a main device" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 11). How users engage in such sharing is different from user to user, however: many users will simply pass on pointers to news articles on mainstream sites without engaging in substantial further commentary (Neuberger *et al.* 2010: 82), while Lehmann *et al.* suggest that

> there is a small but important group of users [who] devote a substantial amount of effort and care to this activity. These users monitor a large variety of sources on a topic or around a story, carefully select interesting material on this topic, and disseminate it to an interested audience ranging from thousands to millions. These users are *news curators*. (Lehmann *et al.* 2013a: 863)

But while the work of such 'super sharers' acting as news curators on social media platforms is clearly important and influential, at the same time we should not dismiss the less committed but nonetheless frequent activities of ordinary newssharers as inconsequential. The news content that ordinary us-

ers share may be seen in the first place only by their friends and followers—the "personal public" surrounding each account, as Schmidt (2014) describes it— but the sharing activities that occur in these individual publics overlap and build up to a widespread, aggregate, and powerful collective and communal judgment on what current news reports and media articles are interesting and important. In this sense, "personal publics are one of the most important characteristics of the social Web" (Schmidt 2014: 4), and Schmidt outlines three crucial aspects that govern how news and information circulates through the networks created by these publics:

> in personal publics, information is
>
> 1. Being selected and displayed according to criteria of personal relevance (rather than following journalistic news factors),
> 2. Being addressed to an audience which consists of network ties made explicit (rather than being broadcast to a dispersed, unknown mass audience), and finally, communication in personal publics is
> 3. Being conducted mainly in a conversational mode (rather than in the one-way mode of "publishing"). (Schmidt 2014: 4)

Motivations for Newssharing

Several recent studies have investigated why, how, and what social media users are sharing with their networks, and in combination their findings point again to the conclusion that these acts of gatewatching and newssharing are anything but random—that instead a range of widespread habits have become well established. Holton *et al.*, for instance, find "six motivations for posting links on Twitter: information sharing, interpersonal utility, passing time, convenience and entertainment, information seeking, and control and promoting work" (2014: 36); Kümpel *et al.* further suggest that "the motivations that drive [sharing] behavior … can be divided into self-serving motives, altruistic motives, and social motives" (2015: 6). Trilling *et al.*, finally, point out that the combination of these motivations for newssharing "does not result in some kind of unpredictable news flow in which only people's personal interests determine whether they share a news item or not. In contrast, characteristics inherent to the news items seem to be good predictors of sharing" (2016: 18). Against this, however, Thorsen and Wells also warn that the specific "logics of curation … are much less well understood than those of journalists, leaving a broad theoretical gap in our

understanding of the way message flows are shaped" (2015: 31); beyond the motivations and habits of individual newssharers it will therefore also be important to ask how such personal motives interact when they come in contact with each other.

A first motivation for newssharing is highly personal and self-serving (but may nonetheless also be beneficial to the sharer's personal public: to share a news story (and subsequently also to see that story be liked, re-shared, and commented upon by one's followers) provides the sharer with a sense of personal achievement and self-worth. "Although they are not the original sources of information, by breaking a news story to their contacts, these individuals may be viewed as sources by their networks and could receive important psychological benefits" (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015: 241). First experiences of such attainment may in fact lead the sharer to engage more frequently and consistently in newssharing activities—in other words, to develop a regular habit of sharing the news—in order to further develop their (actual or perceived) personal standing amongst their followers. From this perspective, "first of all, people share news to gain reputation (and/or followers), to draw people's attention, and thus to attain status among peers or other users" (Kümpel *et al.* 2015: 6). The fact that most current social media platforms provide the tools to quantify and track such personal status—by counting one's friends or followers, and by tracking the reach and engagement of one's posts—only encourages such activities further.

However, such newssharing for direct or indirect personal gain and gratification represents only one side of the picture, and it has been suggested instead that "information sharing—as the central altruistic motive—… seems to be one of the main drivers" of sharing practices (Kümpel *et al.* 2015: 6). As followers of the news with specific thematic and intellectual interests, in other words, most newssharers genuinely want their friends and followers to know more about the topics that exercise their own interests; they are not simply positioning themselves as sharers and curators of the news on particular issues for purely self-serving reasons, but because they think these issues are important. Studying the motivations of users who share news on *Facebook*, for instance, the Pew Research Center found that

> the most common reason why [they] post news links is to pass along information they
> think is important for people to know. A vast majority, 89%, indicates that this is a
> major reason why they post or share news. The next most common reason is to create

a discussion among friends around an issue or event (70%), closely followed by the desire to make a statement (67%). (Pew Research Center 2013: 16–17)

Such altruistic motivations are perhaps heightened by the explicitly social, networked nature of contemporary platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, compared to the more individualistic setup of citizen journalism sites and news blogs during the first wave of citizen media. Social media are standardised platforms containing networks, whereas the first wave of citizen media consisted of a loose network of diverse sites and platforms; social media therefore establish much tighter and more overt feedback loops between users, and in doing so also encourage expectations of greater reciprocity between users. As a result, there is therefore also a strong element of *do ut des* to the altruism of newssharers: they share interesting news content in order to encourage their network contacts to do likewise, thus improving the circulation of 'interesting' news items (as judged by some unspoken, shared criteria) across the overall network. As Holton *et al.* have found, therefore, "those who have a higher level of motivation for seeking information were more likely to post links on Twitter" (2014: 36).

The implications of this observation are fascinating, and point again to the enhanced *social* aspects of social media as one of the crucial differences between the first and second waves of citizen media. "Even in the seemingly simple act of posting a link on Twitter, users may be both relying on a web of trust and reciprocation and helping build that web for others" (Holton *et al.* 2014: 39). This is not to suggest that contributors to citizen journalism sites and news blogs in earlier phases were not also driven at least in part by altruistic motives, of course—but the web of interconnections and interactions between users was a great deal less formalised and explicit as it is in the platform spaces provided by *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and other social media, which meant that it was much easier even for meaningful individual contributions to be overlooked and ignored. In contemporary social media environments, by contrast, users with sufficient commitment to a given topic "may post links to spark conversations with followers or to find links to similar information. In other words, users may be both sharing and seeking information at the same time, facilitating a gathering and sorting of information" (Holton *et al.* 2014: 40) that may eventually result in concerted, collaborative efforts amongst larger groups and communities of users to curate such news and information.

This makes possible a relatively rapid progression from news usage to news produsage, "from traditional forms of news consumption to the productive use of information" (Picone 2011: 102), for individual social media users. As Papacharissi points out, many of the initial actions that social media users may take as they engage with news stories are simple and present negligible barriers that must be negotiated:

> the ambient, hybrid, and *prodused* practices of liking, retweeting, liveblogging, endorsing, and opining that are frequently blended into social reactions to news events are … liminal. They present personal and temporary content injections that play their own … part in turning a news event into a story. As such, they are inspired by the potential of what the *prodused* story might look like, however temporary the lasting effect of these subjective content interpolations may be. (Papacharissi 2014: 125)

Newssharing Practices

Initially, such liminal actions are simply about helping conventional news stories to circulate through social networks, and the major social media platforms have actively partnered with news providers to facilitate such sharing. For instance, "Facebook itself says that the average news organisation has increased referrals by 300 per cent in the year to June 2011, driven largely by the introduction of a simple sharing button (Facebook Like)" (Newman 2011: 15; cf. Zuckerberg in O'Connor 2009: n.p.). *Twitter* has implemented a similar on-site button for news providers, enabling users to share articles directly from news sites, and a variety of further third-party services offer such functionality across all major social media platforms. As a result, in many Web traffic analyses these "'share' tools that appear alongside most news stories rank among the most clicked-on links" through which users depart from news sites (Olmstead *et al.* 2011: 2). More recently, similar functionality has also been embedded at the operating system level into the content sharing tools offered by most smartphones and tablets, further encouraging the user-driven circulation of news and information through social media. "While these are technically clicks away from the site, they are positive clicks away, likely multiplying additional traffic to that story" (Olmstead *et al.* 2011: 18).

As a result of these developments, it can now be stated without fear of contradiction that in the contemporary mediasphere "news consumption is a socially-engaging and socially-driven activity, especially online. The public is clearly part of the news process now. Participation comes more through sharing than through contributing news themselves" (Purcell *et al.* 2010: 4). How-

ever, although in principle this may be seen as a step back from the ultimate 'become the media' ideals espoused by the original citizen journalists—what is circulated now is more likely to be mainstream media content, rather than the products of alternative sources—our observations in the previous chapter also point us to the conclusion that ordinary social media users are very well able to take yet further steps towards outright content production under the right circumstances, for instance: when they are caught up in breaking news events, and/or when an issue or topic becomes important enough for them to add their own views and comments rather than 'merely' passing on original content from somewhere else.

It becomes important in this context to take a dynamic rather than static perspective, and to consider what Wall describes as "the influence of *platform socialization*. How do both (1) social media and (2) their communities of users school others in logics specific to those forms" (2015: 806)? Here again the enhanced observability and encouraged reciprocity that are amongst the core features of contemporary social media play an important role: ordinary users may not start out by joining a social media platform with the explicit aim to share the news, but as they develop their networks on a given platform they are increasingly likely to encounter others who are doing so, to observe the benefits in social interaction and status that those others may experience as a result of their newssharing, and to feel the gentle encouragement to reciprocate by sharing some news items themselves. They may also encounter some proactive 'super sharers' who are no longer simply reactively passing along mainstream news articles to their followers, but are seeking out a broader range of sources, are adding their own commentary and analysis, and are helping to collaboratively curate the information about a specific event or issue.

