

MANAGEMENT AND METRICS

The News Industry and Social Media

The previous chapter has explored the active, communicative uses of social media that have now emerged in the news industry, with a focus especially on uses by individual journalists as they attempt to incorporate social media into their day-to-day professional practices. But there are also a number of more institutional responses to the challenges and opportunities provided by contemporary social media platforms—which ultimately require a substantial rethinking of the relationships between news organisations and their (former) audiences. This chapter addresses these responses at the institutional level.

First, the emergence of social media as spaces for following and discussing the news can be seen to have had an unexpectedly positive side effect. Almost since they were first implemented, journalists as well as audiences have been critical of the reader commentary functions provided by most news Websites: while audiences have been disappointed by the lack of post-publication engagement in such comment threads by journalists and columnists, news professionals in turn have frequently dismissed such commentary spaces as overly belligerent and ill-informed; additionally, many news organisations have struggled with the additional work required to oversee and moderate these comment sections. Over time, therefore, such sections have largely been treated as unwanted extensions of news Websites, with little attention paid

to the technical and social interventions that could be made to improve the quality of engagement and commentary there; by now, many such comment spaces are either virtually dead or populated only by a remnant of incorrigible trolls and ideologues.

The emergence of social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* as third-party platforms where substantial discussion of news content takes place has therefore provided a welcome opportunity for news organisations to transition and outsource such commentary functions to these platforms, to the point where “this trend towards more conversations happening off-platform has led some news websites to close their message boards and forums” since 2014 (Newman *et al.* 2015: 83). This frees up considerable staff time for news outlets, as it no longer requires maintenance or development work, or the presence of dedicated moderators “playing chaperone to the users they have invited in” to their own sites (Braun and Gillespie 2011: 384); notably, however, some such moderation may still be required in social media platforms such as *Facebook* where user feedback and comments on the news headlines posted to an organisational *Facebook* page will also appear to other visitors of that page (Larsson and Ihlebæk 2016: 5).

In addition to shutting down on-site comment sections altogether, some sites have also experimented with the embedding of *Facebook*'s commenting functions on their own pages, replacing comment systems developed in-house. Whether embedding *Facebook* into the news site in this way, or outsourcing commenting to *Facebook*, one underlying hope associated with such strategies is that the direct association of comments with the commenters' personal *Facebook* profiles that is created by such mechanisms will lead contributors to moderate their language and behaviour: although dedicated trolls would certainly be able to set up fake profiles in order to protect themselves from immediate repercussions, to do so might constitute more effort than many disruptive commentators are willing to endure.

At the same time, the outsourcing of commenting to *Facebook*—especially through the creation of institutional *Facebook* pages that post all or selected news headlines and ledes as starting points for user liking, sharing, and commentary—might also mean a reduction in actual user visits to the news outlet's core Website itself: there is a danger that *Facebook* users could simply visit the institutional page on the platform in order to keep track of current headlines, but click through to the full articles only on rare occasions (the organisation's *Facebook* page would then have a similar, but this time self-inflicted effect to the consequences reported for *Google News* or third-party newsreader apps). The limited data that are currently publicly available on

user behaviours around institutional *Facebook* pages paint a mixed picture in this context: “the coveted ‘click back’ from links inside Facebook posts to full stories on a news website is fairly common. Two-thirds of Facebook news consumers, 64%, say that they at least sometimes click on links to news stories. Still, just 16% do this often” (Pew Research Center 2013: 11). Although far from the ideal situation that news organisations might envisage, then, their development of institutional *Facebook* pages may at least not have worsened the already limited click-through rates that news outlets have experienced from other news digests outside of their control.

Much of this discussion has been in the first place about *Facebook*, which—because of its more fully developed, semi-threaded commenting functions and branded institutional pages functionality—enables a more straightforward transition from existing on-site, in-house commentary sections to outsourced social media commenting. *Twitter*, by contrast, represents an even more arm’s-length option: except for the news organisation’s overall profile page, it does not allow for the creation of dedicated institutional pages, and the responses posted by ordinary users in the form of @replies to the posts made by a news organisation are not as immediately visible (nor organised as effectively in the form of comment threads) as they are on *Facebook*. For this reason, news outlets posting their headlines to *Twitter* neither need to concern themselves with the moderation of subsequent user comments, nor is there the functionality on *Twitter* to do so even if they wanted to.

In turn, finally, the user comments to institutional news stories posted to *Facebook* or *Twitter* may also be pulled back into ‘official’ institutional content by incorporating them into follow-up reporting. Especially important in this context is the liveblog format, which we will explore in greater detail in the following chapter: here, having already outsourced commenting functionality to the relevant social media platforms, the journalist in control of the liveblog now has the opportunity to select especially valuable comments for inclusion in the unfolding blog text.

Standardising Social Media Activities

The outsourcing of user commentary to social media platforms must ultimately be seen as an attempt to control user engagement activities and protect the news organisation against any negative repercussions for its public image and reputation that may result from especially negative and belligerent user

discussions on its pages. News outlets are similarly concerned about the impact that the social media activities of their own journalists and newsroom staff may have on the organisation's reputation, and they have therefore also begun to at least attempt to standardise professional uses of social media by instituting their own official guidelines for social media use. These guidelines have been examined especially in an important article by Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck (2014), which reviews the tenor of such guidelines as they have been implemented in a number of leading news organisations and interviews a range of Flemish journalists about their perceptions of such guidelines.

Acknowledging the increasing importance of social media as tools for sourcing, dissemination, and engagement, most such guidelines deal in the first place with a number of key aspects of journalistic practice: "recommendations and guidelines are formulated about how journalists must deal with, *inter alia*, checking sources, plagiarism, breaking news, insults, etc., within social media" (Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck 2014: 729). The focus here is not simply on safeguarding the individual journalist from making mistakes, however: importantly, where such mistakes do occur, the guidelines also seek to ensure that they impact only on the individual, and not on the news outlet as a whole. Therefore, they frequently encourage or require the journalist to implement clear disclaimers that distance their personal account and brand from that of the news organisation they work for: for instance, at the Reuters news agency

one of the recommendations encourages journalists to mention Reuters in their account name or biography and to declare that they speak for themselves, not for Thomson Reuters. Staff may present themselves personally, but details about their private lives do not belong on the account. Furthermore, it must at all times be clear that the journalist in question works for Reuters and the tweets must not have any possible adverse effect on the press agency. (Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck 2014: 729)

Such concerns are especially prominent, on *Twitter*, in the context of journalists' retweeting practices, reflecting fears that the retweeting of political and other statements could be seen as an implicit endorsement of these positions. Indeed, Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck report that one news outlet, the U.K.-based *Sky News*, has even attempted to implement "a guideline ... that its journalists were not allowed to retweet any message originating from someone who is not affiliated" with *Sky News* itself (2014: 730). There are, however, significant questions about whether such comprehensive bans of social media activities that are otherwise extremely common on these platforms can be

effectively enforced, as they would severely limit journalists' ability to use social media in a way that is compatible with the practices of ordinary users, and comprehensible to these users.

Journalists are therefore also often critical of such institutional social media guidelines, especially where they clearly overreach in their attempts to ward off negative repercussions for the organisation. Indeed, this raises the broader question of the extent to which employers can control the social media practices of their employees by instituting official guidelines, especially where such social media use occurs in the context of the employee's personal profile and is clearly demarcated from the employer's corporate social media presence. Such questions exist in similar form well beyond the journalism industry itself, and have yet to be tested comprehensively (and across diverse jurisdictions) in court; some journalists themselves, at any rate, point out that they would be opposed to giving their employers too much control over what is at least in part a personal social media presence: "I would find that unfortunate. Precisely because in part I really use Twitter personally as a sort of way to vent my thoughts" (anonymous journalist qtd. in Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck 2014: 734).

At the same time, however, it must also be noted that some journalists are themselves still deeply unsure about the 'correct' use of social media for professional or at least semi-professional purposes. They are therefore usually not inherently opposed to the social media advice provided by their employers, as long as it is formulated in the form of useful guidelines rather than restrictive rules (Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck 2014: 737). In the first place, in fact the mere existence of such guidelines is also seen as an explicit statement of a news organisation's embrace of social media as a legitimate element of professional newswork practices: "if there were no guidelines for us, then that would mean that the company has not yet realized that social media really constitutes a part of the news" (anonymous journalist qtd. in Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck 2014: 733). In some news organisations, therefore, institutional guidelines for journalistic social media use have been developed not on the initiative of management concerned about reputational damage from uncontrolled individual activities, but on the request and with the input of journalists themselves (733). This can be seen as a sign of the normalisation of what Hedman (2015) has described as 'j-tweeting', and of other social media activities, as part of everyday journalistic practice; such normalisation—especially if it occurs too soon after the introduction of new technologies and associated practices—may also end up prematurely curtailing the transforma-

tive potential of these new developments, however: “instead of experimenting with how audience participation might change the journalism conversation, news institutions have tended to retrofit yet another reporting tool” (Lewis and Usher 2013: 609).

Addressing Personal Branding

In the previous chapter, we have already explored the practice of direct audience engagement and personal branding from the perspective of individual journalists, not least also as a mechanism of accumulating valuable social capital that boosts the individual news worker’s job prospects in a stressed and shrinking industry. Corporate responses to such practices remain mixed and contradictory. On the one hand, there is a perception that—much as in broadcast news—the development of strong personal brands by leading journalists enhances audience engagement with and trust in the news produced by the journalists’ organisation, and thereby perhaps also increases its circulation across social networks; as Newman points out, “individuals are often more effective as ‘network nodes’ than brands ... because the currency of social media is people, and because of the extra trust involved in receiving news or information from people you know” (2011: 48).

On the other hand, however, there is also a concern that such personal branding alters the balance of power between journalists and their employers, and mainly benefits the journalists themselves. As the U.K. *Daily Telegraph*’s social media editor Kate Day reports, “if you have reporters tweeting and building up their profiles, that is great for them but there are some editors who struggle to understand how that is great for the Telegraph” (qtd. in Newman 2011: 48). Perhaps the key concern here is that such social media stars amongst journalists might eventually move on to another organisation, taking their strong established social media following with them as they do so (much as might happen when a popular broadcast news anchor moves from one station to another); the social capital built up by the journalist in the course of their employment, drawing on the resources of their employer, remains necessarily associated with the individual and benefits the employer only as long as the association between journalist and employer continues.

Short of outlawing the operation of personal social media accounts by journalists altogether, or of stipulating as part of employment contracts that the social media account operated by the journalist remains the property of

the news organisation at the termination of employment—neither of which are practicable options in the current environment—, however, news organisations appear unable to address this shift in the balance of power between them and their news workers; their relationship now resembles that between sports clubs and professional sportspeople more than that between ordinary employers and employees. Similar developments are occurring also in other professions where the accumulation of social status and capital through social media has elevated individuals from being ordinary team members to becoming recognised as distinct personalities.

