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Making sense of Twitter buzz : the cross-media construction of news stories in election time

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MAKING SENSE OF TWITTER BUZZ

The cross-media construction of news stories in election time

Abstract

As the use of social media becomes more common, it is often claimed that a media environment arises in which traditional distinctions between concepts like online and offline, producer and audience, citizen and journalist become blurred. This study's purpose is to find out what the implications for contemporary news stories are. Using a content analysis of Belgian election campaign coverage in 2014, we study the role of five newspapers, two daily television newscasts, seven current affairs programs, radio news bulletins, three news websites, and a selection of Twitter accounts in creating and shaping news stories. We find that the analytical distinction between platforms still matters, since they have different roles in creating and shaping news stories, suggesting that different platform-specific logics are at play. Twitter is an important factor in launching and shaping news stories, but it tends to be dominated by establishment actors (journalists and politicians), whereas citizens only play a modest role.

KEYWORDS social media, Twitter, hybrid media system, news stories, election news, cross media

Introduction

Research on the role of Twitter in journalism and political communication is growing fast (Hermida 2014; Klinger and Svensson 2015). Several studies describe how Twitter is increasingly being adopted by journalists for professional purposes, not only as a news source (Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014), but also as a networked 'social awareness system' for monitoring the continuous streams of news and information (Hermida 2010; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2014). Other studies have focused on the ways in which both politicians and citizens are using Twitter to broadcast opinions and participate in direct, public conversations (Graham et al. 2013; Bruns and Highfield 2013; Enli and Skogerbø 2013).

While most studies on the use of Twitter among journalists, politicians and citizens have looked at the microblogging platform as an emerging networked 'social space' or a new 'arena of political communication' (Enli and Skogerbø 2013), our study explicitly aims to position Twitter within the broader cross-media environment. This means that we try to examine the 'Twittersphere' not in isolation but in relation to the broader media ecology and public sphere of which it is an integral part. Following Chadwick (2013), we conceptualise today's cross-media news environment as a 'hybrid media system'. Although we use the dichotomous categories 'traditional news media' and 'social media', it is not our intention to compare and stress the differences, but rather to explore their mutual interactions and to understand to what extent and how they have become interdependent. In this paper, we illustrate this point by describing how news stories emerge and spread in today's cross-media news environment.

The cross-media construction of news stories

Literature on new media has a tendency to emphasise change over continuity and difference over similarity. Hence, scholars studying social media are likely to argue that a new 'public sphere' is emerging, one that is networked rather than centralised, user-centred rather than professionally controlled, participatory rather than elitist, and messy rather than overseeable (see e.g. Singer et al. 2011; Papacharissi 2015; Klinger and Svensson 2014).

In his book *The Hybrid Media System*, Chadwick (2013) stresses that the ‘newer’ media logics do not simply replace ‘older’ logics, but they mutually build upon and interact with each other. The result of these interactions is a hybrid media system where these newer and older logics can no longer be understood in isolation, but should be considered as interrelated and interdependent. The boundary between ‘networked’ and ‘traditional mass’ media spheres becomes very theoretical, for it is clear that mass media are an integral part of the networked media environment and networked communication patterns are (re)shaping the processes of news production and distribution of mass media. The hybridity concept provides an analytical framework to understand the mutual interactions between online and offline, networked and traditional media.

To understand the construction and flow of news within the hybrid media environment, Chadwick (2013, 62-63) argues that we should look beyond the ‘news cycles’ of a single medium. In today’s cross-media environment, news continuously travels between and across different media platforms, resulting in what Chadwick calls ‘political information cycles’:

Political information cycles possess certain features that distinguish them from ‘news cycles’. They are complex assemblages in which the logics (...) of supposedly ‘new’ online media are hybridized with those of supposedly ‘old’ broadcast and newspaper media. This hybridization process shapes power relations among actors and ultimately affects the flow and meanings of news. (Chadwick 2013, 63)

The notion of hybridity does not only help to understand the cross-media flows of news, but also relates to the blurring lines between the producers and users of news. Social media are typically regarded as the focal example hereof. Particularly Twitter has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention. Several authors view it as a social space where news and opinions are collaboratively ‘produced’ by ‘networked publics’ of both professionals and citizens (Papacharissi 2015). According to D’heer and Verdegem (2014), who studied the conversations between political, media, and citizen actors on Twitter, the public debate can be understood as “a combination of and overlap between three fields” (D’heer and Verdegem 2014, 731), thereby echoing its hybrid nature. Their analysis shows that despite the prominence of citizens in the debate, established political and media agents still tend to hold central positions in these Twitter networks. Hence, Twitter does not only represent a ‘logic of the public’ (Brants and Van Praag 2015), but at the same time reflects the older political and media logics that we are likely to associate with traditional news media.