Any such practices may readily be observed in most social media users' networks, on any given day—and it is therefore highly likely that this experience would also serve to socialise these users into an understanding of newssharing as a practice that is socially accepted and even valued. Not all such users will eventually advance to the highest-involvement levels of newssharing, of course, but the substantial percentages of reactive and proactive 'participators', in the Reuters Institute's terminology, clearly document the fact that newssharing is now a widespread practice.

Whether we should also consider such habitual newssharing across social networks as a form of citizen journalism depends ultimately on how we might define 'citizen journalism' itself, in the contemporary environment. Kim and Lowrey suggest that "the public is engaging in citizen journalism to the de-

gree that the public participates in gathering, providing, and using publicly relevant information" (2015: 301), and the forms of newssharing we have discussed here would seem to fall under this umbrella. But this may be too simplistic an assessment; citizen journalism as we have encountered it is a considerably more productive practice that not only circulates existing but also generates new information, even if only in the form of new assessments and analyses of existing news stories, and it often also takes an explicitly critical perspective on the outputs of the mainstream news industry. We have yet to establish the extent to which habitual newssharing and curation practices also incorporate such productive and critical elements. There are at least some indications that they may indeed be present, however: as the 2015 *Digital News Report* points out, "in most countries there was no significant difference in sharing news between those who trusted their news and those who distrusted it. This may point to the use of news sharing for the purposes of both criticism and 'collaborative verification'" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 84). We will explore these questions later in this chapter.

For the moment, however, it is already possible to state with certainty that the habitual newssharing we have encountered here is the immediate result of gatewatching practices that are now in operation right across the vast userbases of contemporary social media platforms—and thus, in most developed nations, at an essentially societal scale. Such gatewatching is trained in the first place on the gates of the conventional news media in their various forms and formats, but—not least also since sharing practices are not confined to the news alone—also observes new material being published by a myriad of other information sources, across all sectors of society. As a result,

> the traditional gatekeeping function of the media is weakened as a significant proportion of news consumers turn to family, friends and acquaintances to alert them to items of interest. Essentially, a person's social circle takes on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story, video or other piece of content is important, interesting or entertaining enough to recommend. (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 821)

Importantly, this information *push* through gatewatching and newssharing, which has increased the circulation of a diverse range of news items across our social media networks, is also complemented by a simultaneous information *pull*, as Thorson and Wells point out: "among some audiences" there is now also "a news omnivorousness, exemplified by gathering public affairs content from an ever-expanding array of content providers and delivery platforms and at all times of day" (2015: 26).

As we have already seen, such gatewatching occurs both externally, iden-
tifying new news items from a wide range of sources and circulating them
(perhaps also with the help of *Facebook* and *Twitter* sharing buttons on the
Websites of such source outlets) on social media platforms, and internally, as
users observe each other's newssharing choices and select from these the infor-
mation they find sufficiently interesting to re-circulate to their own networks.
The user-to-user connection choices (made through friending and following)
therefore also crucially affect the gatewatching process: "when connecting to
like-minded others and peers on social media platforms, users indirectly tailor
what information will reach them. In other words, users increasingly con-
struct and organise their social realities through their online social networks"
(Klinger and Svensson 2016: 33).

Networks of Newssharing

In addition to users' underlying motivations and practices for sharing the news
through social media, their specific connection and sharing choices should
also be examined, therefore. At their most extreme, such choices may enable
the "near complete avoidance of news content … or (at the most) occasional,
incidental encounters …, which raises new questions about the role of per-
sonal agency and circumstances in determining a person's information diet"
(Thorson and Wells 2015: 27); even if newssharing does play a greater role in
a social media user's day-to-day participation experience, too, it is still possi-
ble that "networked audiences are exposed to news that is popular rather than
important, and [that] social recommendation limits exposure to a variety of
news sources" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 822).

Recent research on such crucial questions has found a mixed and complex
picture to date. As Klinger and Svensson report,

> in many occasions, network media logic and mass media logic overlap. Often, users
> share content from mass media, such as online newspaper articles or TV videos, in
> their networks. In these cases, users have selected the content according to their
> personal tastes and interests and at the same time reproduced the selection criteria of
> journalists. (2016: 29)

In addition, network effects also mean that "articles that are placed more
prominently have a higher chance to be shared" (Kümpel *et al.* 2015: 6); this
is true both for article placement on mainstream news sites, where such place-
ment may be determined by the conventional news values that have guided

the spatial and temporal composition of newspapers and broadcast bulletins for many decades, or also by a measurement of the aggregate preferences of a given Website's readership, and for the placement of shared stories in a user's newsfeed, which is the product of a complex interaction between the activities of other actors in the user's network and the organising and display algorithms in use at a given social media platform.

But at the same time it is also evident that many social media users are well aware of the presence of such network effects, and of the role of platform algorithms in surfacing some stories over others, and are taking deliberate steps to counteract these dynamics and in essence trick the system into displaying 'their' stories more prominently. There appears to be a preference for sharing content that is not already evidently in wide circulation; for instance, Holton *et al.*'s "respondents indicated that they post links, at least in part, to find information quickly and to reach hard-to-find content" (2014: 39). This is supported by Trilling *et al.*'s analysis, which shows that on *Twitter* "topics that were very present in the media received [fewer] shares than topics that did not belong to the top issues" (2016: 16)—put succinctly, "higher topic popularity … will lead to fewer shares" (7). The same study also finds "an opposite effect" on *Facebook*, however: "one interpretation would be that sharing on Facebook centers more around few dominant issues, whereas on Twitter there is more variation" (Trilling *et al.* 2016: 16).

Additionally, users of both platforms seem to prefer circulating news articles that are distinctive and do not originate simply from a generic news agency: agency pieces "receive only two thirds of the Twitter shares of other articles …. An even sharper decline is observed on Facebook, where agency-written articles can expect only 0.28 times as many interactions compared with nonagency articles" (Trilling *et al.* 2016: 16). This is in line with the more anecdotal and site-specific observations made by particular news outlets that their most widely shared articles frequently "include more distinctive and unusual content—often content that is not showcased on the front page of the website" (Newman 2011: 23) as well as "content exclusive to that news organisation" (22). Newman reports observations made by magazine *The Economist*, for instance, for which "certain types of distinctive content perform particularly well in blogs and social networks. The Economist Daily Chart is a case in point because it tells an unusual story every day in a visually compelling way" (25). Many news outlets are therefore now deliberately taking steps to enhance the distinctiveness of their original content, in order to

ensure its broad circulation, through gatewatching and newssharing, across social media networks.

Even if there is a tendency amongst social media users, especially on *Twitter*, to direct attention to specific articles that are not already in wide circulation, the overall themes of the content being shared by social media users largely reflect long-standing news values, however. "There is a marked dominance of subjects and authors with a close relationship to 'hard' journalism. Thus, we cannot conclude … that Twitter is generating a fundamentally new structure of relevance which diverges from the traditional news values established by mainstream journalism" (Neuberger *et al.* 2014: 356). On *Twitter*, such values have tended to privilege stories addressing disasters and deaths, breaking news, quirky stories, provocative analysis, and distinctive content (Newman 2011: 22); additionally, even within today's global social media networks geographic proximity still matters at least to some degree: "articles covering domestic issues are shared 1.29 as many times as nondomestic issues on Twitter, and 1.80 as many times as nondomestic issues on Facebook. … Stories about non-Western countries receive only 0.83 (Twitter) and 0.69 (Facebook) times as many shares" (Trilling *et al.* 2016: 14). On other news values, the leading platforms once again diverge, however: on *Twitter*, "the presence of a human interest angle is basically irrelevant …. However, this is different on Facebook, where human interest has a strong influence, and articles may expect the number of shares to go up by a third" (15–16).

In light of these patterns, which replicate many conventional newsworthiness judgments but also take into account (and in part seek to counteract) the specific attention economies of social media platforms, Trilling *et al.* suggest that "the concept of newsworthiness—once developed to explain news selection at the production stage, later also used to explain audience choices—can form a fruitful starting point to develop a concept of shareworthiness" (2016: 16). Overall, and combining the findings from a number of recent studies of newssharing patterns online, shareworthiness appears to build on many of the well-established news value judgments commonly made by journalists and audiences alike, but exercises such judgments against the backdrop of an understanding of the specific affordances of social media platforms, where such judgments are no longer merely individual, but come to have a much greater effect in aggregate.

Put differently, although there is usually no formal coordination between newssharers as they make their judgments about what news to share, they are more or less explicitly aware of the fact that their individual choices contrib-

ute to network-wide effects on the visibility and circulation of a given news story, and this awareness may intensify or counteract the news judgments they would have made if conventional newsworthiness rather than social media shareworthiness criteria had been applied. Although mainstream news outlets continue to be popular and prominent in social media newssharing overall, this shifts attention away at least to some extent from those outlets and stories that are already widely visible in other news media channels, and instead benefits those sources that are situated further down the long tail of the attention economy.