This personal recognition, in turn, can also have strongly negative effects, however. The development of a personal brand, with all that it entails, necessarily also limits the individual journalist's ability to maintain their privacy; in their study of Irish journalists attitudes towards social media, Heravi and Harrower cite personal privacy issues as a deterrent to professional social media use that is named by nearly two fifths of their respondents, for instance. Such concerns are especially notable “given that the most-used platform, Twitter, comprises almost entirely public content” (Heravi and Harrower 2016: 1205). In addition to the need for individual journalists to choose what level of privacy or disclosure they are comfortable with, this also has important institutional consequences, of course, not the least of which are the chilling effects that may arise from personal exposure:

journalists acting as individuals exposes them to personal attacks, the fear of which may restrain what they are willing to cover. In other words, journalists' desire to please their audiences may have the undesirable side effect of limiting their interest in covering controversial or potentially sensitive story subjects. (Molyneux and Holton 2015: 237)

News organisations requiring their journalists to cover highly controversial topics—from anthropogenic climate change through refugee policy to the election campaigns of populist candidates—may already be exposing these journalists to considerable attacks and hatred from extremist participants in these debates. News organisations that do so while at the same time also encouraging (or requiring) their journalists to be present with a personal profile on social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* may go even further in placing such journalists in harm's way—and will need to very carefully consider the implications of such corporate policies, as well as to put in place the support mechanisms that ensure the personal integrity and safety of their staff.

Measuring Audience Engagement

In spite of such concerns, it is now nonetheless true that “the individual journalist’s activity in social media becomes part of a corporate brand, and editors and managers can put pressure on journalists to be active social media users” (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013: 371). A further consequence of this incorporation of social media into institutional audience engagement strategies is also that the returns on such investments of staff time and other resources are increasingly closely measured and evaluated, with social media strategies being constantly refined as part of overall competitive behaviour in an already highly competitive marketplace.

“News organisations all over the world have in recent years increased their use of analytics—systematic analysis of quantitative data on various aspects of audience behaviour aimed at growing audiences, increasing engagement, and improving newsroom workflows” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 7). This extends (and to some extent transforms) previous strategies for search engine optimisation (SEO)—which were designed to ensure that a given outlet’s news stories on a particular topic appeared high in the ranking of relevant search results on that topic—towards social media optimisation (SMO; cf. Newman 2011: 53), where the central aim is to promote the widest possible circulation of stories through social media platforms, thereby amplifying their visibility and readership. “All of this activity demonstrates how closely editorial teams now need to work with marketing and business development—in real time” (Newman 2011: 54)—, but such growing interconnections between editorial and marketing imperatives are also the cause of substantial concern in the industry.

Several leading news organisations have now deployed sophisticated in-house analytics toolkits that enable a close observation and analysis of the performance of their content across various social media platforms and the wider Web; this also enables them to “collect and analyze the footprints that news users leave behind, offering immediate access to an unprecedented wealth of information about audience behavior” (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 560). Less well-resourced outlets rely on a range of more generic Web and social media analytics tools that do not provide insights at a comparable level of detail, but here, too, there is a growing push to gather real-time information on how well individual news articles and overall sections and publications within the news organisation are performing.

Such performance indicators are now also often provided directly to the editors and journalists responsible for the news content. The aim behind *The Guardian's* development of its in-house analytics suite Ophan, for instance, “was to create a ‘feedback loop’ to make it easier for journalists to see in real time how changes made to headlines, for example, might affect search traffic to stories” (Edge 2014: n.p.); such fine-tuning of story headlines and presentation after publication in order to optimise their visibility and circulation is now common across much of the industry, at least in comparatively well-resourced news organisations.

It should be noted here, however, that such optimisation processes did not emerge only with the adoption of social media as a content promotion mechanism: online content adjustment strategies were previously implemented when search engines first appeared as a major source of traffic to news Websites, and even in pre-digital times subeditors worked to ensure that article headlines were clear and attractive to readers, of course. However, the very immediate online and social media response to such changes that can now be measured and evaluated further intensifies these content dynamics: “in many ways Twitter is just speeding-up a process that has always occurred behind closed doors. Now it is possible to see a networked map of how a news story spreads—and how that draws people back to find out more” (Newman 2011: 20). This is due particularly to the increasing technological sophistication of the platforms on which digital content is published, and through which audiences engage with it, as Helmond points out: “the practice of link sharing on social media platforms automatically ... renders the link, and to a certain extent the user, into a traceable object” (Helmond 2013: n.p.).

Such growing technological sophistication, however, does not necessarily also translate into a markedly improved understanding of the analytics data that can now be gathered. As Cherubini and Nielsen note in their major study of the rise of social media optimisation in the news industry,

in many cases, analytics are organised in ways that reflect inherited workflows and the incremental accumulation of new tools and techniques over time more than any thought-through approach. Real-time analysis may be carried out by a homepage editor, social media insights are monitored by a social media editor, and deeper, longer term analysis only on the commercial side or in the media research department and not in the newsroom. Search engine optimisation is sometimes streamlined across the whole online newsroom, sometimes the province of a SEO editor, sometimes an afterthought. (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 30–31)

This affects especially the most recent and most sophisticated measurements of social media activity around news stories and sites, which remain inconsistently implemented and poorly understood; as a result, Cherubini and Nielsen's report concludes that in 2016, "basically, contemporary forms of analytics are very good at understanding the main ways in which people used digital media in 2010" (2016: 39). This view is echoed by *The Guardian's* director of architecture Graham Tackley, who reports that "when I've talked to people about ... more [complex] metrics than page views they ... really genuinely have no idea about what they actually mean" (qtd. in Edge 2014: n.p.).

Even when—as at *The Guardian*—more sophisticated and in-depth online and social media metrics are available to editors and journalists, therefore, they are often still treated more as an impenetrable fetish object rather than a genuine tool for attracting and engaging with audiences. Indeed, one of Tandoc Jr.'s informants—the managing editor of a newsroom—

compared using web analytics with getting hooked on drugs. "It's like crack," he said, grinning. "You can sit here and watch it, popping all night." Online editors would have their analytics program open all day, and the numbers on the analytics dashboards would change all the time. (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 567)

In this context, the adoption of social media *analytics* into newsroom practices may follow similar paths to the preceding adoption of social media themselves, in fact: it is driven in good part by individual enthusiasts, and often becomes the domain of younger newsroom staff who—as 'digital natives'—are rightly or wrongly assumed to know more about social media (and social media analytics) than their more senior colleagues (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 567).

Such widespread deployment of analytics tools without a matching growth in analytics literacies amongst newsroom staff—and similar problems exist also in many other industries where social media play an increasingly important role—can create systemic structural problems that have been highlighted by Nielsen in none-too-subtle terms:

many actors, some of them powerful, feel impelled to act upon, engage with, and have views of social media, even though they may know little about them. This demand underpins a highly generative *political economy* for the production of statements about social media. ... [It] is likely to also produce a lot of bullshit. (Nielsen 2015: 2)

This continued lack of understanding of social media analytics, coupled in some cases with a wilful ignorance of and deliberate resistance to social media, serves to heighten the conflicts between traditional and emerging journalistic

practices, particularly in relation to audience engagement. It is broadly true that “journalists used to ignore, if not reject, feedback from the audience” (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 563) and make their gatekeeping choices by means of ‘gut feel’ and professional routines; some—especially more senior—journalists may well wish to continue to do so still. To them, it may now appear that “the gatekeeping role is being centralized—editors, armed with audience analytics, maintain iron discipline The gatekeeper is now computer operated” (Phillips 2015: 80). However, at the same time the increasingly competitive struggle for audience attention also means that “many journalists ... *want analytics*, as an earlier period of scepticism seems to have given way to interest in how data and metrics can help newsrooms reach their target audiences and do better journalism” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 7). This clash of journalistic worldviews remains as yet unresolved.

Shaping News Content

However, institutional imperatives are now pushing editors and journalists towards a deeper engagement with their content metrics with increasingly irresistible force; “in most online newsrooms, audience preferences have become omnipresent through web analytics and ignoring the online audience has become difficult” (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 560). Napoli also sees this as a sign of a fundamentally changing understanding of news audiences within the industry, and suggests that such “audience evolution” can only occur “when both: a) the dynamics of audiences’ media usage are changing in ways that undermine traditional approaches to audience measurement and valuation; and b) affordable and acceptable new analytical approaches are available” (Napoli 2013: 4).

Again, in this reconceptualisation of news audiences as more active *users*, and this redevelopment of institutional strategies for reaching and engaging with them, industry leaders are necessarily a great deal more advanced than more minor players (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 7). Amongst the leading news outlets, Cherubini and Nielsen therefore now see the emergence of “distinct forms of ... editorial analytics” that advance well beyond mere audience metrics: such “editorial analytics aim to help journalists and news organisations become more data-informed, not to replace editorial judgement with the tyranny of numbers” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 9).

Such editorial analytics affect the shape and structure of the content published on news outlets’ Websites and through their social media accounts in

a number of ways. First, in a further extension of practices that emerged in full with the rise of search engine optimisation, but trace their history back to pre-digital times, the headlines of news stories are now often systematically optimised for attractiveness to various online audiences. Indeed, some leading news outlets even engage in real-time A/B testing of headlines to determine which version draws more audience engagement. Tandoc Jr. observed this in action in one of the newsrooms he observed, which used the *Visual Revenue* analytics suite:

a web editor wrote two headlines for the same story. *Visual Revenue* randomly exposed readers to one of the two headlines. His first version got a 9% rating while his second version got 42%. The ratings were based on how many readers clicked on the story after reading the headline. He decided to go with the second headline based on *Visual Revenue's* recommendation. (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 568)

Second, the visual elements accompanying each story can be similarly optimised by testing audience engagement with different configurations; in addition to the visuals posted to the news outlet's site itself, this is especially important in the light of studies that show that *Facebook* and *Twitter* posts that are accompanied by visual elements receive a greater level of user engagement (e.g. Sabate *et al.* 2014). In one of Tandoc Jr.'s newsrooms, for instance,

a web editor was updating a news story about a homicide when he suddenly came up with an idea. Having the suspect's photo next to a story is common, but readers would also want to see the photo of the victim. So he thought of putting the two photos side by side. "I kind of favor that," he said. "We need her face [the victim's] out there for it to perform well so I'm gonna talk to photo." Then, he walked toward the photo section, came back to his workstation, and said, "So they're producing that." (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 568)

Such content strategies may be deeply problematic especially in the context of crime and disaster coverage, of course: images showing victims, especially when they are used to promote news stories on social media platforms and thus widely circulated, could be seen as insensitive and exploitative; they might also prejudice the eventual court case. Several cases of substantial user backlash against the use of such images to promote news content have gradually led to a more cautious approach to image use, at least amongst quality news outlets.

Third, the analysis of audience engagement metrics both on news sites, through search engines, and on social media platforms now also influences the

story line-up displayed on the frontpages of news outlets' Websites. There is an imperative for the stories on such news sites to remain 'fresh' in order to reward repeat visitors; as a result, when click-through numbers to individual stories "start to dip, web editors take that as being the right time to update the homepage by moving around stories or adding new ones to replace those that have stagnated based on traffic" (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 568). Conversely, stories that show signs of growing real-time audience engagement especially via social media, even though they are not prominently featured on the frontpage, might be promoted to better visibility in order to fully exploit such interest.

These selection and deselection processes may be understood from the perspective of gatekeeping theory: having already made it through one set of gates—initial story selection by the journalist or editor, leading to the development of the news article itself—these stories now make it through a secondary gate that controls access to the frontpage. But such an opening of the gates may also be reversed again once audience interest in a given article wanes, and result in a subsequent closing of the gates. Complicating this picture, however, is the fact that the audience metrics upon which such gate opening and gate closing events are based are in turn reflective—if they are drawn from the activities of social media users—of the *gatematching* practices of these users, which crucially influence the visibility and circulation of news stories across social media platforms.