Highlighting individual aspects of hybridity in the current media ecology is one thing, but a holistic approach to examine the *extent* to which processes of hybridization are visible in the news is another. In this study, we address this open issue by exploring the lifecycles of news stories. We specifically look into two aspects of contemporary news cycles. First, one central aspect of the hybridity concept is the supposed cross-medial nature of news. To what extent is this realised in practice? Second, if older and newer practices become increasingly synthesised, what does this mean for the origins of news stories? Our research questions, then, are:

RQ1: How are news stories distributed across the hybrid cross-media news environment?

RQ2: How are news stories created within the hybrid cross-media news environment?

To specify the second question, we divide it into two sub-questions that address different aspects of where news derives from. First, we study news stories’ platform origins. Do platforms matter less in this respect, do we find that traditional media are leading, or has the balance shifted to social media? Second, we have to acknowledge the hybrid nature of Twitter itself. Different publics, including citizens, journalists, and politicians, assemble in a networked sphere. Therefore, researching how often the platform breaks a news story does not suffice here – in contrast to traditional media, for which news is produced only by professionals. Instead, we should look more in-depth and ask *who* exactly is first. Are ‘older’ logics, in which news is created by elite actors

dominant, or do we witness the ascendance of 'newer' logics, in which citizens and other publics are also able to influence the news agenda?

RQ2a: Where do news stories originate?

RQ2b: Which Twitter actors are the sources of news stories?

Methodology

Data collection

Using the hybridity concept strongly implies using a holistic approach, a requirement that we try to meet by taking a wide range of media outlets into account. Data from these media were collected in the run-up to the 2014 national elections in Belgium. An election campaign provides a framework of reference for journalists, in which certain kinds of stories are favoured over others. This provided us the opportunity to retrieve many interwoven news stories within a relatively short time span. For three levels of government (regional, federal, and European), elections were held on May 25. We started our data collection on May 1 (Labour Day, when left parties traditionally present their concerns for the coming period), and ended on May 24 (the last campaign day, we excluded election day itself to avoid biases).

We opted to include only Flemish (northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium with a population of around 6.2 million) media and Twitter accounts. Specifically, we included five newspapers (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *De Tijd*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*), three news websites (*destandaard.be*, *demorgen.be*, *deredactie.be*), the two daily 19:00 television newscasts (*Het Journaal* from the public broadcaster and its commercial *VTM Nieuws* counterpart), six daily radio newscasts (the 8:00, 9:00, 12:00, 13:00, 18:00 and 19:00 public *Radio 1* bulletins), the regular current affairs television programmes (*De Zevende Dag*, *Reyers Laat*, *TerZake*), and election-specific shows (*Het Beloofde Land*, *Het Nationale Debat*, *Jambers Politiek*, *Zijn er Nog Vragen?*) in our sample. Since the news websites in this sample are directly associated with newspapers, radio and television outlets, we consider them part of traditional media.

For Twitter, we were inspired by Axel Bruns' Twitter News Index approach (mappingonlinepublics.net, also see Bruns and Burgess 2012; Bruns and Stieglitz 2014) and constructed a sample of relevant accounts, encompassing 678 professional Flemish journalists (virtually all retrievable journalists who had a Twitter account); 44 accounts affiliated with the principal traditional media; 467 politicians (the top-3 candidates per constituency, plus a selection of lower-listed candidates); and 19 accounts of civil society organizations. In addition, we included a selection of 109 'influentials' (experts, business representatives, celebrities, and active citizens), whom we identified using the 'top Twitter influencer' list of *twitto.be*. This website provides a ranking of Belgium-based twitterers based on their *Klout*-score, an algorithm that estimates one's online influence. In sum, we had a sample of 1,317 accounts of which we retrieved all (re)tweets. Furthermore, we saved the tweets in which any of these 1,317 accounts was mentioned by people outside of our sample. Also, tweets mentioning the election hashtags #vk14 or #vk2014 were retrieved.

With this sample, our aim was to provide an adequate overview of the discourse in the Flemish 'Twittersphere'. The rationale was that even when we did not follow a particular Twitter user, when his/her tweet had considerable impact, it would be retweeted by at least one user in our sample (and thereby be included in our data set). To ensure that all tweets in the data set have had at least *some* impact, a threshold of two favourites and two retweets per tweet was set. The underlying assumption is that 'impact' can be regarded as having gained some traction in terms of diffusion and appraisal. We consider retweets and favourites, respectively, approximations hereof.