This shift beyond the core of the mainstream has both spatial and temporal dimensions, in fact: on the one hand, "social media users [are] more likely to access websites from international news outlets, websites that mix news and commentary such as the *Huffington Post* and the website of an individual blogger not affiliated with a major news outlet" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 820; cf. Himelboim *et al.* 2013: 169); on the other, even in spite of the real-time focus of social media platforms such as *Twitter* "news articles continue to circulate on social networks on average [for] two days after they are published by the news outlets" (Bastos 2015: 311). In thus shifting from conventional newsworthiness to contemporary shareworthiness judgments, social media users overall display a remarkable level of digital media literacy: implicitly or explicitly, such shareworthiness judgments appear designed to adjust and counteract the gatekeeping choices made by mainstream news media, by exploiting the affordances of social media platforms and their networks.

Newssharing as Performance

So far, we have described the newssharing practices of any given user as resulting from a combination of internal and external factors. A user may identify genuinely new information through gatewatching, and share it because of an intrinsic interest in the topic and to encourage others to reciprocate; the same user may also observe the gatewatching and newssharing choices made by others and choose to amplify or counteract them in their own sharing. However, it must also be noted that—especially for users with a larger following—"social network spaces are not simply representational spaces: they are performance spaces. They are constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created, and where, above all, 'we act'" (Mazali 2011: 290). Newssharing is part of that performance of identity:

when a person shares content on social media, the nature of the shared content re-
flects on the individual's identity. Unlike a journalist, who acts in a professional role,
and unlike an individual's decision to *read* a news piece, the individual's decision
to share it can be seen as a part of a manifestation of their online identity. (Trilling
et al. 2016: 6)

This observation has a number of important implications. First, the need
for social media users to perform an identity to their friends and followers may
in fact encourage them to engage in newssharing, as a relatively simple prac-
tice that can help to generate a steady stream of updates in the user's profile
feed. This strategic use of newssharing to anchor a social media identity is
possible because social media users exist as visible entities only by virtue of
their communicative activity: "it is not that networks do not exist without
information sharing, but it is the act of information sharing that renders them
visible. In this sense, actor nodes materialize digitally as they share informa-
tion" (Papacharissi 2014: 126).

From this perspective, posting (anything) regularly is a crucial prereq-
uisite to establishing a social media identity, and sharing news items is one
core practice alongside the sharing of life updates, photos, videos, and other
material. But the nature of the content being shared also directly affects the
nature of the online persona that such sharing creates; it is therefore also like-
ly that users will make strategic judgments about the news they share, and that
these judgments may diverge somewhat from their actual news interests and
preferences. Such biases may be responsible for observations that quality news
content is generally shared on social media somewhat more often than the
overall market positioning of quality news sites would suggest (Bruns 2017;
Larsson 2016: 13), and that even within those quality news sources particular
forms of content are preferred over others: "the audience of social networking
sites engaging with the content published by *The New York Times* and *The
Guardian* is slightly in favor of hard news over soft news, particularly opinion
pieces, when compared to the news editors' choices" (Bastos 2015: 321).

In other words, "social network site users select 'markers of cool' based on
an imagined audience of friends and peers" (Marwick and boyd 2011: 116)—
or in our present context, select news content that makes them appear in what
they hope to be a favourable light. Interviews with users have shown, in fact,
that "people have multiple imagined audiences, which may change each post"
(Litt and Hargittai 2016: 8); yet at the same time "the difficulty is that on the
other side of the screen, there are actual people forming impressions—and
the imagined audience may not always align with the actual audience" (2).

What emerges here, then, is a complex process of trial and error by which social media users explore how best to present a consistent online persona to their imagined audience, with constant recalibrations of their presentation strategies based on the feedback that they receive explicitly (in the form of peer responses) or implicitly (through the engagement metrics provided by the platform). Over the longer term, this reinforces particular newssharing choices and strategies which are believed by the user to help them in building social capital within their network (Kim and Lowrey 2015: 302).

Positive feedback on newssharing activity may initiate an iterative process of engagement, then: "by acting as a source of information in one's network, an individual gains a sense of responsibility over this content and is likely to become more involved in that information" (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015: 242), but the extent to which one has achieved such status within the wider network is evident only from the responses received by others in the network. There are also important differences between the different affordances for peer feedback that the various social media platforms provide:

> immediately after sharing content, individuals do not yet have a sense of how that content will be perceived, and receiving likes or comments that do not add value does not provide the validation desired. Only feedback that is perceived as relevant, thoughtful, and engaging can drive continued involvement in the content and a sense that one has influenced one's network. (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015: 246)

At the same time, however, the lack of such feedback can also lead to certain topics gradually being abandoned as unproductive, as

> even relatively small differences in sharing behavior can lead to a spiraling process: If … a hardcore politic[al] topic or a foreign topic is slightly less likely to be shared, there will be a few people less who see it as a result of the sharing, out of which slightly less [sic] reshare it, and so on. In extreme cases, this could lead to the disappearance of topics (like, for example, foreign news) from the public agenda. (Trilling *et al.* 2016: 18)

More problematically still, in addition to topics gradually falling out of favour because of a lack of interest in a user's network they might also be actively abandoned in response to (or for fear of) negative feedback from peers. In line with the well-established 'spiral of silence' theory (Noelle-Neumann 1974), where dissenters choose to remain silent in order to avoid social sanctions from their peers, the users of social media could similarly "choose to conform

to others and reverse their own opinions in order to restore their sense of belonging and self-esteem" (Zhu and Huberman 2014: 1330). In our present context, this may mean choosing not to circulate a news item otherwise deemed to be of interest, in order to avoid criticism from one's social media friends and followers.

Indeed, Vos suggests that such spiral-of-silence processes were at play in the lead-up to the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, when voices warning of impending problems failed to circulate widely because their views were seen by many as extreme. As a result, "the truth did not go viral. The truth remained locked behind the gates" (2015: 8). Although the structure of national and global mediaspheres has changed considerably during subsequent years (and still continues to transform rapidly), and newssharing processes are now more widely established than they were at the time, there is nonetheless no guarantee that a similar failure to take the warning voices seriously and circulate their views widely could not occur again today, or in the near future. It therefore remains important to understand "what kinds of information make it through what kinds of channels if we are to understand the broader news ecology and its significance for the public information environment" (2015: 10).

Newssharing as a Demotic Practice

The observations we have outlined here lead some researchers to suggest that "the ideal of the news sharing user as an *altruistic democratizer* is to some extent also backed up by empirical studies" (Kümpel *et al.* 2015: 8), but in light of the promises of democratisation that surrounded the first wave of citizen media and were never fully realised we should treat such statements with a certain degree of caution. It is possible to state, however, that compared to this earlier phase gatewatching and newssharing are now both truly widespread, mass participation practices, and even that "many active internet users now see *themselves* as editors—balancing and comparing multiple sources, multiple editorial judgements, and even multiple algorithms" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 13). This does not inherently imply a democratisation of the news—the content that is shared here still represents the work of a number of non-representative groups including professional journalists, alternative media producers, experts, pundits, activists, eyewitnesses, and others—but it does represent a *demoticisation* of newssharing practices: to find, share, and comment on the news is no longer

the domain of news and political junkies only, but a fundamental everyday activity on social media.

What keeps such demotic activities from becoming truly democratic is that the social media platforms that are being used for those activities do not guarantee—and in their current structures perhaps even work against—a potential for all users' contributions to become equally visible, or a possibility for their debates to be conducted right across entire societies. "Individuals may interact with others who do not share their political ideology. But … this potential does not lead to meaningful cross-ideological interaction" (Himelboim *et al.* 2013: 171) with reliable frequency; the fact that users often establish their social media connections on the basis of shared interests and identities may mean that they are more likely to encounter content with which they have at least a basic affinity, and that their social media environments thus resemble self-reinforcing "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" (Sunstein 2009; Pariser 2012). At the same time (and we will return to such considerations in greater detail in Chapter 8),

> while there may be concerns that social networks may limit the breadth of information people receive, … news consumers have a different perspective. A majority of social media users believe their social circles provide them with a broader range of news and information than if they relied solely on traditional media. (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 820)

If such beliefs are borne out in reality—and the studies cited here appear to do so—, the complex, networked, massively multi-user nature of contemporary social media platforms means that the net effect of gatewatching and newssharing via social media is to increase the source and content diversity experienced by news users as they participate in social media platforms, and that "the situation is not as bleak as [the] pessimistic view suggests" (Trilling *et al.* 2016: 18).

Conversely, however, this demoticisation of newssharing does inherently affect the standing of the mainstream news media as a component of the changing media environment through which news now circulates: "instead of being dependent on the authority of mass media, news consumers can increasingly construct their own truth-claims and representations of social reality with greater ease and individualization" (Broersma 2013: 43). Some of the more pessimistic voices that foresee deeply negative repercussions from the growing influence of newssharing on how citizens encounter the news may be motivated more by their concerns about the loss of this institutional author-

ity than by any empirically observable problems; much of the public debate about the role of social media in enabling the rise of 'post-factual' political propaganda that emerged in 2016 in the wake of the Brexit referendum in the U.K. and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President also served to deflect attention away from the decisive failure of the mainstream media in each country to hold populist political leaders to account, for instance.

From Demotic Newssharing to Habitual News Curation

If, as recent surveys demonstrate, the majority of ordinary social media users now engage in habitual newssharing activities, then those activities must be seen as part of their everyday "social media practice"—a term proposed by Hogan and Quan-Haase "as a means to overcome the transient nature of the phenomena encountered on social media and identify practices that are stable and universal" (2010: 309). But sharing the news is also inherently a first step towards curating the news, at least at a personal level: "in personal curation, it just happens to be the end user who is doing the curation for himself or herself" (Thorson and Wells 2015: 33). Such personal curatorial activities, in turn, add up to aggregate and possibly coordinated collective curation—and we might therefore argue that the curation of news and related information, too, has now become a habitual activity for social media users, well beyond the collective curation activities that we observed in the context of acute events in the previous chapter.