There is, however, also a more fundamental question about the extent to which such attention to the story line-up on the frontpage of a news outlet's Website is still particularly relevant. As we have already seen in Chapter 4, newsharing as a habitual, demotic practice contributes substantially to an atomisation of the news—where direct, deep links to individual news articles rather than generic links to a news organisation's frontpage are the predominant unit of currency. Many users arriving at a mainstream news site through a process of serendipitous news discovery in their social media network may never encounter the site's frontpage at all, unless they click through to that page from the specific article they came to read (and the available statistics on such frontpage click-throughs are mixed at best). The more traffic arrives at such sites through deep links from social media platforms, therefore, the less important may this rearranging of frontpage news items turn out to be.

However, as a fourth element of metrics utilisation, audience engagement analytics are now also often reflected back more or less directly at news audiences themselves, beyond the structuration of the news frontpage. Starting as early as the mid-2000s,

online news platforms now incorporate collaborative filtering cues, such as *most e-mailed*, number of *page views*, and *average ... rating* associated with specific articles. The social functions of news may be even more salient when cues of collaborative filtering are present and indicate what other news readers appreciate and consume. (Knobloch-Westerwick *et al.* 2005: 297)

In addition to view counts, many sites therefore now also show their visitors how often a story has been tweeted, liked, or shared, and generate ranked lists of such ratings that are prominently displayed in sidebars alongside articles. In essence, this brings elements of the frontpage—chiefly, an ordered list of headlines—to individual article pages, and therefore to those pages that news users are now most likely to encounter. To the extent that such lists are based on the collective activities of social media users, they can therefore be understood as essentially embedding the aggregate results of the habitual social news curation activities taking place on *Twitter* and *Facebook* into the pages of mainstream news sites, ceding some control over the structure of such sites to news users.

Although “it appears likely that online news readers will orient their news consumption” relative to the story rankings that result from such analytics (Knobloch-Westerwick *et al.* 2005: 299), it is notable that this does not always happen in the way that the designers of these analytics may have envisaged. Building on an experimental study, Knobloch-Westerwick *et al.* point out that the lowest-ranked stories sometimes receive the greatest number of readers, and offer a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon: users may have “believed that the articles with fewer readers were more recently posted”, or may have been “looking for a ‘rare gem’ [that] could add to news consumers’ self-uniqueness experience” (2005: 310); additionally, we might also speculate that some users may have been reading against the grain deliberately because they sought to reject the popularity rankings apparently foisted on them by the news site. Whatever the explanation in each case, however, users do not just appear to blindly follow the content choices and rankings presented to them on a news site.

From Metrics of Popularity to the Populism of Metrics?

Nonetheless, as Heinderyckx warns us, “we must ... be wary about conflating relevance with popularity”: as audience engagement metrics are still used by many actors in the news industry, “the most read and best-rated articles

or most watched videos gain prominence and are implicitly considered as more important and hence more relevant, while they're just more *popular*" (2015: 260). If this influences further news reporting choices, then it may well result in news coverage that is more popular with general audiences, but does not necessarily serve to inform them more effectively. As Newman summarises this concern, "has a more responsive news organisation changed its values over what it writes and where it seeds its content? Is there a danger that the agenda is being narrowed by a race for popularity" (2011: 25)?

Such questions about the balance between quality and populism in news coverage are as old as commercial journalism itself, of course, and have at different times in its history been answered in very different ways; such answers also depend on the institutional mission of the news publication in question, and on the professional self-understanding of its newsroom staff. However, across the industry "most would agree that journalism's purpose cannot be reduced to 'giving the people what they want', while at the same time warning journalism's practitioners not to ignore its audience's preferences" (Loosen and Schmidt 2016: 3). Still, in an increasingly metrified digital newsroom environment the apparent audience imperatives emerging from the available news analytics data are perhaps particularly difficult to evade, especially if the corporate understanding of these metrics still remains unsophisticated.

The fundamental question in this context, then, is exactly how audience metrics are operationalised in a given newsroom, and how they are used alongside the various other data points as well as journalistic intuition and routine news judgment that also remain important to the news production process. Clearly, simply to rely "on algorithms that populate the list [of important stories] based on page views takes the control [away from] the journalist" (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 569) and would considerably narrow the available news coverage—not least also because the available audience analytics are necessarily most representative of (and most detailed for) those audiences that are most clearly observable: at present, this means online and especially social media audiences (and even here possibly the users of *Twitter* more than those of other, less public platforms). Thus, "one major challenge for journalists is to reconcile the (assumed) demands of the disperse[d] and heterogeneous, yet often silent mass media audience with the (verbalised) demands of the connected audiences they face in comment sections and social media" (Loosen and Schmidt 2016: 10).

For better or worse, in many newsrooms the barriers between editorial control and commercial interests have already weakened and perhaps even

disappeared as a result of the increasing utilisation of audience metrics; given the intense and now largely global competition between news outlets, especially online, for audience ‘eyeballs’, this is seen by many news workers simply as an unwanted, but unavoidable necessity. The response by one of Tandoc Jr.’s informants to a question about the balance between quality and commercialism is likely to be representative of such views: “I don’t think that we have the luxury of thinking that way because if the company’s not making money then I might get laid off. I mean, that’s just the way it is” (qtd. in Tandoc Jr. 2014: 570).

Short of returning the industry to a level of profitability that would allow the interweaving of journalism and commerce to be reduced again, if we do accept that “that’s just the way it is” for now it then becomes important to ensure that the increasing use of audience metrics does not mean that journalistic judgment is marginalised altogether. Ideally, this begins with involving practicing journalists in the development of the news metrics themselves, rather than confronting them simply with off-the-shelf metrics that have been created by analysts without journalistic training or affinity. This is crucial because, as Cherubini and Nielsen point out, “analytics and data metrics will continue to evolve, and if journalists are not part of that process, the tools and techniques developed will continue to reflect and empower commercial and technological priorities more than editorial priorities” (2016: 7).

Journalists must similarly be involved in discussions about the use of such metrics to influence news coverage. It is notable in this context that some of the most advanced audience metrics development and deployment in collaboration with journalistic staff has occurred in born-digital news organisations that have not traditionally been associated with quality journalism. *Buzzfeed* founder Jonah Peretti, for instance, recounts how his newsroom does

a lot of testing and we look at lots of metrics, but ultimately the raw material is people coming up with creative ideas. We have lots of meetings with five or six people sitting in a room brainstorming about what they could create. You have a lot of reporters saying ... , “Oh, what stories are we going to cover?” None of that is directly tied to any metrics. Although having seen what people’s response is in the past, it actually might give people a gut feeling. (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.)

Such ‘new’ news organisations may indeed be benefitting from the fact that they do not look back on long-entrenched organisational structures and cultures that may stifle an open and level exchange of views between newsroom and marketing staff; they are therefore free to take a more flexible and ex-

perimentative approach to their development and operationalisation of user engagement metrics.

Where such open and equitable discussions about the appropriate use of audience metrics occur, then, and where these metrics are not used to institute a transition to the computer-operated gatekeeper that we have seen Phillips (2015) warn of, a different dynamic may emerge: here, journalists are beginning to master the metrics and incorporate them usefully into their routine practices. In this sense, Tandoc Jr. suggests,

journalists are normalizing web analytics, using audience metrics to inform their traditional gatekeeping functions. But a process of negotiation is also going on, with journalists modifying existing norms to accommodate the increasing influence of new technology. News judgment now includes acute awareness of what stories did well in the past based on traffic. Headlines are now being tested in terms of which version attracts more clicks. (2014: 572)

This may come to resemble the evolution of audience metrics uses that *The Guardian* had in mind in the development of its analytics tool Ophan, whose aim “was ... to be useful to everyone working at the outlet, something ... referred to as the ‘democratisation of data’” (Edge 2014: n.p.). The underlying philosophy here is to offer a broad basket of relevant metrics that can be used for different purposes by different newsroom staff, rather than to settle on a narrow and binding set of metrics that each story, each journalist, or each sectional team within the newsroom must uniformly deliver on. The latter vision is now increasingly being described as a (possibly futile) quest for a “god metric” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 9)—and *Buzzfeed*’s Peretti is openly critical of this all too reductionist approach to news analytics, which invites misuse:

the natural inclination, if one metric is seen as the important, true metric ... is to game it. And then when you game it, you essentially are creating a fake version of that metric. So page views are a metric of how many stories people want to read—and then you split the story in two. You essentially are doubling your pages for that story, or not quite, probably, because not everyone will click. But you create pyrite page views. (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.)

Such tendencies towards a deliberate subversion of audience metrics would mirror similar patterns of deliberate gaming that have been observed for media metrics ranging from newspaper circulation through TV ratings to music sales.

The great diversity of online and social media-derived news usage metrics, and of the tools and frameworks used to generate them, as well as the continuing absence of any one widely accepted ‘god metric’, point to the fact that current “new media trends (the rise of distributed content on social media and through messaging apps, the rise of the mobile web, and of online video) require a continuous evolution of new metrics and forms of analysis and changes in the tools, organisation, and culture of analytics” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 42)—this field, and the news industry that has come to base its newsroom decisions increasingly on such metrics, remain far from settled.

The uncertainty and confusion that this unsettled state has created—going back at least to the rise of the first wave of citizen media, but arguably perhaps even to the very beginning of journalism’s inevitable transition towards online-first publishing in the early 1990s—has at times been described in dramatic terms: “the high modernism of journalistic professionalization has moved to a liquid modern state ... of feverish journalistic differentiation across media genres (including popular, tabloid, and infotainment journalisms), platforms, and industries” (Deuze 2005: 450). Even in spite of the gradual normalisation, into standard journalistic practice, of some of the new platforms and genres that we have already observed, however, this inherent liquidity and the uncertainty it generates continue to exist. This is due most of all to the fact that the fundamental question facing the journalism industry at this stage—how it can ensure its long-term sustainability, if not profitability—has not yet come any closer to being resolved.

This has been framed at first as a question regarding the interrelationship between the online and offline editions of the same news publication: as Ju *et al.* point out,

the industry’s decade-long search for a working business model for the Web edition itself has not been successful. While the number of newspapers’ Web visitors has been growing during the past decade, the relationship between the Web edition and its print counterpart has become ambiguous. More and more empirical evidence has suggested that free Web offerings may have eroded print subscriber bases over time. (Ju *et al.* 2014: 11)

Similarly, because of the ready availability of free news content online those Internet users are also unlikely to pay for news delivered via the Web and social media in sufficient numbers; this is true especially for news in English and other major world languages, where a wide variety of news outlets from

a range of countries now compete in a global market. As a result, only some 9% of consumers are willing “to pay for general news online ... in the highly competitive English-speaking world ..., but in some smaller countries, protected by language, people are twice as likely to pay” (Newman *et al.* 2016: 8).

Meanwhile, the viability of offline media forms continues to decline rapidly in most countries, as a distinct generational change in news access patterns unfolds:

most people over 45 are using digital news as an additional layer of choice and convenience without abandoning their core habits around television, radio, and print. Younger audiences who have grown up with digital are exhibiting very different behaviours and increasingly expect the news to come to them through online channels and in new formats. (Newman *et al.* 2015: 20)

As these younger audiences have come to play an increasingly important role in the news market, newspaper readership has suffered substantially, to a point where “social media are now considered more important than print in the US, Ireland, Brazil, Italy, France, Spain, and Australia” (Newman *et al.* 2015: 11). But even the previously still relatively stable audience base for television news has now begun to erode: as the 2016 *Digital News Report* observes, “for every group under 45, online news is now more important than television news. For 18–24s social media (28%) comes out ahead of TV (24%) for the first time with print lagging behind at just 6%” (Newman *et al.* 2016: 10).