Respecting this threshold, 23,134 items were captured across all platforms. Of those, 9,749 (42%) could be categorised as politically relevant – meaning it featured a political topic, a domestic political actor, and/or an election-specific term.

Coding

These politically relevant items were then coded on the news story level (Thesen, 2013). Here, ‘news story’ refers to the collection of news items, across different media, that deal with something that happened at a given location and point in time. A general example of a news story could be the bankruptcy of a large enterprise. In this conceptualisation, all coverage, whether it be newspaper articles, television news, or Twitter posts, about this bankruptcy is considered part of this news story.

We found that in the election campaign, the bulk of the news stories is less about what happened than about what was said (often by politicians). For example, one often-covered news story was about a top politician who claimed that everyone with a good resume is able to find a job in Belgium. Another major story was about a politician who contradicted his own party’s viewpoints regarding welfare benefits in an interview.

Not each and every utterance by a politician does fit the news story concept, however. Only the main statements, meaning those that were highlighted in the title or introduction of the article, or those that were mentioned in other articles (even those bits that appeared in other media after the initial publication of an interview) were coded as news stories.

In the inter-media agenda-setting tradition, a framework that is often used to analyse how content transfers between different media, studies have often relied on rather broad issue categories, like ‘foreign policy’ or ‘public welfare’ (McCombs and Shaw 1972). These are valuable for tracking issue attention over a longer period of time, making large-scale statistical analyses (correlations and time series) possible. However, this level of analysis does not enable to track the origins and dissemination of chains of directly related news items – which is eventually our aim in the present paper. A news story level approach (Thesen 2013), then, is more suitable for these purposes.

A codebook was constructed to provide guidelines for identifying and labelling news stories, which were applied to traditional news media items (i.e. items from newspapers, newspaper websites, radio bulletins, and television newscasts) only. Items judged to belong to a previously-identified news story were coded as such. The remaining items in the sample (e.g. tweets and current affairs television shows) were not used to identify any extra news stories, but only assigned to the ones we previously found in traditional media.

About a third of the 9,749 items (3,395, including 3,145 tweets) were not found to be related to any news story. In the other 6,354 items, we were able to identify 869 news stories. Since some news items were judged to belong to more than one news story, thus counted more than once, the news stories ultimately encompassed 6,497 items. Table 1 shows, per media platform, how often news items were assigned. Here, we distinguish between stories that did not spread beyond their initial platform of publication (single-platform news stories) and those that did (multiplatform news stories). Our analysis is focused on the latter group.

[Table 1 here]

At first glance, only using the traditional news media to find news stories may seem to limit the inferences we can make. However, we consider this a more sensible approach than it would be to start from tweets as well. There were 3,145 tweets (of the 6,506) that could not be associated with an existing news story in the data set, each of which we might have considered an additional news story on its own. Yet, an inspection of these Twitter messages suggests that they predominantly concerned meta-comments, jokes, general criticism of politics (pub talk, in other words), and self-promotional tweets. It can hardly be argued, then, that they genuinely merit the name ‘news’, while using that label to classify *newscasts* and *newspaper* items is by definition correct. Ultimately, 3,361 tweets were considered.

In a final coding step, the original authors of all tweets included in the analysis were coded in one of ten categories: politicians, political parties, citizens, journalists, media outlets, experts/professionals, business representatives, celebrities, and civil society actors.

Findings

The distribution of news stories

To answer the first research question, regarding the distribution of news stories across platforms, we analyse their size, lifespan, and number of platforms reached. As discussed before, we distinguish between single- and multiplatform news stories. Of the total number of 869 news stories, 413, or less than a half, did not spread beyond their initial platform of publication. The other 456 featured on at least two platforms. We ignore the single-platform stories for the remainder of this paper, as we are only interested in the stories that actually spread across platforms.

Therefore, the smallest news stories encompassed 2 individual items, while the largest story (about the death of former prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene) consisted of 450 items. The median number of platforms that a news story reached (i.e. radio, television, newspaper, website, Twitter), was 2, with a range of 2-5. We also calculated the difference between a news story's first and last occurrence in the election campaign. By this measure, the lifespan of the shortest news story, concerning a liberal politician's statement that 'Belgium is a good country to live in' was just 0.05 hours (or 3 minutes). The lifespan of the longest news story, which is about proposals to adapt the automatic inflation correction of wages, was 558.74 hours (or 23 days, 6 hours, and 44 minutes). A median lifespan of 28.7 hours was calculated.