Personal Curation

In the first place, each individual user curates their own streams of updates, perhaps simply as a way of keeping track of interesting information but most likely also with a view towards their imagined audience of friends or followers. This may happen more or less consistently; Lehmann *et al.*, for instance, distinguish between "two types of users that are intensely engaged with news content in social media. We call them *focused curators* and *unfocused curators*" (2013a: 864). However, even an unfocussed curator, who skips between a variety of news topics in the course of their everyday newssharing activities, still serves as a "a news provider of sorts, disseminating news articles about breaking news and top stories" (864); this is the case even more obviously

for a topic-focussed curator who consistently shares news that relates to their special areas of expertise. Fundamental to this news provision in both types of personal curation, of course, remains the practice of gatewatching through which shareworthy news and information is identified by the curating user. Through their activities, then, the news curator is placed in the role of opinion leader for their friends or followers, at least potentially and temporarily: they are "passing along information that is already available elsewhere and making it personally relevant to their social network" (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015: 241).

In theory, consistently active, topic-focussed social media news curators could therefore also become *persistently* important news sources and opinion leaders for their personal publics. However, in practice this is unlikely for all but a handful of exceptional social media users: to achieve such consistency would require a quasi-professional commitment to newssharing that few social media users will be able to maintain. (Those few users who do are likely to be in the same 'news junkie' category as the leading citizen journalists of the first wave of citizen media, and indeed as many professional journalists.) Additionally, the users in a news curator's personal public are likely to follow a number of other accounts that are actively sharing news via social media: "the discursive density of the web environment in the contemporary media landscape results in an intense and incessant competition for attention" (Dahlgren 2014: 197), and consistent and persistent opinion leadership is therefore difficult to attain for any one of these users.

Although from the point of view of the individual newssharer their sharing activities may constitute simply a personal curation practice, therefore, the ordinary social media user is exposed to the combined results of several such personal curation activities, which may amplify or counteract one another. Further, the specific design and affordances of particular platforms mean that social media users will rarely or never encounter the totality of all posts made by accounts in their network: for instance,

> at any given time, Twitter users are exposed only to the most recent information posted. Previous messages are not only pushed down (which is the case in almost any social media, such as blogs and Facebook), but simply disappear. Beyond a rather short period of time, these messages cannot be searched. Implications vary across users. Those who frequently read their stream of tweets can build over time a more complex understanding of the opinions of users who post them. Others are limited to only the most recent tweets, lacking of background of the issues and the users who commented about them. (Himelboim *et al.* 2013: 170)

The interweaving of multiple social media users' curation activities is therefore playing a crucial role in creating the necessary repetition and redundancy that ensures that specific news stories are shared widely enough to be visible to a large number of recipients. Single exchanges "can thus be connected into larger communicative relations and enable the perception of individual experiences and views as communal knowledge and opinions" (Katzenbach 2016: 15; my translation). In other words, if enough users make the personal curation choice to post a given news item (or to re-share a news item already posted by another user in their network), then it becomes more probable that this item reaches a larger audience; if in posting or sharing this item they choose a common framing of the news, then it becomes more likely that their followers may also adopt that framing as their own. The specific design choices made in the development of each platform, but also the following or friending choices made by each user, and the overall level of attention they play to the platform, determine just how frequently and over what timeframe a news item must appear in their incoming feed of social media updates in order for it to move beyond a merely ambient awareness. The ten-minute time window proposed by Elmer (2013: 18) represents only a rough and generalised approximation of the full visibility dynamics here.

Social Recommendations

"Users thus experience a logic in which content is produced reflexively with regard to personalisation and attention maximisation rather than professional codes, such as news values" (Klinger and Svensson 2016: 29)—and yet, as we have also already seen, individual assessments of a given news item's shareworthiness also affect whether and how widely the story will travel across the social network. Although this may introduce a new kind of systemic randomness, where the visibility of a given news item to a given user could be calculated using a complex probabilistic function, those messages that are seen by others may in turn carry a considerably greater impact than conventional news reports. This is due to the *social* dimension of social networks: "each user on Twitter has followers, who themselves have followers. Thus each tweet has a social graph attached to it, as does each message that is retweeted (forwarded to other users). Accordingly, social graphs offer a means to infer reputation and trust" (Hermida 2010a: n.p.).

This does not mean that every news item shared in one's social media network will be regarded as more trustworthy than the news reports received

through conventional online and offline media, of course; we are likely to connect with social media users for a range of reasons, not all of which are related to how knowledgeable they are about the news. But in a social media environment that is used to a considerable extent every day, users are likely to be particularly well-placed to assess which of their connections are reliable sources of valuable news items, and on which specific topics; although the exact processes through which we assess the credibility of incoming posts are not yet fully understood (and are likely to change as social media platforms evolve and as our own social media literacy matures; cf. Thorson and Wells 2015: 37), it is already well understood that personal recommendations made via social media—whether they relate to products, services, or the news— are highly persuasive: as Facebook's former Director of Market Development Randi Zuckerberg has put it, "when you get a news clip from a friend, they are putting their own personal brand on the line, saying 'I recommend THIS piece of content to you out of all the content that is out there,'—just as they would recommend a restaurant, or a movie" (Zuckerberg qtd. in O'Connor 2009: n.p.).

As Newman *et al.* point out, this increased reliance on social recommendations is also related to the declining dominance of search as the preferred way of accessing information (including news). "In search we tend to be looking for very specific information—whereas default behaviour in a social network is to browse a complex multi-subject news feed. Users will be more receptive to signals around quality and trust to help them make that choice" (2015: 78). However, it is important to note that such signals will now relate both to the quality and trustworthiness of the original news source (the mainstream news organisation, alternative news site, government, commercial, or non-government organisation, or other source whose content is being shared) as well as to the quality and trustworthiness of the social media user sharing the content, or the utility of the specific social media platform through which it is received; a news item originating from a non-standard, little-known source may still be regarded as valid and worthy of attention if it is shared by a trusted contact in the recipient's network. This is especially likely when the sharing user has an established track record in gatewatching for information on a specific topic; for this reason, as we have seen in the previous chapter, a contributor like Andy Carvin, who through his consistency in sharing valuable information had earnt his audience's trust on matters relating to the Arab Spring, and was able to draw his followers' attention to local sources whose trustworthiness they might otherwise have doubted. By contrast, other par-

ticipants in the social media conversations relating to the Arab Spring—including even mainstream news organisations and journalists—would not have been able to impart their sources with as much referred authority, because they did not have the same track record of sustained engagement with North African and Middle Eastern affairs.

Topical Clustering

As multiple social media users share information about related events, issues, and topics, then, and as follower and friendship relations on social media platforms develop at least in part on the basis of shared thematic interests, the users engaging with specific topics over the longer term will begin to form network clusters around these shared interests. Such clustering tendencies can be observed in many large-scale network analyses of user relationships on leading social media platforms (e.g. Kelly and Etling 2008; Bruns *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2014); thematic interests are not the only driver of clustering (others include personal or professional relationships or shared geographic location, for instance), but they are one particularly important element. This clustering also means that those users who are regularly active on a platform—whether as listeners or as content contributors—will be exposed to the topical content posted by their network connections, and are thus also likely to adjust their own posting activities in response. "On Twitter, such processes of social negotiation of the meaning of news happen right away, because the messages diffusing the news may already include interpretation. Twitter users often connect current events to personal experiences, opinions, and world views: they explain, classify, interpret, and reinterpret what they have received" (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014: 310). This process of reciprocal adjustment could variously lead to greater conformity with the content choices made by others, but also to greater divergence as users seek to distinguish their own contributions from those made by others, or aim to counteract a perceived bias by sharing information in support of alternative perspectives.

But whether conformist or contrarian, and whether explicitly paying attention to the activities of others or just peripherally aware of the other content circulating through the network, the inherently networked nature of users' newssharing activities in such thematic clusters means that the individual, personal curation activities that hundreds and thousands of social media users may engage in for any given topic also combine into a broader process of collective news curation. Such collective curation of the information relating

to specific topic will be deliberate only for the most active and most connected of these newssharers, who do pay constant attention to the activities of other users; others' contributions are likely to be a great deal more random. As a result, the number, origins, and range of news items being shared through such collective curation processes are going to be rather diverse; this positions collective social media news curation as a highly multiperspectival, second-tier process of sharing, reviewing, and evaluating the news that exhibits many of the features first outlined by Gans (1980).

As such, this social, collective, and very loosely organised form of news curation contributes to its publics' understanding of the news in ways that differ very significantly from the news insights provided by mainstream news media. Mainstream news continues to be presented as the end product of expert evaluation, and as the result of an institutional process claims to offer a complete and unified picture of the news; by contrast, the news circulating through social curation processes remains incomplete, unfinished, and contestable. Where the editorial curation of the news by journalists and editors takes place backstage, out of sight of audiences, so that only its end results become visible to ordinary users, social news curation is a frontstage activity and represents first and foremost "the social negotiation of the meaning of news" (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014: 310), in full public view. As such collective negotiation unfolds, it enables the emergence of one or more shared frames through which significant subsets of the total social media userbase perceive and interpret the news.