In light of such transformations, from a commercial perspective the early-1990s decision by most news outlets to offer journalistic content online for free has been described as “one of the most far-reaching collective failures of the media industries” (Hanitzsch 2013: 204). Still worse, it is deeply unlikely that the generation of news users who have since become used to accessing news content online free of charge would come to accept a transition to paid content in the near future; this genie will not be able to be coaxed back into its bottle. Indeed, these same users are now increasingly also rebelling against the second major revenue stream for online news publishers: on-site advertising. As Newman *et al.* report,

business problems for many publishers have worsened with the rise of ad-blocking, which is running at between 10% (Japan) and 38% (Poland) but much higher amongst under-35s and people who use news the most. The vast majority of those who have ever downloaded a blocker are using them regularly, suggesting that once downloaded people rarely go back. (Newman *et al.* 2016: 8)

In this context, the embrace of social media by the industry as a new mechanism for news dissemination has been questioned by some commentators as further undermining its economic viability: in essence, “are newspapers repeating the same ‘mistake’ by giving content away for free to SNS users and by granting audience access to aggregators? ... Just [as] they did with their Web operations, newspapers seem eager to seek ‘eyeballs’ through Facebook and Twitter before locating a viable business model” (Ju *et al.* 2014: 11–12).

But it must also be noted here that competition between free and paid news media is hardly new, and predates the rise of the World Wide Web as a mass medium by some decades. Major public service broadcasters such as the BBC have offered ‘free’ (or more correctly, taxpayer-funded) news content in competition to commercial newspaper and broadcast news outlets for decades, but this has not undermined the profitability of those commercial news organisations; in many countries, newspapers remained profitable operations well into the 1990s, at least. What has changed notably in the current sociotechnical environment is that online content distribution and access practices have contributed to a marked atomisation of news content, as we have already seen: in this context, audiences are no longer prepared to subscribe in large numbers and for the longer term to the packaged news product (the ‘online newspaper’, the news site, the news app, or the social media feed) offered by a specific news organisation, but are instead considerably more open to discovering their news serendipitously by browsing, searching, and social filtering. “A small number of loyal readers have been persuaded to pay for brands they like but it is proving hard to convert casual readers” (Newman *et al.* 2015: 18). Outside of highly specialised niches (financial news, fan news, etc.), news outlets have largely failed to develop new news packages and services that address the news usage preferences of contemporary audiences.

Atomising the News, Deliberately

It is perhaps unsurprising that a number of relatively young, born-digital news outlets are at the forefront both of the development of comprehensive online news usage and circulation metrics, and of the use of such metrics in making further news coverage decisions. It is interesting in this context, however, to see that even such outlets as *Buzzfeed*, which has made its name as the source of news-related content that is designed to achieve wide social media circulation (that is, to ‘go viral’), are now taking a view of audience metrics

as complex and multifaceted, rather than chasing only a small set of virality indicators. Indeed,

the idea of integrating analytics into daily editorial work and longer term strategic planning has been central to US-based digital news start-ups like Gawker, the Huffington Post, and BuzzFeed for years. These companies have from the start been proud of their ability to use a more data-informed and evidence-based approach to digital publishing than many older media, and have drawn extensively on analytics developed in the technology sector, marketing, e-commerce, and advertising. (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 12)

In doing so, sites such as *Buzzfeed* come to embrace a very different concept not just of what is news, but also of how news should be presented and packaged. Contrary to established news outlets, many of which developed in the age of print and broadcast news and only subsequently transitioned to an online and social media news environment, these more recent sites never experienced the necessity of packaging their news in the form of a daily paper or nightly broadcast; in fact, they were established even after the heyday of the institutional Website with its carefully designed frontpage. For instance, “Buzzfeed does not care very much what its homepage looks like because it doesn’t expect people to visit it as a ‘destination site’, but rather to encounter the news through social feeds” (Bell 2015: 89). Such sites are therefore also considerably more open to simply serving a steady stream of individual stories that are shared online—especially through social media—as distinct items rather than as a dedicated effort to cover a defined newsbeat. Thus,

the strategy of BuzzFeed ... is very different from that of traditional news organizations. It is not built around building a loyal, returning audience. Instead, it is built around “being a part of the conversation,” says editor-in-chief Ben Smith. The site’s writers and editors develop content that people want to share so that a story reaches all those it “should” reach. It may well be a completely different audience from one story to the next. (Pew Research Center 2014: 5)

In this, *Buzzfeed* is different even from the *Huffington Post*, as Peretti notes: “HuffPost, to this day, has a large front page audience. In part, it started it that way. Part of its DNA was thinking of how to build an entry point or front page to the web” (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.). By contrast, “Buzzfeed has been built around the proposition that distribution of journalism will happen primarily through social networks. It has expertise in understanding how social platforms spread news stories, and what formats of journalism work best on the

real-time social web” (Bell 2015: 89). Peretti describes this difference by suggesting that *Huffington Post* content “is both contagious and sticky” (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.)—in other words, individual stories travel widely through the social networks and in doing so build up the brand recognition that increasingly draws visitors directly to the site; by contrast, *Buzzfeed* content is “just a little sticky”, but this also serves to further increase its circulation well beyond a loyal and committed audience:

often, television producers would read BuzzFeed, and they’d say, “I’m getting these new trends and I’m always ahead of the curve.” People would describe it as a secret. Their friends would say, “How come you always ... send me all these interesting stories?” None of them are BuzzFeed stories, but they were finding them on BuzzFeed. (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.)

This approach to creating news content is almost certainly reactive and opportunist; it might also be described even less charitably as populist and mercenary, as it seeks to rapidly push out search engine- and social media-optimised stories about currently active topics to ride the wave of emerging search and sharing trends (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.). But however we evaluate such approaches, their net effect is to atomise the news by creating a feed of distinct, divergent news items rather than a consistent identity and agenda for the imprint. The core difference from the atomisation of the news that we have already observed in earlier chapters as a result of gatewatching and newsharing, though, is that here it occurs knowingly, deliberately: *Buzzfeed’s* content is specifically designed for the contemporary social media news environment, which is of course why it performs so well there.

In taking this approach, sites such as *Buzzfeed* also expose themselves directly to the vagaries of the social media platforms on which they rely for the circulation of their stories. The growing adoption by more mainstream news outlets of these sites’ approaches to using audience metrics to maximise circulation and readership similarly transfers increasing market power to these platform providers: “if BuzzFeed is correct in its strategic direction (and it is already being emulated by many legacy news organisations), then the control of pathways to audiences no longer lies with the organisations which publish news but with the platforms that carry it” (Bell 2015: 89). In an extreme case, a single change of policy or programming within *Twitter* or *Facebook* could undermine the fundamental content dissemination strategy of a site like *Buzzfeed* (and thus also its core business model, which relies on the advertising income generated by serendipitous social media user visits to its viral con-

tent). Whenever *Facebook* notes that “the quality of its News Feed was declining because of too many clickbait stories”, and foreshadows “plans to banish clickbait, by filtering out headlines such as: ‘You’ll never believe ...’”—as it did in August 2016 (Battersby 2016: n.p.)—or vows to combat ‘fake news’ in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Zuckerberg 2016), therefore, such changes could fundamentally affect the viability of many viral content sites.

The point of the present discussion is not to hold up *Buzzfeed* and similar sites as a model for the future of journalism; they are not, or at least not in a straightforward fashion. For many established news operators, to embrace *Buzzfeed*’s approaches to content and distribution would “prove to be not just ineffective, but actively counter-productive because they damage brand and reputation, and point newsrooms at the wrong audience targets and user experiences” (Thompson 2016: 109). Yet *Buzzfeed* and its fellow travellers can be seen as rapid testing labs for new news formats and distribution approaches: as Peretti puts it, they ask

what would this be if the readers and the publishers were not focused on making something similar to print? ... What should this be if mobile is the most important thing; if things can be more visual; if things can be more shareable; if length can be anywhere from 140 characters to 12,000 words? In that kind of world, where things can be interactive, like quizzes—in that kind of a world, what should a media company be? (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.)

Grafström and Windell describe such relatively young sites as “peripheral actors” in the field of journalism, and suggest that their ability to experiment and adjust their content strategies and formats with great agility and speed derives specifically from this peripheral status: as history-less sites that invite few audience expectations and have only limited established routines, *Buzzfeed* and others can quickly reinvent themselves as the socio-technical environment within which they operate changes. “Experimentation with new practices is less costly for these peripheral actors in comparison to dominant field actors, as the latter ones have a vested interest in conventional practices” (Grafström and Windell 2012: 67); nonetheless, demonstrable successes of new practices within such peripheral and unorthodox sites also lead to increasing emulation within the mainstream.

Additionally, the popular (and commercial) success of such sites also enables them to invest in developing more conventional news reporting approaches. Notably, for instance, “BuzzFeed has hired new staff and high-profile

journalists in a number of countries including the UK and Australia, working on subjects like politics and the environment” (Newman *et al.* 2016: 91), and the work of these journalists has gradually earned the site a grudging respect amongst its peers even in spite of their continuing misgivings over its populist click bait and listicles formats. Peretti describes this as a maturing process: “It was like, ‘Okay, the web is growing up. The social web is growing up. We need to grow up. And we need to add capacity to do all kinds of stuff that we’re not doing now’” (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.). But at the same time, as more conventional news reporting approaches are thus introduced into an unconventional site such as *Buzzfeed*, its novel strategies for ensuring the viral distribution of its content may thus also be applied to traditionally non-viral ‘hard news’ stories; while this is unlikely to entirely undo the popularity of the simpler news formats that *Buzzfeed* has been chiefly associated with, this could also serve to significantly boost the visibility of such content across social media platforms.

Mobile News Users, Mobile News Workers

It is therefore clear that the first and second waves of citizen media have contributed to a marked atomisation of the news: the people formerly known as the audience, acting now as news users, sharers, and curators, no longer exhibit a strong loyalty towards specific news organisations, and their habitual newsharing now focusses on content from a much broader range of sources; this then also creates a strong need for news outlets to provide readily shareable, pre-atomised content in order to remain visible in the largely user-driven environments of contemporary social media platforms.

This atomisation of the news—associated with practices of casual and serendipitous “news snacking”—is sometimes described as promoting a shallower form of news engagement than sustained and focussed news reading; however, Newman *et al.* report that “data from news organisations suggests [that] time spent with news and media websites has increased slightly Overall, it appears that—for at least some people interested in the news—snippets of information in social networks are stimulating further interest in news events and encouraging further exploration” (2012: 18). This phenomenon may be explained especially by the considerable rise in the use of mobile devices for accessing the news. In the 2016 *Digital News Report*, for instance, “smartphone usage for news is sharply up, reaching half of our global sample (53%), while

computer use is falling and tablet growth is flattening out” (Newman *et al.* 2016: 8); indeed, for a substantial minority the smartphone is fast becoming the main device through which they access the news.

Further, active news engagement functionality—for instance, the ability to tweet links to news stories, or share them on *Facebook*—is usually inherently built into these devices, which means that such casual and serendipitous mobile news usage is also more likely to result in further newssharing activity. As a result, as a Pew Center study reported as early as 2010, “almost half of on-the-go news consumers (46%)”, using mobile devices to access the news, “are what we term ‘news participators’” (Purcell *et al.* 2010: 38), engaging in activities such as posting and on-sharing links to news stories, or adding their own comments to these stories. As everyday computing continues to transition from desktop to mobile devices, we should therefore expect to see a further growth in such activities.