Table 2 shows the statistics regarding lifespan and size of stories, split up by the number of platforms reached. Here, too, we use the median as the central tendency.

[Table 2 here]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find that the more platforms a news story reaches, the longer its lifespan is, and the more items that news story encompasses. It also becomes clear that the number of news stories that reaches all platforms is fairly limited, as only 22 did so.

Next, we analysed what proportion of the 456 news stories each media platform featured. In this respect, Twitter is leading, covering 80,9% of the news stories. That is, few stories were *not* covered here. News websites and newspapers cover 70% and 63.6%, respectively. Numerically, television (33.3%) and radio (17.8%) are underperformers. Thus, we may say that Twitter is the most comprehensive of all media platforms, at least in touching upon news stories.

The origins of news stories

Our second research question, on the creation of news stories, is divided up into two sub-questions that will be addressed separately. Concerning sub-question 2a, about where news stories originate, table 3 shows how often news stories appear first on that particular media platform, how long these stories last, and how many items they encompass.

Starting 18% of all news stories, newspapers are far from obsolete in setting the news agenda. Moreover, the comparatively long median lifespan (62.8 hours) indicates that these stories also tend to be the more important ones. Online news websites account for 28.9%, which suggests that traditional media follow a digital-first strategy (as these three websites were associated with newspapers, radio, and television). At the same time, editors seem to save some stories for their newspaper's print edition. The role of television and radio in bringing new news stories is modest, both accounting for 6% each. Reporting stories that were already covered by other media, then, seems to be the predominant role of television and radio. A last and remarkable observation is that Twitter starts the biggest share, 41.7%, of news stories, something which we explore further in the next sub-question.

[Table 3 here]

In the second sub-question, we asked about the exact origins of news stories on Twitter. To answer this last question, we analyse the original senders of all first tweets of the 190 news stories that were Twitter-instigated. Table 4 shows an overview of these actors. The ‘other’ category includes experts/professionals, civil society actors, celebrities, and business representatives.

[Table 4 here]

What stands out is the dominance of institutional actors, particularly political parties and politicians, who account for almost half of the news stories that started on Twitter. This finding confirms the strategic use of Twitter by politicians and parties alike to influence the news agenda (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). More important for our present purposes is that over a third of these stories originate from either individual journalists or accounts associated with media outlets. By contrast, the contribution of citizens and other actors is relatively small. It should be conceded, nonetheless, that it may be less likely that citizens are the origin of a news story in traditional mass media. Yet, the main pattern that emerges from this quantitative analysis is a focus on elites, paired with a dominant presence of journalists and media outlets in the discourse on the platform.

This also shows when we look at the nature of the stories that started on Twitter. An exploration of these stories shows that even when not brought up by journalists or media-associated accounts, their topics are closely aligned to those initiated by mass media. Indeed, in some cases there is a direct link, as Twitter users are live-tweeting about what they see in other media. For example, when viewing a television documentary, one citizen was first to note that two politicians did not wear their seat belts when driving their car. In other cases, we find that the *logic* of news reporting, particularly that of breaking or unfolding news, is incorporated on Twitter (cf. Marchetti and Ceccobelli 2015). The news that one candidate’s campaign vehicle burnt down, for example, was announced first on Twitter. Also, people attending (political) conferences are sometimes first to mention these gatherings.

These findings suggest that Twitter’s role in the election campaign news should not be sought in providing alternative types of stories that are picked up later by traditional media. Indeed, Twitter is more likely to behave exactly like traditional media or discuss their news coverage (cf. D’heer and Verdegem 2014). We can point to only one instance, namely the grassroots campaign to tunnel the highway around Antwerp, in which an alternative story (driven by citizens, not urgent) spread from Twitter to traditional mass media. Yet even for this case, traditional news media mainly seemed interested when established actors commented on the issue.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this paper is to give insight in the distribution, as well as the origins, of news stories in the contemporary news ecology. These issues link back to Chadwick’s (2013) hybridity concept.