Ultimately, every act of engaging with a specific news topic—of sharing a new article, of liking, re-sharing, retweeting, replying to or commenting on it—contributes to this process of collective curation, because each such act directly or indirectly alters the metrics for the shared article that are gathered by each social media platform, and thereby makes the article more or less visible, and leads it to appear in new contexts and frames. "By framing the links, users introduced certain schemata to perceive the objects linked to, reinterpreting their meaning and negotiating their position within the networked public discourses" (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014: 313). Not every such user intervention is made with the explicit aim of contributing to the collective curation process, however; topic-unfocussed curators (in Lehmann *et al.*'s definition), in particular, may not even be aware of the curatorial activities that they are contributing to, in fact. Such less involved participants are unlikely, therefore, to engage in newssharing with an explicit expectation to thereby become part of an interpretive community, unlike those participants

in acute events hashtags whom we have encountered in the previous chapter. Topic-focussed curators, on the other hand, could be seen as acting in a para-journalistic role; since "it has been argued that journalists come together as a community to make sense of events and interpret their importance", we might therefore suggest that their sustained attention to their core topics shows that these users similarly "have the expectation of being considered … part of that interpretive community" (Lehmann *et al.* 2013a: 863).

These social news curators are likely to be considerably more central to the network clusters that exist around such topics, and to be linked via friending and following connections to other users with similar thematic interests. For them, consistent participation in such interpretive, curatorial news and information communities is also an important form of civic engagement; they will define their social media personas in part through such community membership. In these cases, such participation can therefore also be a source of social capital—but such social capital is accumulated not simply by active participation in newssharing itself, but only when a user's newssharing activities are acknowledged as valuable by other users in their network. "Receiving comments … can evoke responses from the original poster and from the following posters, sparking a discussion that causes users to feel that they are part of a community of involved friends and readers" (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015: 242). Importantly, such acknowledgment may be received both from already established connections in one's social media network (from strong ties) and from new or not yet fully actualised connections (from weak ties); the social capital that can emerge here therefore represents both bonding and bridging capital (Kim and Lowrey 2015: 303).

Much as the small and more or less random endorsements of specific news items by a wide range of newssharers acting independently of each other may eventually result in a specific news item being featured prominently on a social media platform, so the many small points of feedback received by a given newssharer from both strong and weak ties in their network will gradually influence their further social media activities; if the user realises that specific types of news items generate particularly strong positive (or negative) responses, they may adjust their sharing activities to feature more (or fewer) such items, for instance. This suggests that many social media users will experience a process of gradual socialisation into their chosen platforms; over time, as they become more familiar with the social network neighbourhood into which their personal profile has settled, they will adjust their online behaviours to what is acceptable in that neighbourhood. Indeed, several large-scale,

diachronic studies of social media platforms such as *Twitter* have shown that many users experience a transition from using their platform as an information network to engaging with it as a social network, almost certainly as a result of that socialisation. As Myers *et al.* suggest, it may well be the case that "from an individual user's perspective, Twitter starts off more like an information network, but evolves to behave more like a social network" (2014: 497–98).

The Emergence of Niche Authorities

In our present context, for users with a sustained interest in specific news topics such socialisation—which can be understood as an increasing knowledge about the network of users that exists around one's own account—results eventually in preferential participation in particular social news curation activities. As such participation becomes habitual, and as more persistent curation collectives and communities form around specific topics, the most consistently valuable contributors emerge as "niche authorities" (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013: 305) within these communities. Such users are "experts in a particular field (for example, usability engineering or parenting) who locate, organize, and distribute links to relevant, high-quality content online, voluntarily assuming a quality filtering role that traditional publishers once held" (Lowry 2010: 3); they are likely to be those who invest the greatest amount of energy into regularly sharing topical news information, display the best curatorial instincts in selecting quality news items, and/or offer the most insightful interpretation and evaluation of the news items they share. As all such assessments of the quality of a user's contributions are inherently subjective, this role of niche authority cannot simply be assumed by a newssharer who makes the effort to contribute regularly and consistently, however; rather, it is assigned only by implicit or explicit crowd acclaim—that is, a newssharer emerges as an authority on their topic only if their contributions are regularly liked, shared on, replied to, or commented upon by a substantial number of fellow users with an interest in the same issue or topic, and/or if their account is subsequently friended or followed by many such peers, and the newssharer retains that authority role only as long as such acclaim continues. This way, "ordinary users can gain influence by focusing on a single topic and posting creative and insightful tweets that are perceived as valuable by others, as opposed to simply conversing with others" (Cha *et al.* 2010: 11).

The participants in newssharing who emerge as niche authorities in this way may be ordinary social media users as well as journalists, activists, experts,

or other contributors with an external claim to enhanced topical expertise; however, it is important to note that in a social media context they gain their authority not primarily because of such external factors, but predominantly due to their track record as contributors to the collective curatorial work. We have already seen this in the context of acute events in the previous chapter: Andy Carvin, for instance, did not inherently emerge as a prominent authority on the Arab Spring because of his position with U.S. National Public Radio, but mainly because of his proven ability to source a valuable and distinct range of first-hand insights from the region. Outside of breaking news contexts, similar patterns still apply: here, too, newssharers of all backgrounds are able to establish themselves as acknowledged voices of authority if they manage to contribute constructively and consistently. (To do so, however, may well be easier for participants with an existing professional or semi-professional interest in the news topic than it is for other, ordinary users.)

Perceptions of a social media user's authority and influence on a given topic may also have spill-over effects into offline contexts, in fact. Recent research indicates that the niche authorities emerging in relation to specific topics on social media are also likely to exert direct or indirect influence on journalists covering news topics that they are unfamiliar with; such journalists may explore relevant discussions on social media in order to gain a better understanding of an issue, identify the leading social media authorities on that issue, and follow those users' information sourcing choices, for example, or may even end up interviewing these social media authorities directly. For instance, one of the journalists interviewed by Parmelee acknowledged that social news curation activities unfolding around the hashtag #SSM were "'very, very important' as he covered same-sex marriage legislation that was pending. 'It enabled me to filter out a lot of noise and hunt for the information or feedback that was important to me at that time for that issue', he said" (2014: 444). Additionally, the newssharers experiencing crowd acclaim as niche authorities on specific topics may feel encouraged by such acclaim to extend their engagement in the topic beyond the social media platform itself, too:

> specific news sharing behaviors (e.g., posting more publicly) have a significant effect on one's sense of influence in one's network, which may be vital to encouraging civic participation in that network. These same behaviors could further translate to offline forms of civic engagement, and could be encouraged by organizations seeking support for campaigns or community events. (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015: 247)

It is important in this context to highlight the dynamic nature of engagement in social media news curation, too: the relative attention paid to specific news issues and topics naturally waxes and wanes both in line with the prominence of the news topic as part of the overall day-to-day newshole, and as a result of the competing demands on participating newssharers' time in their everyday lives. As a result, the active news curation collectives and communities that form on social media platforms may grow and dissolve again over time, rather than remaining stable over longer periods; at the same time, however, the experiences made in the context of specific issues and topics will also not be forgotten completely, and the associations made between participants will remain latent and ready to be reactivated when the topic rises to renewed prominence in the daily news. "Just as the majority of crowds simply disperse over time, parts of some crowds come together again around new newsworthy events" (Lehmann *et al*. 2013b: 359). Importantly, in particular, the new friending and following connections made at the height of an active collaborative news curation process are unlikely to all be severed as that process concludes; this makes it even more likely that such connections are going to be reactivated again once renewed interest in the same news topic demands it.

Beyond the Political

In our discussion so far, we may have used political issues and topics from time to time as a means of illustrating the practices and dynamics of social media newssharing, as does the majority of scholarly research on these phenomena. However, as the widespread, demotic take-up of newssharing as a habitual practice by social media users already indicates, newssharing extends well beyond narrowly 'political' topics—or, viewed another way, almost all issues and topics for which social media users may be motivated to share news are *political* in a much broader sense.

That newssharing has become habitual for the majority of social media users is a result of the fact that any and all social media users will be interested in some issue or topic beyond themselves—from politics to sports, from activism to the arts—and will monitor, more or less actively and attentively, the latest developments in those fields. Although, as we have seen, such interests may be strictly casual for all but the most committed followers of such topics, many now nonetheless re-share and retweet the information about such topics that circulates through their social networks, and will perhaps even add their own

comments and responses from time to time. For the most part these activities may represent only a form of gatewatching that remains internal to the social media platform itself—in order words, users select information to share from within their on-site social networks, rather than actively introducing new information from external sources—but this, too, makes an important contribution to amplifying the visibility and influencing the framing of each shared news item.