Overall, then, we must now ask at what point all those multiple instances of news snacking add up to a full meal. “*Mainly digital* users [are] almost three times as likely as traditionalists to access the news more than five times a day. Increased frequency also seem[s] to be related to the growth of new devices—such as mobiles and tablets—which are extending the range of access points. The more devices we have, the more frequently we consume” (Newman *et al.* 2015: 56), and surely at some point all of this additional news consumption, usage, and sharing through various channels and devices results in a considerably greater level of news engagement than would have been experienced by previous generations of news users. Thus, “it appears that snippets of information in social networks are stimulating further interest in news events and encouraging further exploration. The commercial implications of this are more complex and raise more concerns for some news organisations, however” (Newman 2011: 21).

In the first instance, those outlets that have been able to design their news content to maximise its social media shareability have turned out to benefit the most from these developments. So, for instance, “in terms of scale of audience, BuzzFeed reaches more people each month than MTV or Comedy Central or a lot of the big cable networks.” At the same time, however, as *Buzzfeed’s* Jonah Peretti points out, “the amount of time people spend on television is still much higher. We reach a lot of people, but they don’t spend as much time on BuzzFeed as they spend watching reality shows ... or something” (Peretti in Salmon 2014: n.p.). Yet this is reflective of the fundamental approach *Buzzfeed* has chosen: it is able to survive and be commercially suc-

cessful on the basis of repeat serendipitous engagement, without needing to rely on a regular readership that is loyal to *Buzzfeed* as a serious news brand.

The challenge for operators in the news industry, from legacy outlets such as the *New York Times* to new players such as *Buzzfeed*, is therefore now to deliberately design their content to take advantage of social filtering processes; this would react to the fact that “a significant number of social media users tend to rely on the people around them to tell them what they need to know rather than relying solely on institutional media” (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 810). This crucially requires becoming part of processes of news discussion and curation, rather than merely building up an audience for the organisation’s own accounts: it is only if the material being posted by these accounts is widely viewed and re-posted that it stands a chance of reaching a wider audience beyond the relatively narrow group of the outlet’s direct followers.

As we already have seen in the previous chapter, this also enables a considerable shift in balance between the corporate news brand and the personal brands of the individual journalist who work for it. On social media platforms, journalists “can leave the pack and become individual news hubs, while especially employed journalists can easily push the news of their own organization through their network” (Brems *et al.* 2016: 3). Such personally branded dissemination and discussion work may indeed become more effective, and especially also more persuasive, than the more generic content promotion activities conducted by the main corporate account; the respected individual journalist, focussing perhaps on a particular news beat, most likely has a better chance of convincing their followers that a particular news story is worthy of their attention (and amplification) than a generic, impersonal, corporate account. This illustrates how recent “economic and technological changes ... weaken organizations and empower individuals, allowing journalists the freedom to navigate uncharted waters through social and mobile media” (Molyneux and Holton 2015: 226)—even if at times that freedom will also bring with it considerable uncertainty.

As Molyneux points out, then, “news companies may need to proceed with caution, ... as there may be a point where a journalist has developed enough of a personal brand that the benefits of independence (and its difficulties) outweigh the benefits (and difficulties) of being part of a larger organization” (Molyneux 2015: 933). But this is also a balancing act for the journalists: as the 2016 *Digital News Report* documents, “almost everywhere, editors and journalists are trusted less than news organisations” (Newman *et al.* 2016: 8), and their success as individual, independent brands is therefore

far from guaranteed. In the near future, we may therefore well see especially the most prominent, most trusted journalists break away from the news organisations where they have made their names, in order to develop their own personal brands; some of these newly independent journalists may also join forces under the auspices of smaller outlets that adopt more network-centric organisational structures with limited institutional overheads. As Lowrey points out, such a development in a transforming industry is also anticipated by organisation ecology theory, which “predicts that during disruptive times, new landscapes tend to emerge, populated by both large, older generalists, which concentrate centrally, and small entrepreneurial specialists that seek abandoned resources in the margins” (Lowrey 2015: 146).

The Normalisation of Journalism

Indeed, by now audience demands and competitive market pressures have already forced even the older generalists to embrace social media, with differing degrees of enthusiasm. As we have seen, “newspapers and broadcasters have normalised their use of social media as source material, filtering the best for a mass audience—and developing new skills and roles for curated or ‘networked journalism’ in the process” (Newman *et al.* 2012: 15); similarly, they have developed increasingly prominent social media presences for their news products as well as for individual journalists, to disseminate the latest news to social media audiences and engage at least to some extent in news discussion and social news curation. This adoption may further undermine their ability to generate revenue from their legacy news products, but the only available alternative would have been to abstain from social media altogether, and thus cede this emerging news space to their less reluctant competitors (especially perhaps to public service media and other non-profit news outlets).

But this normalisation is unable to simply tame social media and defuse their potential to disrupt the industry, in the same way that blogs were normalised in the wake of the first wave of citizen media: “j-tweeters appear to be normalizing microblogs to fit into their existing norms and practices but, at the same time, they appear to be adjusting these professional norms and practices to the evolving norms and practices of Twitter” (Lasorsa *et al.* 2012: 31). It is quite likely that the much more widespread adoption of mainstream social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, compared to the significantly more niche status of news blogs and citizen journalism sites, has made the task

of normalising social media more difficult for journalists, in fact; the demotic social media practices that have emerged on these popular platforms exert substantial pressure on journalists to conform, while conversely the small population of professional journalists and news organisations have little prospect of significantly affecting user practices.

Thus, Broersma and Graham argue,

normalization theory as a conceptual framework sells short the fact that coherent and distinct social media repertoires have emerged in the past decade. These follow from the affordances of social media platforms and, more broadly, from a networked logic that fundamentally differs from the industrial mass media logic which underpins legacy journalism. (Broersma and Graham 2016: 99–100)

But this is true only if we assume that normalisation always occurs in the direction of professional practice—that is, in the way that blogs were normalised into mainstream journalism. What we are observing in the present context, by contrast, is the normalisation of professional journalism, alongside many other professions, *into social media*.

Individual journalists as well as leaders of the industry are beginning to realise this. Journalists who are active social media users, in particular, are already “much more likely to believe that the traditional role of journalists is and must be transformed by social media” (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013: 380). Peter Horrocks, the head of the BBC’s Global News division, has been even more explicit: “you’re not doing your job if you can’t do those things. It’s not discretionary” (qtd. in Eltringham 2010: n.p.). At the U.K.’s *Financial Times*—not necessarily perhaps the most obvious outlet where a drastic transformation of established journalistic approaches would be expected to occur—Head of Audience Engagement Renée Kaplan “has been ... developing a strategy for moving the *Financial Times* from ‘digital first’ to what she calls ‘audience first’ ... changing the way journalism is produced and distributed to integrate engagement objectives into the commissioning and production process” (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016: 15).

However such an ‘audience first’ approach is interpreted and implemented, then, its emergence demonstrates the shift towards the dominance of a network logic in journalistic practice that Broersma and Graham have pointed to. “Networked digital media have amplified the communicative forms which structure and reproduce” the relationship between journalists and their audiences (Loosen and Schmidt 2016: 4), and this results in “a shift in the modes of mutual observation and interaction which also affect[s] the gen-

eralised expectations journalists and audiences have of each other” (6c). It also affects the relationships between journalists and their news organisations: journalists now “focus more on what audiences think of them” (Molyneux and Holton 2015: 232), and perhaps less on what their editors’ views are. This, in turn, represents “part of a general trend of increasing audience orientation in journalism, making the credibility of news and the legitimacy of journalism key factors in commercial success” (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013: 371).

This also drives the further diversification of journalistic roles, as individual journalists, not least also in the process of building their personal brands, are exploring the forms of audience engagement that they are most adept at and most comfortable with. As Molyneux observes,

now that journalists have a direct line to their audience, they have begun to act differently than they would in other news arenas, perhaps making it more difficult to maintain independence. Their focus is still the news, but they are taking on different roles—commentator, heckler, interpreter, marketer, and so on. (2015: 933)

Not all of these roles are still strictly journalistic in an orthodox definition of the term, however, and some of the news professionals who reposition and reinvent themselves in this way no longer necessarily concern themselves with that label: “there is a schism between those who call themselves journalists and those who seem to do the same type of work but are wary about labelling themselves as such” (Fulton 2015: 371). Some of this is also related to professional histories: as we have seen most prominently in the example of Andy Carvin in Chapter 3, some news workers who rise to prominence especially through their social media curation activities are no longer necessarily employed primarily in conventional journalistic roles, or understand themselves to be journalists in a narrow definition of the term.

Nor surprisingly, then, in her study of Australian news workers Fulton identifies

a distinct division between those participants who had worked as journalists in traditional media and others who had come into the space via other professions. Those who had previously worked in the occupation still identified as journalists, while those who had not were more cautious about using the occupational term. (Fulton 2015: 366)

But such distinctions also intersect with similar distinctions between conventional and novel outlets and platforms for the news: many of the non-journalist news workers identified by Fulton’s and other, similar studies are

now contributing as permanent or freelance staff to conventional news outlets, while professionally trained journalists as well as news workers with less traditional career histories can also be found working for a number of emergent sites and platforms that make no claims to being news outlets in a conventional sense, but nonetheless report the news. These include the surviving and now increasingly professionalised remnants of the first wave of citizen media, slightly more recent additions such as *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed*, and a number of novel outlets that are sometimes supported by crowdfunding or funded by relevant commercial organisations interested in quality specialist and independent coverage for their areas of interest.

In this evolving media ecology, then, social media platforms are increasingly emerging as the public forum where engagement with the news happens—between diverse actors including journalists, experts, politicians, celebrities, and ordinary users themselves. One effect of this development is that “journalists now find themselves in the rather unfamiliar position of not necessarily being the first ones to provide the ‘news’, let alone being the only ones telling people what to ‘think’ about as news, as the agenda-setting function of the mass media was once described” (Heinrich 2012: 62); another is that these ‘people’—the everyday users of the news—are now very significant, active participants in news processes at all stages of journalism, from sourcing through dissemination to curation.

News usage during the age of mass media was “based on ... a rather passive consumption of professionally selected, framed, and interpreted news items (this is not to deny the notion of a cognitively active audience that unconsciously makes sense of the messages conveyed to it)” (Klinger and Svensson 2016: 33); by contrast, news usage via social media makes these cognitive reception processes, and the supportive or oppositional negotiations of meaning performed by those news users, a great deal more visible and interactive, at a potentially global scale: “the readings by the audience result ... themselves again in manifest, publicly accessible texts. This way the individual opinions can be perceived as common viewpoints and enter into various forms of publics—potentially even into the same public as the original text” (Katzenbach 2016: 9–10; my translation). And most importantly, in these social media spaces the process of evaluating and negotiating the meanings of a specific news story is conducted within the same media space: the third-party social media platform that is controlled neither by news organisations and journalists nor by experts or ordinary users.

Social Media as Tertiary Spaces for the News

This final point is perhaps the most crucial, and arguably represents the root cause for most of the difficulties experienced by journalists and news organisations in coming to terms with the new media environment in which they now find themselves. As Loosen and Schmidt put it succinctly, “with social media, journalism and audiences meet on uncommon ground” (Loosen and Schmidt 2016: 7), in a space that is both unfamiliar and outside of their full control.

“Earlier online undertakings by journalists were mostly performed on web pages maintained and operated by their employers” (Larsson and Christensen 2016: 3), and the non-journalistic challengers of the first wave of citizen media similarly operated from a set of blogs and related platforms that, while less well resourced, were similarly usually under their full and direct control. During the first wave, this resulted in a clear dichotomy between mainstream and citizen media, mostly arguing at and disagreeing with each other from a distance until the creeping normalisation of news blogging and citizen journalism enabled a number of individuals to switch sides, in both directions, and even allowed entire citizen news outlets (such as the *Huffington Post*) to become part of the journalistic establishment. Talk of the ‘blog wars’ in Australia in the context of its 2007 federal election exaggerates for heightened effect, but nonetheless validly points to the existence of relatively clear opposing fronts in this first-wave conflict.