Concerning the question of how news stories are distributed across and within the hybrid cross-media news environment, we can conclude that the majority indeed spreads across media platforms. We also see that the more platforms a story reaches, the more items it encompasses, and the longer its lifespan is. Although Twitter and news websites cover the highest proportion of news stories, newspapers have not yet had their day, as nearly two-thirds of the stories can still be found there. By contrast, television and radio only cover one-third and less than one-fifth of all stories, respectively. We should be aware, however, that this does not say anything about the quality of the coverage. Obviously, a tweet of 140 characters is unlikely to challenge a newspaper article in terms of information value. Nor does this say much about the stories’ importance – television and radio channels may deliberately dedicate their limited airtime to fewer, but more important news stories. From an electoral perspective, it may well be that following traditional media still provides the best information to make an informed political judgment, even though these media tap into fewer news stories. Presently, our data do not allow for making this assessment. Furthermore, we should bear in

mind that our sampling method plays a role here as well. While we made an effort to capture the debate on Twitter comprehensively, it seems unpractical for individuals to attend to this wide array of voices while the election campaign unfolds.

Regarding the question on the origins of news stories, our conclusion is that Twitter is the fastest medium overall, being the first medium to feature over 40% of the news stories. News websites are second, with about 29%. Since these websites are associated with traditional media (radio, television, and newspapers), the inference is that an online-first strategy prevails in today's news industry. Here, too, we find that newspapers are not at all obsolete, since nearly one fifth of the stories appear here before spreading to other platforms. Television and radio, however, are far less important in this respect.

We find that there tends to be an establishment bias in the stories that appear first on Twitter, for their vast majority derive from accounts of political actors, journalists, or media outlets. Citizens account for less than 8% of the news stories that break on Twitter. Hence, we should not equate 'social media' with 'the public', but rather regard social media as a mediated social space where the 'public of citizens' interacts and blends with the political and media fields (D'heer and Verdegem 2014).

Our research provides some first indicative figures on the scope and degree of hybridity in the contemporary news ecology. We have tried to give the hybridity concept more empirical ground. The blurring of categories, as well as the interaction between 'newer' and 'older' logics, are crucial to this concept (Chadwick 2013). Indeed, while we find that novel elements like Twitter firmly establish their position, this does not imply a complete overhaul of the pre-existing news ecology. Core elements are still key to understand the news ecology, particularly platforms and actors.

First, our study shows that differences between media platforms remain relevant, as they clearly occupy different positions in the news ecology. Some platforms (television, radio) are far less important in starting news stories, but are probably crucial for a news story to reach the public at large. Although most stories are multiplatform in nature, few reach all platforms. Further research is needed to explain to what extent the diffusion of news stories can be explained by differing criteria of newsworthiness per platform.

Second, though the theoretical difference between producer and audience can be questioned, we find that the interaction from which news stories arise is still centred around established actors. Journalists and political actors have a vastly more important role than ordinary citizens. This is partly due to our focus on the election campaign in which journalists and especially politicians are more active than usually to reach out to the electorate (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Potentially, in political 'routine' periods, other actors have more opportunities to influence and initiate news stories. It would therefore be useful to replicate this study in other contexts to see whether social media and traditional media become more distinct platforms outside election-time. We hope our study can be a helpful starting point for this.

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Table 1. Number of items assigned to single- or multiplatform news stories, by media platform.

Platform	All items, assigned to 869 news stories (<i>N</i> =6,497)		Assigned to 413 single platform news stories (<i>N</i> =502)		Assigned to 456 multi- platform news stories (<i>N</i> =5,995)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Newspapers	1,440	22.2	245	48.8	1,195	19.9
Television	433	6.7	17	3.4	416	6.9
Radio	248	3.8	45	9.0	203	3.4
News websites	1,015	15.6	195	38.8	820	13.7
Twitter	3,361	51.7	- [*]	- [*]	3,361	56.1

^{*} = Since tweets were not used to identify news stories, they only show up in the multiplatform column

Table 2. Median lifespan and size of multiplatform news stories, by number of platforms reached.

Platforms reached	<i>N</i>	Lifespan (in hours)	Size (items in story)
2-5	456	28.7	5.0
3-5	201	60.8	10.0
4-5	77	123.6	23.5
5	22	183.5	44.0

Table 3. Median lifespan and size of multiplatform news stories, by platform on which the stories started.

Started on	<i>N</i>	%	Lifespan (hours)	Size (items in story)
Newspaper	82	18.0	62.8	6.0
Television	26	5.7	84.0	7.0
Radio	26	5.7	7.0	7.0
Website	132	28.9	14.1	4.0
Twitter	190	41.7	34.4	8.0
Total	456	100	28.7	5.0

Table 4. Actor type frequencies in tweets.

	Frequency overall (<i>N</i> =3,361)		Frequency of starting a news story (<i>N</i> =190)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Politician or political party	1334	39.7	88	46.3
Journalist or media outlet	1144	34.0	70	36.8
Citizen	421	12.5	15	7.9
Other	462	13.7	17	9.0