Such casual, day-to-day engagement with the news that interests them may appear to outsiders to address a comparatively random range of topics, but is nonetheless clearly meaningful to the users who share the news items (it is at least meaningful enough to have led them to become active in this way); given the fact that friending and following connections are made at least in part on the basis of similarities in topical interests, these choices are therefore also likely to be intelligible and meaningful to the newssharers' immediate personal publics. In this sense, therefore, it is also likely to contribute to everyday "political talk" in Wright *et al.*'s definition:

> we define political talk as something that (a) emerges in the process of everyday talk, often interweaved [*sic*] with conversations that do not have a political character; (b) includes mundane reflections upon power, its uses and ramifications; and (c) possesses qualities that enable it to contribute to meaningful public action. (2016: 74)

Importantly, recent research has shown that such newssharing, and such political talk, also often reaches social media audiences that are commonly not strongly engaged with conventional news sources: the demographics of such groups vary from country to country, but they commonly include women, younger users, and retirees (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 818). Survey-based, representative studies across a number of countries indicate that newssharing through social media platforms is fast becoming an important source of the news for these groups: one "key point about social news discovery is that it reaches different demographics—and not just the young. Those who visit news sites regularly, sign up for email, or receive mobile notifications are heavily male skewed. Search is more even but social is the only discovery mechanism that appeals more to female users" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 77). This is also correlated with users' overall interest in following mainstream news: notably, "Facebook exposes some people to news who otherwise might not get it. While only 38% of heavy news followers who get news on Facebook say the site is an important way they get news, that figure rises to 47% among those who follow the news less often" (Pew Research Center 2013: 1).

Very obviously, the specific role played by social media even within such groups will differ from individual to individual: "users who are immersed in social media are likely to be more open to receiving news and information via their networked circles, from both peers and journalists" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 821). Nonetheless, both the use of socially shared news items and the active sharing of such news now extends well beyond a narrow group of news or "political junkies" (Coleman 2003), and the considerable distinctions between active gatewatchers and news junkies on the one hand, and ordinary news users on the other, that existed during the first wave of citizen media have eroded to a considerable extent. As a result, there is now less of a hard distinction between those who participate in citizen media and those who do not, and more of a sliding scale in the extent to which ordinary users incorporate social media into their everyday news diet, and to which they engage in reactive or proactive newssharing themselves. Picone describes this as a continuum extending from a merely "casual" to a dedicated "structural produsage" of the news (Picone 2011: 103).

An individual user's position on this continuum determines the extent to which they constitute merely a net recipient of news information via social media, or also an active redistributor of such information. This points to the existence of what we might understand as a cascading, multi-step flow of information across multiple newssharers:

> just a third, 34%, of Facebook news consumers … include news organizations or individual journalists and commentators directly in their feed by "liking" or following them. That means, then, that two-thirds of people who get news on Facebook have it passed along to them second, third or twentieth hand from their Facebook friends—rather than directly from news organizations. (Pew Research Center 2013: 12)

This is not to suggest that all social media users will persistently and consistently engage in newssharing via social media, of course; their placement on the continuum from structural to casual news produsage (and beyond to non-participation) will necessarily vary from topic to topic, and from time to time, as a result of a wide range of contextual factors. "Users do not always feel like contributing. Especially when online news is used between times or to quickly catch up with the news, participants seemed not willing to react extensively on it. Also work stress, domestic tasks, and other time-consuming activities shape a user's mood for produsage" (Picone 2011: 112). However, the available data suggest that a substantial number of social media users do engage in newssharing as part of their everyday social media practice. Additional-

ly, there is also considerable evidence that such engagement extends beyond mere sharing and on-sharing and towards active discussion of the news; the *social* aspects of social media may make this discursive engagement especially likely. As the Pew Research Center reports, on *Facebook* "liking or commenting on news stories occurs almost as frequently as clicking on links" (2013: 2).

Mass media researchers have long painted a dystopian picture in which a substantial divide between a small number of highly engaged news junkies and a large mass of far less connected citizens undermines societal information flows and, ultimately, threatens democratic processes. Writing in 1992, for instance, Hallin outlined the likelihood of

> a division of the audience into one part, mostly wealthier and better educated, that "consumes" news of perhaps a higher quality than we have yet seen, and a large part—poorer, less educated, and substantially drawn from minority ethnic groups—that consumes nothing but "A Current Affair" and a sort of soft tabloid style of local news. And this would mean not only a widening of cultural barriers, but also an intensification of the knowledge gap. (Hallin 1992: 24)

Although such fears remain valid in general, and some evidence for a societal polarisation along the faultlines of mass media consumption choices does exist in a number of developed nations—most obviously perhaps in the United States—, the considerably more complex picture of news and information flows across social networks that emerges from our present discussion points to the possibility that newssharing via social media might even serve to counteract such audience segmentation processes (we will pick up this discussion thread again in Chapter 8). Because of the individually random, and collectively aggregate and probabilistic nature of news flows through the many unterwoven publics that exist on social media platforms it is considerably more difficult for social media users to hermetically insulate themselves from a diversity of viewpoints and consume only a homogenous, monoperspectival newsfeed; instead, one of the fundamental features of social media news is serendipitous news discovery, as we have already seen. Although such exposure to opposing perspectives on the news may at times also lead to heated arguments over the 'correct' interpretation of the news, these may still be preferable to the disintegration of society into several separate interpretive communities that no longer speak to each other.

In this context it is especially encouraging that news engagement through social media is no longer simply an unexpected side effect of social media use, but increasingly also a major attraction in its own right: as Hermida *et al.*

report from a representative survey of Canadian Internet users, "keeping up with the news emerged as a strong driver for the use of social media. More than two-thirds of social media users (71 per cent) said that getting news and views was one of the main reasons for taking part in sites like Facebook" (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 819). If such patterns persist over time and across different national contexts, social media may therefore actively redress societal tendencies to disengage from the news—and the potential to actively engage in sharing and discussing the news in with one's social network, and to draw on that network's newssharing activities as a form of social curation that filters the newshole into a more focussed, personally relevant subset of all news, are likely to represent important factors attracting users to social media.

Demotic. Democratic?

We have already noted the widespread adoption of gatewatching, newssharing, and news curation—by both proactive and reactive participants—as habitual rather than merely occasional and random practices. This is true both at the level of personal curation, for one's imagined audience(s) of followers, and in the form or more collective efforts in concert with other users. Given the broad and diverse range of users now engaging in such practices, we have therefore also described this phenomenon as the demoticisation of gatewatching, newssharing, and news curation.

This should not be misunderstood simplistically as a democratisation of newssharing and engagement, however. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the democratic hopes for citizen journalism and news blogging during the first wave of citizen media have never been fulfilled: the barriers to entry and the costs of sustained engagement turned out to be too high for would-be citizen journalists beyond a narrow group of news and political junkies. Additionally, "it is of essential importance to recognize that even though the internet gives people the opportunity to make their voices heard, not every citizen has the desire to participate in public conversation" (Hanitzsch 2013: 204). Finally, politics, at least as defined in an orthodox sense that does not include merely occasional engagement with major events, was also too specialised a field to inspire interest from a broader population. This does not mean that ordinary citizens are not genuinely interested in news and politics, especially where current discussions relate to the issues that directly affect their everyday lives,

but many users simply do not have the energy to spare for sustained, constant engagement with such topics.

But citizen journalism and news blogging only ever represented the tip of the iceberg of political participation. Social media have made the politics of everyday life, and their intersection with higher levels of parliamentary and party politics, a great deal more visible, and have thereby shifted the balance between everyday and organised politics. Indeed, they have created a range of spaces ranging from the public (hashtags on *Twitter*, pages on *Facebook*) through the semi-public (personal publics on *Facebook* and *Twitter*) to the private (closed groups and direct messaging) where users are able to share and discuss all aspects of their life-worlds, including news and politics, without necessarily being explicitly aware that this contributes to journalistic and political debate. In this they mimic other, earlier spaces for such engagement—from the family kitchen table to the office watercooler—but substantially increase the potential for the discussions that occur here to connect with and amplify each other, rising eventually to greater visibility beyond the smaller publics where they originate.

As a result, for the ordinary user the process of participation in news and politics has become a great deal easier and more natural; at least until the growing prominence of a given topic leads the user to realise that they are potentially speaking to an audience well beyond their own followers, the steps from gatewatching (identifying interesting news items) through newssharing (disseminating those news items) to news curation (organising the continuing stream of news items) are now simple and present comparatively few major obstacles. Further, as such practices have become habitual, and as user-curated news feeds have become part of the everyday social media experience, social media users have also gradually developed the more advanced literacies required to make sense of complex multi-subject feeds (Newman *et al.* 2015: 78)—borrowing liberally from traditionally journalistic practices such as source comparisons, fact-checking, and verification.

This still does not result in a democratisation of the news, however: first, through effort or authority, some voices continue to speak louder than others, and not every news report or political opinion will receive the attention that it may deserve; and second, while news engagement via social media is evidently now very widespread, levels of interest and literacies for parsing the news remain unevenly distributed. However, the balance between the engaged and the disengaged has shifted considerably, and it is therefore appropriate to describe this as a demoticisation of news engagement. In this con-

text, demoticisation should be understood in its literal meaning as a process of widespread popular adoption across society—in contrast to Turner (2009), who has rightly problematized the "demotic turn" in a number of mainstream media, no value judgment is implied here.

This is because the circumstances of the demotic turn examined by Turner, and the demoticisation examined here, are fundamentally different. Turner's demotic turn is largely driven by media and political interests: although he writes that ordinary people "*turn themselves* into media content through talk radio, citizen journalism, news blogs, reality TV, celebrity culture and the like" (2009: 390; my emphasis), for the most part this transformation still remains something that is *done to* everyday citizens, as examples such as talk radio or reality TV imply. The producers and hosts of such programming formats—which are largely disseminated through conventional broadcast media—remain fully in control, and ordinary people are simply positioned as a supposedly representative (and therefore irrefutable) *vox populi*, the voice of 'the people'. In Turner's analysis, this provides a justification for populist politics and shallow content; he notes that "among the casualties of the demotic turn is the professional production of journalism" (2009: 390).