Both sides of this conflict, then, operated from proprietary bases that were controlled by their respective publishers; as Shirky pointed out at the time, “most weblogs are much more broadcast than intercast. ... Most comments are write-only replies to the original post in the manner of Letters to the Editor, rather than real conversations among the users” (Shirky 2002: n.p.). Much the same could, and in some cases still can, be said about the operational models of mainstream news sites, too; on either side of the pro/am frontline, except for the professional and citizen journalists who are able to author new content, users or audiences were invited in merely as guests and considerably less privileged contributors.

These primary and secondary news spaces continue to exist, of course. But now they have been joined, in all senses of that verb, by social media acting as a tertiary type of space for the news. For instance, “Twitter is a distribution channel for news that is not controlled by the news media. Journalists tweet links to their news articles, but it is the distributed response of the Twitter community that determines whether that news spreads” (Orellana-Rodriguez

et al. 2016: 107); in much the same way that community also determines the visibility of other news-related content originating from alternative news sources.

The tertiary spaces provided by *Twitter* and other social media platforms, in other words, are where the content posted on the primary and secondary news spaces of mainstream and citizen journalism sites circulates and reaches an increasingly sizeable and important audience, and where that audience amplifies, evaluates, and curates this mixture of content from many different sources. Having watched the gates of these original sources, social media users open their own gates, more or less widely, to enable these sources' articles to circulate on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and thereby also bring these individual articles into contact with each other. Similarly, too, many of the authors as well as the subjects of these articles are themselves active on social media, and increasingly become involved in these processes of dissemination, discussion, and curation themselves; in this way, too, the tertiary spaces of social media serve to connect the previously much more disconnected inhabitants of the first and second spaces of news publication.

Therefore, "whereas j-blogs appear within the framework of a given organization's news site, and thus are often edited to meet standards and protocols, j-tweeters operate on a neutral platform" (Lasorsa *et al.* 2012: 24). That platform is neutral only in the sense that it is not inherently aligned with any one major news outlet or other industry player; at the same time, it must be noted that it certainly pursues its own commercial interests and embodies a specific ideological perspective (on matters including free speech and democratic deliberation, for instance). From this perspective, as Ahmad notes, it becomes important to ask a "pertinent question: that of whether journalism has not become a useful 'tool' for *Twitter*—or for that matter large corporations such as Google and Apple, whose control of the profits that can be made from web technology in the information age seems increasingly secure" (Ahmad 2010: 149). By increasingly embracing the tertiary spaces of *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and other social media platforms as crucial environments in which their news articles circulate and their staff engage with news audiences, mainstream and alternative news outlets necessarily cede a considerable amount of control over the processes (and proceeds) of news coverage to these social media platform providers, which do not have any inherent allegiance to traditional journalistic ideals.

In these tertiary spaces, then, "the medial thematisation of the everyday and the political by individual citizens stands ... side by side with profession-

ally produced journalistic and non-journalistic offerings. For users of digital media it is normal that brief notes from friends, contributions by companies or celebrities, and journalistic offerings gather on one screen” (Katzenbach 2016: 12; my translation)—and the design of contemporary social media platforms offers remarkably little opportunity for the major commercial or civic actors to be featured more prominently than ordinary citizens. Tweets posted by @nytimes or @bbcnews will appear in a given *Twitter* user’s timeline alongside and in the same format as those by their own family and friends, with no specific indicator that the former represent a different class of account (*Twitter*’s blue tickmark that indicates officially verified accounts might have served this purpose at least to some extent in earlier times, but that tickmark has now also been made available to a much larger group of accounts, including those of ordinary users). Similarly, as the posts by major news outlets to their *Facebook* pages are shared through *Facebook* users’ personal publics, they will appear alongside a wide range of other content from ordinary users and other non-news sources, and not necessarily any more prominently.

This is not to deny that especially the major, legacy news outlets still command a considerable amount of name recognition for the imprints they have established over the course of many decades, of course. But as Castells notes, “while the old struggle for social domination and counter-domination continues in the new media space, the structural bias of this space toward the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication” (Castells 2007: 257–58). This is especially pronounced on platforms such as *Twitter* with their comparatively minimal user interface design: the available range of features for customising one’s account profile simply does not extend to a point where a major corporate player could definitively distinguish their *Twitter* presence from those of ordinary, individual users. “From this purely system-oriented perspective, almost all *Twitter* users are equal” (Gruzd *et al.* 2011: 1303), and they emerge as prominent nodes in the *Twitter* network predominantly on the basis of their sustained content contribution and engagement activities.

As Heinrich points out, then, prominence and influence in these social media spaces is accorded to specific participants by the logic of the networks that underpin these platforms:

which node is connected to the others, and how strong or weak these ties are, depend on the individual nodes. How big or how small these nodes are also depends on the individual nodes. Such nodes can be journalistic organisations such as the BBC, *The New York Times* or Associated Press; however, these nodes are also tweeters, bloggers

or the independent journalist freelancing on international territory. Some of these nodes might have more impact than others, yet they all *share* the same information exchange sphere. (Heinrich 2012: 64)

Further, the initial reluctance of journalists and news organisations to engage fully in the spaces of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and other social media platforms has provided a head start to other actors from outside the field of conventional professional journalism in assuming roles of influence and authority in this social media information sphere. These social media opinion leaders are unlikely simply to melt away as the journalism industry takes a greater interest in social media; they constitute a real and persistent challenge to journalism's claims to news authority.

In this tertiary space, pre-populated with a broad range of minor and major societal actors and according no inherent special privileges of voice and authority to conventional news outlets and journalists, it is therefore also very difficult for journalists to engage in effective boundary work of the type that we have observed in the early phases of both waves of citizen media. Such boundary work is possible when the boundaries are clearly demarcated—it was a valid if not always successful strategy when there were clear battlelines that could be drawn between the primary spaces of the mainstream news industry and the secondary, second-tier environments of news blogs and citizen journalism sites, for instance; and it could be attempted again to distance social media sceptics and abstainers like *The Australian's* editor Chris Mitchell, who saw themselves as upholding traditional journalistic ideals, from the “highly politicised activists” on *Twitter* who dared to challenge journalism's authority to explain the world to its readers (2016: n.p.).

But the divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are nowhere near as clear-cut when so many journalists and news outlets are themselves present and active in the tertiary spaces of social media, where they inevitably come into direct contact and interaction with other actors, from politicians and celebrities to ordinary users. Here, the rejection of non-traditional news actors through boundary work must almost necessarily give way to a more dialogic engagement: “digital media have introduced a conversational mode into the journalism-audience relationship, by providing communication channels and spaces that afford direct interaction, whether dialogue- or conflict-oriented” (Loosen and Schmidt 2016: 7). Journalists still have the opportunity to dismiss and ignore their critics, to be sure—but to do so, and to do so persistently, is to act against the underlying logic and unspoken rules of social media, and is

likely to undermine the journalist's standing with their followers. "Journalists enter but do not control these newer media spaces, which operate according to principles that challenge professional boundaries on different levels" (Revers 2014: 821).

Rethinking Journalistic Ideals

At least implicitly, the social media guidelines or rules implemented in different newsrooms and news organisations may therefore also represent an attempt to (re)define what it means to be a journalist and to do journalism in the present, highly digitised media environment. We have already seen in the previous chapter that the growing adoption of social media for content sourcing, news dissemination, and audience engagement, and especially also for associated personal branding activities, appears to encourage a further personalisation of journalism around charismatic individuals; inherently associated with this is also a continuation of longer-term trends away from conventional journalistic ideals of objectivity and towards the greater incorporation of interpretation and opinion. Beyond individual practice, this raises important questions at the level of news organisations, and even at the level of the overall profession of journalism.

Such questions predate the emergence of contemporary social media platforms themselves; as Deuze has pointed out, "multimedia's careful embrace of interactivity as well as a merging of different cultures (print, broadcast, online; 'hard' and 'soft' news; marketing and editorial) within the news organization ... confronts the individual professional with multiple interpretations of objectivity" (2005: 456). The increasing importance of social media as tertiary spaces where professional practice is conducted further intensifies this confrontation, however—and the social media guidelines we have discussed at the start of this chapter aim at least in part to spell out what specific news organisations see as an appropriate balance between professional objectivity and personal opinion. Here, it is notable that the very status of the news organisation within the overall continuum of journalistic institutions appears to play an important role in determining the extent to which opinionated uses of social media are seen as permissible: Lasorsa *et al.* find that compared to the industry leaders, "less 'elite' journalists were more willing to deviate from traditional norms and practices—and act more like other non-journalist Twitter users—by posting their opinions on Twitter" (2012: 29).

Additionally, journalists also seem to regard professional objectivity increasingly as a relative rather than absolute commandment, and treat it as situationally dependent; for instance, some of Parmelee's informants "said that the objectivity standard that applies when tweeting about their political beat does not always hold true when their tweets are not about politics" (2013: 302), distinguishing their objective professional stance on their core areas of reporting from their opinionated personal stance on other topics even though both are likely to be expressed through the same personal social media account and contribute to the same personal brand. Conversely, one of Revers's interviewees makes a distinction instead between the more opinionated voice they adopt on social media and the more subdued tone used in their mainstream news reporting: "it's a little snarkier on Twitter" (2014: 820). This shows that such journalists adjust their approaches based on whether they operate within the primary spaces provided by their own news imprints, or the tertiary spaces of social media.

For news organisations, such differentiated and diverging approaches to objectivity are likely to be concerning: they mean that the unified, reliably objective journalistic stance previously sold to news audiences as part of the news product is now giving way to a more variable and possibly inconsistent collection of more or less objective or opinionated styles of news reporting embraced by different journalistic staff and across the various platforms serviced by the news organisation and by individual staff accounts. This could significantly undermine the audience's trust in the organisation's news product—and arguably this loss of trust has already occurred in recent years, as the shift of more and more of the news process from backstage to frontstage has revealed the news as a socially constructed narrative rather than an objective truth.

In response to the decline in the belief—amongst journalists as well as audiences—in journalistic objectivity as an attainable absolute good, a gradual redefinition of the concept of objectivity has occurred, therefore. More recently,

in a more practical understanding of the concept, objectivity has been understood in the sense that journalism should be balanced and neutral, and a considerable amount of literature has argued that objectivity in this sense (often referred to by synonyms like impartiality, detachment, or nonpartisanship) remains a cornerstone and an ideal to strive for in journalism. (Rogstad 2014: 690)

Another useful synonym for such practical objectivity in our present context may be neutrality; as one of Revers's informants puts it,

good journalism ... is neutral about its consequences or whom it helps, whom it favors. But it's not objective because if I was not bringing with me the cumulative value of my experience ..., I would not be doing my job. We're making judgments every day about what is important and what isn't. (qtd. in Revers 2014: 820)

This highlights the fact that journalistic gatekeeping has never simply been objective, but that it has always also been informed by long-established news values that determine the perceived newsworthiness of specific events and issues.