But while social media are self-evidently not free from the influence of media interests, and especially not from interference by the platform providers themselves, here the logic of demoticisation is different. Very importantly, the remarkable year-on-year growth in newssharing and news engagement that Pew Center and Reuters Institute have documented is not due to the concerted efforts of media companies to enlist social media users in disseminating their news products: as we will see in Chapters 5 and 6, the belated, confused, and contradictory responses by journalists and news outlets to the emerging demotic practices of social media news engagement, as well as the often divergent and critical framing of mainstream news adopted by social media users, clearly document the fact that the demoticisation of newssharing and news curation is not orchestrated by media for corporate and political gain in the way that Turner's 'demotic turn' was.

Rather, the demoticisation of news engagement in social media has occurred because social media platforms have provided new and previously unavailable mechanisms for users' pre-existing everyday news and political interests to be expressed, individually and in aggregate. This phenomenon has certainly been harnessed for commercial gain—in the first place by the platform providers themselves, for whom any user practices that generate substantial and sustained traffic are commercially valuable, and who have therefore

implemented additional mechanisms to encourage the further demoticisation of these practices; and more recently also by some (but certainly not all) news organisations, if they have come to understand user-driven newssharing as beneficial to the circulation of their content rather than as a threat to the integrity of their news products. Notably, however, many news outlets and platform operators are on record as stating that the rapid uptake of social media for sharing and engaging with the news has surprised them. As we have already seen, even *Twitter* co-founder Biz Stone has admitted that "the news applications surprised us" (qtd. in O'Connor 2009: n.p.).

The net result of this demoticisation of news engagement from below, driven by ordinary users, is a challenge to conventional journalism that is possibly even more profound than that posed by the first wave of citizen media, precisely because everyday users' news engagement practices have now become habitual. "The boundaries of journalism as a cultural field of production are questioned when acts usually associated with professions can be performed by others. … Twitter is emerging as a hybrid space for the cultural production of journalism, with citizens involved in the flow, framing and interpretation of news" (Hermida 2013: 304), and the same is true for other platforms such as *Facebook* as well—especially when we look beyond the context of breaking news events.

As a consequence, the pre-existing everyday politics of ordinary people have become more visible, more networked, and therefore also more potentially powerful. As Wright notes, in past research into online political engagement "scholars have largely ignored the spaces where the vast majority of (everyday) political talk between 'ordinary' citizens online is most likely to occur" (2012: 3). The demoticisation of newssharing habits instead points us to a considerably "more expansive notion of political talk: one that embraces the vernacular, expressive, and porous characteristics of everyday public speech" (Wright *et al.* 2016: 74). The study of newssharing on social media, then—especially when it examines everyday sharing practices, rather than focussing only on exceptional acute events as marked, for instance, by trending hashtags—can provide important new insights into everyday political debate.

The results of such study may potentially be instrumentalised by populist political interests, however, especially where they are misunderstood and misrepresented as straightforwardly indicating popular attitudes. It bears repeating that social media, and the activity patterns that can be observed here, are not simply democratic spaces, for a number of reasons: in spite of their vast user communities, *Facebook* and *Twitter* are not directly representative for the

wider public; user activities on these and other platforms span a broad range of interests and practices, and have a range of affective as well as rational dimensions, not all of which intersect with public debates; and the inherently and explicitly social nature of these platforms, which is accentuated not least by the on-site follower and friendship networks that most users are at least generally aware of, is likely to engender powerful socialisation dynamics that make some topics and issues a great deal easier to address than others.

But overall, the concerns that Turner has expressed about the demotic turn in talk radio and elsewhere do not translate easily to the observations we have made here about the demoticisation of news engagement in social media. This is fundamentally because mediation works differently here: there is no explicit moderation of user contributions beyond a comparatively laissez-fair and reactive enforcement of (controversial, but not narrowly political) 'community norms'; instead, users are free to express their political and other views as they see fit, guided only by their own judgments of what is acceptable to their imagined audiences. The strong focus on liveness—especially on *Twitter*—further contributes to a reliance on the algorithmic rather than manual shaping of update feeds; such algorithmic and other technical mechanisms as employed by social media platforms are problematic in many ways, as much recent research has pointed out, but the content visibility and amplification choices that algorithms make are usually not overtly party-political. In all, therefore, the mediation and publication frameworks that underlie social media affect the range and diversity of views that are able to be expressed by ordinary users far less than the production and mediation processes of talk radio and other audience-involvement formats in conventional media channels constrain the expression of ordinary audience members.

As a result, therefore, expression and debate on social media platforms remains considerably more diverse, open, and independent than they are on most other media forms. Even in spite of the evident controlling presence of platform providers, and of the technologies they implement to shape user activities, social media platforms do remain premier vehicles for what Castells has described as "mass self-communication" (Castells 2007: 239).

Industry Responses to Habitual Newssharing

Although news outlets and their journalists are now increasingly active on social media, not least also to provide content that is ready-made for on-sharing,

for the most part their relationship to newssharing has been a reactive rather than proactive one—not unlike the social media platform operators themselves, they have been surprised by the evident popularity of newssharing and engagement on platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. As we will see in the following chapters, they have only gradually developed strategies for operating effectively in social media spaces.

However, the effects of the demoticisation of newssharing as a habitual practice that the majority of social media users engage in are already profound. They have contributed in the first place to the further atomisation of the news, and of news flows, further intensifying such tendencies that had already emerged during the first wave of citizen media. Then, and even more so now, what gatewatchers identify as shareworthy content are almost always individual stories, rather than entire news sites. In social media spaces, these are then shared usually in the form of headlines and links to the full article; in the case of newssharing on *Twitter*, the 140-character limitations that apply to individual tweets enforce a particular brevity, of course.

As an entry point to mainstream and alternative news sites, and to other sources being identified by gatewatching and circulated by newssharing, this promotes the practice of direct or 'deep' linking: these links encourage users to go directly to a specific news article (or, using available page anchors, even to a specific part of an article page), rather than to enter the site's main page and navigate from there to the shared article in the way that the site's designers may have envisaged. This shortcutting of navigational pathways from external links to news articles has traditionally been disliked by online news outlets, however, not least because it reduces the number of pages viewed by a visiting user and thereby both undermines the potential for brand recognition and (more importantly) the number of revenue-generating on-site ads being served to the user. Indeed, in the past some news sites have even attempted to use the legal system to prohibit deep linking, with predictably limited success (Cullen 2003).

Especially in the context of a financially stressed news industry, the habitual circulation of links to online news content also conflicts with attempts to increase online news revenues by implementing access restrictions for non-subscribers. These paywalls have been implemented in a number of different configurations over the past 10 years, from hard paywalls that exclude any users without a current paid subscription to softer models that allow a limited number of free article visits before a subscription becomes necessary. Some sites also distinguish between free (non-paywalled) and premium (paywalled)

content types: here, generic news reporting—much of which is likely to be sourced from news agencies and can be found in identical or equivalent form on competing news sites—often remains in the 'free' category, while original articles by the news outlet's own reporters, and opinion pieces by its commentators, are classified as 'premium'. Unsurprisingly, especially more restrictive forms of paywalls tend to have a strongly negative effect on the volume of news articles that are shared on social media: paid subscribers—as well as the outlet's own organisational accounts and journalists—may well share links to paywalled articles, but users who due to paywall restrictions cannot gain access to such content are unlikely to amplify the visibility of these articles by sharing them on any further.

More recently, some sites have complemented their paywall strategies by implementing a somewhat softer form of exclusion: they now refuse to serve articles to users who use one of a number of popular ad-blocking extensions for their browsers to prevent the display of in-page advertisements. The intention of this approach is to continue to provide free news content, but to ensure at least that such free viewing of articles results in online ad impressions and thereby generates revenue to the news site. However, even this much gentler encouragement to users to enter into a *quid pro quo* relationship with news sites still affects newssharing rates: long-term observations of the sharing of links to articles published in the leading German tabloid *Bild*, for instance, show that the monthly volume of tweets sharing *Bild* links declined by one third after the site implemented its ad-blocker ban (Bruns *et al.* 2016). Again this can be explained by the fact that especially casual users who are not frequent visitors to this site may be reluctant to turn off their ad-blockers just to view a single shared article—and will therefore also not share the article on any further.

Finally, some sites also deliberately limit the shareability of their articles through social media for explicitly ideological reasons. For instance, the staunchly right-wing newspaper *The Australian*—which we have already seen feuding with blogging opinion poll analysts during the 2007 'blog wars' in Australia—has more recently directed its attacks towards the Australian Twittersphere, based on its (empirically unfounded) assumption that the political *Twitter* community in Australia is dominated by left-wing activists. Having already constructed a partial paywall, which allows non-paying users a limited level of free access, around its 'premium' content, *The Australian* further implemented a distinction between the different pathways by which such non-paying users arrived on its site: while users who find *The Australian*'s

articles through Google searches can read a number of paywalled articles for free before being required to pay, users arriving from links shared on *Twitter* are immediately excluded and must pay in order to gain access. (If this two-class system was designed to prevent *The Australian*'s articles from circulating on *Twitter*—and, in the editors' fears, from being critiqued and criticised—, however, it has failed: enterprising *Twitter* users now often share the Google search links that point indirectly to the articles in question, rather than linking to the articles directly.)

Although news outlets' implementation of such strange, contorted bottle-necks to user access and newssharing is perhaps understandable from a commercial perspective (as well as, with considerable charity, from an ideological point of view), it is nonetheless clearly hindering the sharing of news content through social media: the more restrictive the paywall approach taken by a given site, the more it thereby removes itself from the social media news flow. This may ultimately create more new problems than it solves: sites that excise themselves from social media debate in this way reduce their own visibility and reach, and thereby also further limit the number of ad impressions and paywall subscriptions they are likely to achieve.

Former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger has suggested that "newspapers should want to be open and collaborative in what they do. Because that's the way the Internet works. And so I think it is a very profound statement journalistically to want to put a universal barrier between you and the way the rest of the world is going to work" (2010: n.p.). The alternative perspective to such self-exclusion from public circulation that has emerged in recent years—but notably has been espoused especially vocally by public service media organisations that receive government or licence fee funding, as well as by news outlets such as *The Guardian* that are sustained by trust funding and thus somewhat more insulated from a declining news market—therefore holds that news organisations must strive to be thoroughly open. "News … needs to become more *interoperable*: capable of being usefully reused by multiple sites and services so that stories and their elements can be discovered, integrated into other sites and content, and redistributed by its users" (Weinberger 2015: n.p.). Some news sites have even experimented with providing their own Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), in order to make their content even more discoverable and shareable, through social media and other platforms. *The Economist*, for instance, has backed away again from a more exclusionary approach as a consequence of coming to understand how important social media now are as drivers of user traffic to the site, and has instead "introduced

a more flexible paywall, partly to ensure that social traffic does not get driven away" (Newman 2011: 17). Across the industry, "this approach is gathering favour as new evidence has emerged which shows that social media traffic tends to be stickier and more valuable than drive-by search referrals" (50).

These more proactive approaches that openly embrace and encourage newssharing as a demotic practice, as well as the substantial negative effects of paywalls and ad-blocker bans that have become increasingly obvious, demonstrate again how central social media have now become as a mechanism for the discovery and circulation of, and engagement with, news and news-related information. Other mechanisms that the industry had hoped would establish captive (and ideally, paying) audiences elsewhere, away from the social media platforms that remain outside of their immediate control, have failed to deliver: the initial enthusiasm for dedicated news apps on smartphones and tablets has dissipated, for instance (and some such apps have been criticised for not providing built-in functionality to share their content via social media); and micropayment solutions that would enable users to reward the journalistic content they share by contributing a very small amount of money on the fly are available but not widely used (Newman *et al.* 2016: 36).

Conversely, social media platform operators as well as the companies designing leading mobile operating systems have continued to implement serendipitous news discovery and social news curation functionality into their platforms. Such functionality draws on the collective but usually uncoordinated efforts of millions of habitual newssharers to surface and present currently leading news stories across a wide range of topics and issues; it further cements the role of social media platforms as the go-to destinations for users seeking to discover current news, and in doing so diverts traffic away from the front pages of major news outlets, as well as from the leading search engines, both of which had previously fulfilled this role.

The net effect of this shift in how and where Internet users get their news is that specific news imprints no longer matter especially much. The loyalty of users to individual brands is now much reduced; only 20% of the U.S. users surveyed by the Pew Research Center clicked on shared links because "the link came from a news organization they preferred", for instance (2013: 3). This decline is especially pronounced, unsurprisingly, amongst users who predominantly source their news online rather than through other, offline channels. For the most part, given the atomisation of the news into individual articles circulating separately from each other, and considering the brevity of posts that leading social media sites encourage, it is the punchiness of the

article headline itself, rather than the eminence of the news brand behind it, that now attracts users to read and share a particular article (Newman *et al.* 2015: 78). Indeed, as *Buzzfeed*'s Jonah Peretti has put it,

> headlines are generated on Twitter and all these different places and it is something that we think a lot about. What do people add to a story when they share it? In some cases it's better than the headline that our team wrote and in some cases shows why content matters to them. Because you say, "I'm sharing this" and explain why you're sharing it. (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.)

As a result, there are now many more new pathways to the news; news access is no longer bundled by brands and imprints, but follows a range of considerably more complex and potentially unpredictable paths that emerge from the aggregate of user-driven newssharing activities. In consequence, it is not unexpected that, as Olmstead *et al.* reported as early as 2011, occasional visitors now account for the majority of visits to most mainstream online news sites: "on average, 77% of the traffic to the top 25 news sites [in the U.S.] came from users who visited just one or two times" (2011: 14). This raises critical questions, as Funt *et al.* point out: "if readers are finding stories in every corner of the Web, and may not even remember where they first read them, how can publishers build a loyal audience? Do brands even matter anymore" (2016: n.p.)?

This is not to say that brands are now entirely irrelevant, of course: given the choice between two articles on the same topic that circulate on social media, or in assessing the veracity of conflicting news reports from different sources, it is quite likely that social media users will continue to select the news imprint which has the better long-term reputation (in general, and/or in its coverage of the topic at hand), but this nonetheless means that the quality of the imprint is now a secondary or tertiary concern in the news judgments applied by social media users, when previously news audiences chose the imprint (the newspaper, the TV channel, the Website) first, before selecting those of the imprint's stories that they felt were of interest to them.

And yet, in spite of the overall decline in news brand loyalty amongst social media users, this also provides a new opportunity for news outlets: "information flows tend not to stop at borders" (Heinrich 2013: 91), and their content is now accessible to a potentially global audience. For example, "social media have helped UK newspapers and broadcasters gain traction around the world and especially in the United States"—but at the same time, "news organisations with paywalls are in danger of missing out on the benefits" (New-

man 2011: 6) of this shift. If brand loyalty in the sense of user attention to the news published by one outlet to the exclusion of all others has disappeared, then, brand recognition does remain even in the considerably more open, multi-channel spaces of social media platforms, and can be reinforced by the collective processes of social filtering and social curation. "For news outlets operating under the traditional model of building a loyal, perhaps paying audience, obtaining referrals so that users think of the outlet as the first place to turn is critical" (Pew Research Center 2014: 5).

Developing an active presence, at institutional and individual levels, is therefore crucial for news organisations and their journalists, as we will see in more detail in the following chapters. Social media users do still follow the *Twitter* accounts and *Facebook* pages of news outlets and individual news workers, of course (Pew Research Center 2013: 3)—in spite of everything, "people still want, value, and identify with traditional news brands" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 29). But most likely they have also established a more diverse repertoire of accounts (cf. Schmidt 2016) that in combination contribute the social media component of their overall news diet: "the impact of online [news consumption] is to significantly increase the number of brands used for news each week" (Newman *et al.* 2015: 50). In addition to the voices from the journalism industry this repertoire may also include news aggregators and retweet bots (cf. Newman 2011: 29), as well as non-professional curators of news feeds on specific topics and issues, and individual sources and experts from those areas of interest. As Thorson and Wells point out, "a central story emerging from the digital media era has been the growing capacity for strategic actors—politicians, corporations, governments, interest groups—to address publics directly, in many cases bypassing the curation choices of the news gatekeepers" (2015: 34). Finally, the specific composition of the repertoire of sources utilised by any given social media user will also vary widely across different topics and issues, as different sources become more relevant (Orellana-Rodriguez *et al.* 2016).

In this context, then, where they are certainly still prominent, but increasingly simply one source amongst many others in a given user's social media repertoire, it is becoming increasingly difficult for news organisations set the news agenda, establish dominant news frames, and lead the public debate of the news, in the same way that they had been able to when they controlled the means of publishing and disseminating the news almost exclusively; rather, what now ensues is a more open-ended interaction between conventional and social media, between professional journalists and habitual newssharers,

between the mainstream and social media news agendas. Comparative studies of the dynamics of mainstream and social media news agendas therefore now commonly "see a complex and dynamic pattern of leading and lagging indicators among the social and traditional media rather than a dominance of traditional media agenda setting in the electronic public sphere" (Neuman *et al.* 2014: 209). In these bidirectional intermedia agenda-setting processes, the leading outlets of the news industry are far from guaranteed to retain their accustomed hegemony on each and every issue and topic.

However, as we have seen, this changed environment also provides an opportunity for new news outlets and journalists to make a name for themselves. In particular, "individuals may be replacing institutions as the fundamental unit of the profession" (Molyneux and Holton 2015: 226), as we will see in the next chapter. They can do so especially if they overcome any remaining fears of engaging with social media, and become active in gatewatching, newssharing, and social curation themselves—and if they do so, like Andy Carvin and other leading proponents of this approach, in a consistent and sustained fashion and on particular issues and topics that clearly relate to their areas of established expertise. "News correspondents and columnists are gaining new authority and influence through their expert use of social media. Some are becoming 'network nodes' attracting significant audiences of their own—independently of their parent brands" (Newman 2011: 6).

As Hermida puts it, then, "the question is whether Carvin is a heretic outside the orthodoxy of journalism, or whether he is the precursor to a proto-journalist immersed in social awareness streams that serve simultaneously as newswire, newsroom and new outlet" (2013: 304). In the following chapters, we will explore the various ways in which individual journalism professionals have explored the new opportunities that have become available to them in recent times, and how news organisations have responded to these tendencies at an institutional level—and in Chapter 7 we explore a particular new journalistic publication format that has gained increasing popularity in the industry, the liveblog, as a novel approach to embedding some of the practices and processes from social media news curation back into conventional journalistic publication contexts.

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