In other words, again, it is now well accepted that the news is and has always been socially constructed—in the first place by editors and journalists in the primary spaces of the mainstream news media, or (pursuing different news agendas) by the small community of citizen journalists and news bloggers of the first wave of citizen media in their secondary, second-tier spaces of self-publication, but now also increasingly by ordinary citizens acting (alongside these other groups) as gatewatchers, newsharers, and news curators in the tertiary spaces of social media. The promise that mainstream news media can still make, now that the processes of this social construction of the news are plainly obvious on the frontstages provided by platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, is that its journalists—wherever they operate—will seek to serve as neutral but not necessarily entirely objective guides through the voluminous flow of information that now circulates through a variety of channels—and where they fulfil that promise, they can also continue to rise to prominence as important curators of social media streams.

In this context, the other core journalistic ideal that is challenged by the news industry's gradual adoption of social media is accuracy, together with the associated professional practice of verification. "Through the discipline of verification, journalists determine the truth, accuracy, or validity of news events, establishing jurisdiction over the ability to objectively parse reality to claim a special kind of authority and status" (Hermida 2012: 659); however, in a complex, real-time, and rapidly evolving social media environment it is becoming increasingly difficult to accurately verify the facts of a matter, especially of course in the context of acute, breaking news events. Even in day-to-day practice outside of such periods of particularly heightened reporting activity, however, the ready availability of social media as a source of information is causing concerns for news organisations: for instance, the "[London] *Times*' Deputy Foreign Editor, Suzy Jagger, [is] worried about younger journalists thinking [that] 'Twitter is ... a replacement for actually going out and meeting people'" (qtd. in Thurman and Schapals 2016: 289).

Both in acute and day-to-day contexts, journalists active on social media are likely to feel implicit pressure from their social media audiences as well as their news organisations to be the first to flag and cover emerging news stories; they must balance this call for speediness with their obligations to accuracy. These challenges are especially heightened when the stories in question are emerging, as rumours, from social media platforms themselves; in such cases (which are increasingly common, given the growing role of social media as a backbone for communication across all areas of society), journalists are torn between amplifying the visibility of these rumours by engaging with them, and waiting until independent information that supports or contradicts them has reached the news outlet through more conventional channels. Journalists' and their news organisations' responses to these competing pressures have been found to differ across different outlets; in particular, it appears that born-digital outlets are somewhat more open to embracing speed at the expense of accuracy (and to apologise for any errors that arise from this at a later stage). Such errors can turn out to be costly, however; "there have been a number of well-documented cases where misleading pictures and stories in social media have been given the 'oxygen of publicity' by news companies desperate to get one step ahead on a major news story" (Schifferes *et al.* 2014: 407), and this might seriously undermine the reputation both of individual journalists and of their news imprints.

Therefore, a range of increasingly sophisticated verification approaches have gradually been implemented into journalistic processes that engage with social media; for content originating from social media, "the biggest news organisations continue to try to verify every picture or video they plan to use by contacting the owner directly. They do this to protect their editorial integrity but also because rights and payment for newsworthy footage are increasingly factors" (Schifferes *et al.* 2014: 409). In major news organisations this is now sometimes the task of dedicated social media content identification and verification teams such as the BBC's UGC Hub; smaller news outlets that value accuracy over speed may instead wait until the user-generated material circulating via social media has been verified and republished by the major outlets before they use it themselves.

Although, as Schifferes *et al.* report, "many senior editors have suggested that social networks themselves need to change the way they are organised in order to work more effectively with news organisations" (2014: 410)—including the implementation of better content verification mechanisms that are operated by the platforms themselves—, such developments appear highly

unlikely. As their reluctant responses even to more obviously problematic practices such as impersonation, trolling, and hate speech demonstrate, social media operators have very little incentive to proactively curb their users' ability to participate on these platforms as they wish; their fundamental interest is always in more, not less user activity. It does not seem realistic that *Twitter* or *Facebook* would implement any frameworks designed to reduce the circulation of rumours through their platforms, therefore, especially when in many cases it would be very difficult and labour-intensive to accurately verify or debunk such rumours. Notably, the only major social media platform which has begun to police the circulation of rumours by its users is the Chinese *Weibo*, which "has implemented punishments for people who are found to put out unreliable information, such as banning them from posting" (Schifferes *et al.* 2014: 410)—but such initiatives are clearly a result of the unique context of Chinese Internet governance, and western social media platforms are unlikely to emulate this example. If "smaller news organisations simply do not have the manpower [*sic*] to carry out these checks" themselves (Schifferes *et al.* 2014: 410), then, the more sensible solution is perhaps to engage ordinary social media users as collaborators in the verification process; as we have already seen in Chapters 3 and 4, the collective evaluation and verification—and thus, the social curation—of available information constitutes a crucial user practice both during breaking news events and in day-to-day newssharing.

Such a collaborative approach also means an acceptance that journalists are no longer fully in control of news verification, however. As Karlsson points out, "this has consequences for journalistic norms and the authority associated with the role of journalism. Thus, it is difficult for journalists to refer to a 'we get it right' norm when the 'we' part is potentially compromised by users, and the 'get it right' part is compromised by fast inadequate news and a plethora of different voices" (2011: 280). But this challenge to established norms is not entirely unprecedented (Hermida 2012: 663): similar pressures have arisen ever since the arrival of live, 24-hour broadcast news channels, which have often had to make difficult choices between speed and accuracy and have not always managed to 'get it right' either. However, as Hermida notes, "the choice between being fast and being right ... has acquired greater import at a time when the audience can itself disseminate the news as readily as journalists" (2013: 303).

Servaes links these questions to broader issues of information overload that are felt across society:

those working for mainstream media seem to have an especially hard time adjusting to the new reality of information overload and continuing inequality. How to deal with a permanent overload of information will be the key challenge for journalists and citizens alike, and how to regulate this in a democratic way will be the challenge for public authorities. (Servaes 2009: 372)

One negative consequence from such information overload that is often highlighted is the possibility that the constant, voluminous stream of information experienced by journalists and ordinary citizens alike will leave them little time to process and evaluate the information they encounter; for journalists, this may then lead to a shallower form of reporting (which we have already seen described as ‘stenographic’ in the previous chapter) that presents informational factoids without offering a comprehensive picture that involves meaningful evaluation (Parmelee 2013: 300). At the same time, this view appears difficult to reconcile with the tendencies towards a greater prevalence of opinion and commentary in journalistic content; it appears that journalists are now both engaging in more reporting of the processual minutiae of political and other developments, *and* offering a greater amount of often opinionated evaluation of what these minutiae might mean. In this context it is therefore hardly surprising that one of the key concerns that arises for journalists and their news organisations from the adoption of social media is also the increased workload that this generates: “it does add an extra layer ... , especially if you have a high-profile story where people are expecting [Twitter] updates throughout the day” (informant qtd. in Parmelee 2013: 301).

Networking the Spaces for Journalism

“Journalistic outlets, then, might have to adapt to the rules of collaboration. And this includes a self-image of being just *one* node among many others” (Heinrich 2012: 65). This would constitute a final, definitive break with their traditional self-perception, which held that all the news that was deemed to be of importance to audiences passed through the news organisation as a single gatekeeper. This loss of one of the fundamental nostrums of professional journalism may be confronting, but could also be seen as potentially liberating for news organisations and professional journalists: “however challenging these developments may seem, they might add some invaluable contributions to the way journalism can be practised today—provided one understands these

interactive paths, acknowledges their power and starts seeking ways to embed them in everyday work practices” (Heinrich 2012: 62).

Some such understandings are now beginning to develop, and are set to have a major impact on how news is produced and positioned by mainstream outlets. In a major report on the *Future of News*, for instance, the BBC spells out that “engaging our viewers, listeners and users so that we have a genuinely activated audience means turning large parts of the news into something you do, rather than just something you get” (BBC 2015: 45); this foreshadows a greater partnership with news users in sourcing information, disseminating the news through a broader range of networks, and collaborating on the social curation of news and related information.

This may then also reposition the role of the individual journalist. As Hallin pointed out in 1992, “journalists used to speak sometimes in the first person—listen to Edward R. Murrow or Bill Shirer. Perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad thing if that practice came back” (Hallin 1992: 21); in the tertiary spaces of social media, where journalists are increasingly engaging with news users as themselves rather than simply as representatives of a news organisation, this re-personalisation of journalism is almost inevitable, and has already begun. As a result, “what appears to happen is not so much subversion but expansion of professional boundaries ... which accommodate diverse forms of journalism” (Revers 2014: 821), and this contributes to a greater transparency in all aspects of the news process. As Molyneux puts it, “social media ... take down the curtain by allowing both sources and readers to interact with the journalist. This is part of a larger, digital-age trend” (Molyneux 2015: 922).

Part of this is again also driven by the realities of a post-gatekeeping information environment. If raw news and information is already in circulation within social media spaces, what is the value of conventional journalistic products? To make a meaningful contribution when the bare facts of any matter are already on the public record, “there must be a willingness to shift mentalities, to adapt the traditional values and practices of journalism so that they match the best part of the wider contemporary news culture” (Russell 2009: 366); this may require the journalist to become a guide through the available collection of information, analysing and interpreting the available record—and constructively discussing those analyses and interpretations with other interested social media actors along the way. As Paterson reports, Kenyan newspaper journalist Irene Awino has described this as a move towards ‘day-two journalism’: in an informational environment “where it is rare for newspapers to break stories given the increasingly rapid dissemination of, and

discussion about, political news on social media ... the focus has to be on providing alternative angles and in-depth analysis the next day” (Paterson 2013: 3).

This certainly does constitute a considerable change of mindset for journalists socialised into the traditional ideals of detachment and objectivity, but also provides a substantial opportunity for enterprising journalists and news outlets to make a name for themselves. For instance, Newman recounts how BBC reporter Laura Kuenssberg live-tweeted the U.K. party conference season in 2009, as an experiment with using the then still emerging *Twitter* in journalistic practice. “By the time she left the BBC to take up a new business correspondent role with rival broadcaster ITV News, she had amassed over 60,000 followers, ‘not far off a small circulation newspaper and far more than we had ever expected’”, in Kuenssberg’s own view (Newman 2011: 40). Such early adopters, and the many other journalists who have followed their lead in more recent years, now constitute what Russell describes as “a well-branded leaner class of what we might call traditional journalists. The members of that new leaner class, in turn, will adjust to becoming merely one set of contributors to the collection of news material aggregated by users and filtering software to make a new kind of ‘paper of record’” (2009: 365–66).

In coming to terms with that adjustment to a lesser level of influence over the coverage and interpretation of the news, it is also important for journalists and their news organisations to acknowledge that some of the profession’s traditional claims of supreme authority are directly responsible for the critical stance many news users now take towards it. The BBC has put this realisation most succinctly in its *Future of News* report: “the voice of God is no good to people who are not believers in the news” (BBC 2015: 44). The greater humility and acknowledgment of professional journalism’s own shortcomings that is expressed in such sentiments may go some way to repairing the fraught relationship between news outlets and the general public; the more personable and constructive engagement between journalists and news users that is possible within social media environments will further help to reposition journalism as a partner in the social curation of the news that is becoming a more and more central component of news dissemination and engagement processes.

Ultimately, as we have noted above, this reverses the direction of the normalisation processes that we have observed in previous instances. Traditionally, the “journalistic adoption of user-driven new media is not so much ‘innovation’ as it is ‘incorporation’ into existing journalistic practices” (Volk-

mer and Firdaus 2013: 106); palatable aspects of first- and second-wave citizen media practices were normalised to a point where they no longer constituted a significant threat to the journalistic status quo. In the present context, however, it is the practices of journalism that are normalised into social media, much as journalists themselves are gradually socialised into becoming constructive contributors to *Twitter* and *Facebook*. For instance, “creating a personal identity ... is not something most journalists have practiced. Yet, it is so much the structural norm of social media that journalists using services like Facebook and Twitter almost naturally begin creating a public-facing identity” (Molyneux and Holton 2015: 229).

Because platforms such as these are now—in terms of both audience size and corporate power—major global media leaders in their own right, they have become too large for journalism to normalise and thus neutralise; as a result, “journalists are being pulled into the modes and logics of other actors with whom they are competing for attention” (Thorson and Wells 2015: 39). However, this process of the normalisation of journalism into social media is far from complete—as we have seen through a number of examples, significant debates continue to rage between traditionalists and enthusiasts amongst journalists and editors. As Revers puts it, “currently, a consensus does not seem to exist in journalism. What usually happens in institutional transformation is that change agents challenge the established logic in moments of crisis and propose alternative visions” (Revers 2014: 822).

But in spite of this as yet incomplete transition in attitudes within the industry itself, news audiences (or more appropriately, news *users*) online are already voting with their feet, affording the leading platforms of social media an ever more crucial role as spaces for the news. As a result of these shifts, *Twitter* now serves as “a newsroom ... that is open, distributed, and collective, in contrast to traditional models of the newsrooms as enclosed, concentrated, and exclusive spaces” (Hermida 2014: 366), while in Bell’s view *Facebook* has become “the world’s front page” (Bell 2015: 89). This also imbues these platforms with considerable power both as emerging players in the news industry itself, and as platforms for public discussion and debate—a form of power that Castells describes as “network-making power” (2011: 781), since the technosocial infrastructure provided by these platforms now serves crucially to connect news outlets with their sources and audiences.

This role is expressed by *Facebook*’s Randi Zuckerberg in her observation that “I see more and more media companies understanding the importance of allowing people to consume content anywhere they want to consume it on

the web, not just at the media company's website" (qtd. in O'Connor 2009: n.p.)—social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* provide that crucial connection. But such influence also has repercussions for the platforms themselves, which must now increasingly be understood as media publishers rather than as mere communications services: "Facebook does not see itself as a publisher, it only sees itself as a platform. But once Facebook is the world's front page, publishing responsibilities begin to attach themselves to the company" (Bell 2015: 89). Their active interventions in what information can be shared and what ideas can be expressed within the spaces they provide now critically affect the flows of information across society, and around the globe, and any deliberate or accidental biases built into these platforms can come to have significant effects.

This raises important questions about the ownership of these emerging news processes. As Hermida puts it,

journalism, which was once difficult and expensive to produce, today surrounds us like the air we breathe. Much of it is, literally, ambient, and being produced by professionals and citizens. The challenge going forward is helping the public negotiate and regulate this flow of awareness information, facilitating the collection, transmission and understanding of news. (Hermida 2010: n.p.)

Journalists and their news organisations, the platform providers and their algorithms, citizens and their governments all have an important role to play in this contest of commercial and societal interests; conversely, the role of journalists as gatekeepers is progressively less crucial: "where the significance of journalistic gatekeeping to a person's information experience could once be assumed, ... the degree to which a particular person's experiences are shaped by what we would call journalistic curation" (Thorson and Wells 2015: 36) is now becoming a matter to be revisited from new perspectives, as this book has done. The flow of news and information continues to be curated—but by a broader and more diverse constellation of curators than ever before.

Platform Power

Whichever of these actors are currently in the ascendancy, all of them rely crucially on the connective infrastructure provided by the leading social media platforms in order to undertake their curation activities. This has led to the development of a somewhat symbiotic but ultimately unequal relationship

between the news curators and the platform providers—a relationship from which the providers now tend to benefit especially strongly, as Ahmad points out: “for all its usefulness as an innovative marketing and research tool for journalists, journalists themselves are a pretty useful source of marketing for Twitter. They appear to promote it at every opportunity, sometimes at the expense of their own work’s quality” (2010: 154).

It is the free promotion which *Facebook* and especially *Twitter* have received from journalistic reporting about their crucial role in covering breaking news stories; as backchannels for discussing live news telecasts and other broadcast media content (Harrington *et al.* 2013); and for engaging directly with journalists and other newsmakers, that has attracted millions of new users to these platforms. The journalism industry has freely posted its news content to these platforms, in the hope that this will not merely inform the users gathered here but also result in a volume of monetisable click-throughs to its own Websites that is sufficient to sustain professional journalistic operations; however, if such social media strategies “simply end up transforming newspaper websites into appendages of Americanized corporate information capitalism ... the question of survival will become something of a moot point (the issue will become ‘survival in what form, and to what ends?’)” (Ahmad 2010: 154).

The relationship between mainstream industrial journalism and the leading social media providers is a fraught mixture of cooperation and competition, therefore. On the one hand, journalism increasingly relies on social media to source information, disseminate content, and connect with a growing portion of its audiences; on the other, news organisations and social media platforms also compete with each other for user attention and advertising revenues. As the Pew Research Center reports, for instance,

total digital ad spending grew ... in 2015 to about [US]\$60 billion But journalism organizations have not been the primary beneficiaries. ... Even more of the digital ad revenue pie—65%—is swallowed up by just five tech companies. None of these are journalism organizations, though several—including Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Twitter—integrate news into their offerings. (2016: 6)

There are many reasons other than following the news that attract users to social media platforms, of course, but news has been an important driver. News organisations have helped to make social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* attractive destinations for their users, but they have not themselves necessarily benefitted substantially from doing so; operating in a tertiary space

that they do not control, they remain subject to the whims of the operators of those spaces. As the BBC points out in its assessment of this new environment, “there are huge risks. What if Facebook decided to launch a news division and didn’t want a given provider on its platform, for example” (BBC 2015: 39)? Similar but somewhat less dramatic problems could also result from a change in the way that such platforms display and highlight the news updates posted by various news organisations, of course: as Newman *et al.* point out, for instance, news publishers are “delighted at the amount of new traffic but also concerned about over-reliance on Facebook and in particular about its algorithms, which are changing all the time and over which they have no control” (2015: 77).

Such concerns have already turned out to be justified. The 2016 *Digital News Report* notes that “news has become a more important part of the Facebook mix over the last year. Algorithms have prioritised breaking news, news-related videos, live streams, and other visual content, while publishers have been stepping up their efforts to publish native formats” (Newman *et al.* 2016: 9); further change is inevitable as *Facebook* steps up its efforts to combat ‘fake news’, however it may come to define that term (Zuckerberg 2016). This changeable environment privileges those news outlets that have been able to adjust their social media content publishing and promotion strategies to the evolving priorities that have become evident on the platform, and undermines the efforts of those that have pursued other approaches.

Facebook’s introduction of its Instant Articles framework has been especially controversial in this context. Launched in early 2015, with Instant Articles *Facebook* “would publish whole articles or videos instead of just publishing links to them. The rationale for the development was that links to external sites slowed down the way news reached readers” (Bell 2015: 90), because they still required users to click on those links to navigate to an external site, but more importantly Instant Articles also retains users (and thus, an audience for advertising) on the platform itself instead of losing them to the Websites of news outlets. Bell describes this as a “trade-off between control of your own journalism, versus reaching large audiences”, and suggests that this choice “is inevitable for both national and international media” (90); she notes with some surprise that even “news organisations like the *New York Times* signed up to a greater loss of control by being one of the first organisations to participate in the test” (Bell 2015: 90), and points out that “the idea that an organisation so apparently dedicated to the control of its own brand would take this route is a signal of how much changed behaviours in news

audiences [are] forcing even the most resolute organisations to make compromises” (90).

Such native, in-platform news publishing frameworks may provide additional revenue to news organisations even when users choose no longer to click through to their own sites, but in doing so also deliver more of the fate of professional journalism into the hands of the social media providers: “with more and more users engaging with news on Facebook, the platform ... will undoubtedly gain leverage towards the newspapers they host” (Larsson and Ihlebæk 2016: 11). An alternative approach would be for these news outlets to develop their own in-platform article display frameworks, but because of the additional development overheads that this would create, this course of action is unlikely to be a feasible option for any but the most prominent, best-resourced global news brands; as Nielsen puts it, “what works for Amazon may not work as well for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*” (2016: 114). Notably, however, major brands such as *The Guardian* have explored this option in the past (Weinberger 2015: n.p.), with mixed results.

In the view of some commentators, then, “Facebook and Twitter stand accused of living parasitically off the quality content produced by mainstream media and reaping the commercial benefit” (Mare 2013: 87–88). From this perspective, there is the distinct prospect—or threat—of a creeping takeover of the news industry by the leading social media platform providers; this has progressed from a competition for audiences and advertising revenue to a direct intrusion into editorial decision-making processes:

first tech companies created new pathways for distribution, in the form of search engines and email. The next industry overlap involved the financial model, with the creation of ad networks and app stores, followed by developments that impact audience engagement (Instant Articles, Apple News and Google’s AMP). Now, the recent accusations regarding Facebook editors’ possible involvement in “trending topics” selections have [shone] a spotlight on technology companies’ integral role in the editorial process. (Pew Research Center 2016: 7)

None of this would be problematic if there was still a viable prospect of a sustainable news industry that did not incorporate distribution of and engagement with the news via social media as a major component of user practices. Today, however, as we have seen throughout this book social media have come to play an ever-increasing role as important pathways to the news; what emerges here is a news “ecosystem where Facebook, Google, Apple, and Amazon control the advertising and technological environment” (Newman *et al.*

2016: 32), and where news organisations are no longer in control of their own destinies.

Although centrally addressing the role of search engines rather than social media as pathways to the news, this has been demonstrated especially prominently in recent battles over *Google News* as an aggregator of news headlines. As the 2015 *Digital News Report* outlines,

German publishers have been at the heart of European demands that Google start paying for content. But when a new law led to news snippets being left out of search results, news publishers were forced to request readmission, after traffic from Google and Google News fell by 40% and 80%. (Newman *et al.* 2015: 26)

This situation could easily be translated to social media. If a news outlet were successful in preventing links to its news from being shared through *Twitter* and *Facebook*, the end would not be an increase in direct visits to the outlet's Website, but rather a further, significant decline, due to the substantially reduced visibility of the outlet's content in the leading social media spaces where users may serendipitously discover its latest articles.

Ultimately, then, mainstream news outlets are forced to come to terms with the growing dominance of the tertiary spaces of social media, and of the companies that operate them. As Bell puts it,

the free press is now controlled by companies whose primary interests are not necessarily rooted in strengthening public discourse and democracy. On the one hand, journalists can reach far greater audiences immediately than was the case in the past. On the other hand, journalists and publishers have very little control now over how information reaches the world and there is limited transparency. (Bell 2015: 89)

At the same time, this also sets up new challenges for the social media companies themselves. As Hermida reports, "at a major online news conference in September 2012, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo was asked cheekily, 'so, how does it feel to be the voice of the press in the 21st century?'" (Hermida 2013: 306). Though tongue-in-cheek, that question has a harder edge, as being classified as a news outlet would make *Twitter* subject to a different and more complex set of rules and regulations than apply to it if it remains merely a communications carriage service. For this reason, representatives of *Twitter* and *Facebook* have consistently downplayed their roles as news publishers and disseminators: in 2016, for instance, one of *Facebook's* vice-presidents stated explicitly that "we are definitely not a media company, but we do recognise that we play an important role and that means we have responsibilities ... to be thoughtful

about how we ... help people find the content that is going to be most relevant and interesting to them” (qtd. in Battersby 2016: n.p.). Whether these platforms are going to be able to maintain the argument that they are not news organisations in their own right, however, remains to be seen.

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