RE-DISSEMINATION OF NEWS AND PUBLIC DEBATE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Redistribución de noticias y debate público en las redes sociales

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Abstract

The results of a qualitative research study based on 12 focus groups with a total of 106 people about the role of social networks in the consumption of current information are presented. We inquired about the motivation of citizens to interact with the news on social networks, and if they consider them appropriate spaces for public debate. Some findings of this study suggest that social networks are seen as an adequate space to share news and information on matters of public interest; to extend the agenda of topics that focus on the interests of users by allowing them access to topics often silenced in their usual media; and finally, social networks are viewed as more suitable for opinions, rather than public debate.

Keywords

Online journalism; Social Networks; Active audiences; News dissemination; News consumption; Public debate; Focus groups.

Resumen

Se presentan los resultados de una investigación cualitativa basada en la realización de 12 grupos de discusión con un total de 106 personas sobre el papel que tienen las redes sociales en el consumo de información de actualidad. Se ha indagado acerca de la motivación de los ciudadanos para interactuar con las noticias en las redes sociales, y sobre si éstos las consideran espacios adecuados para el debate público. Algunas conclusiones de este estudio apuntan a que las redes sociales son vistas como un espacio adecuado para compartir noticias e informaciones sobre asuntos de interés público, amplían la agenda de temas que centran el interés de los usuarios y les permiten acceder a temas habitualmente silenciados en sus medios de consulta habituales; y son más aptas para la opinión que para el debate público.

Palabras clave

Periodismo digital; Redes sociales; Audiencias activas; Distribución de noticias; Consumo de noticias; Debate público; Grupos de discusión.

1. Introduction

Within the current hybrid media system, in which the "old" and "new" media coexist (**Chadwick**, 2013), the role of social networks in the consumption of news has become increasingly important in recent years, thereby constituting a public sphere for the debate and formulation of public opinion (**Papacharissi**, 2010) or, in our view, becoming included in and widening the pre-existing public sphere. Various scholars have highlighted the importance and the transformational potential of user interactions in social networks in the traditional news cycle, when exchanging or discussing contents related to news or public affairs (**Nielsen**; **Schrøder**, 2014; **Almgren**; **Olsson**, 2015; **Newman**; **Dutton**; **Blank**, 2012). These new dynamics, arising from users who share, recommend, or send news material to their contacts through private messages in social networks, expands the

scope of the public sphere in which ordinary citizens gain a larger role (**Singer** *et al*. 2011; **Papacharissi**, 2015; **Klinger**; **Svensson**, 2015), jeopardizing the traditional hegemony of the journalists and media as *gatekeepers* of public affairs (**Suau**, 2015; **Suau**; **Masip**, 2015).

Previous research has focused on the effects of the redistribution of content on social networking like *Facebook* or *Twitter* (**Singer**, 2014; **Coddington**; **Holton**, 2014; **Vos**; **Heinderyckx**, 2015). Most of the previous studies have used quantitative methodologies and have focused on analyzing the type of news shared, as well as the social network used (**Bastos**, 2015). According to these studies, *Facebook* is more widely used to share material relating to entertainment, while *Twitter* is more closely linked to current affairs or *hard news* (**Newman**, 2011), and the users sharing material on *Twitter* are older than those sharing on *Facebook*

(**Newman**; **Levy**, 2014). Some authors have also highlighted the perception of *Twitter* as elitist (**Engesser**; **Humpretch**, 2015), a social network in which journalists and politicians are particularly active. In contrast, *Facebook* is used more by ordinary citizens to share material with their contacts or friends (**Almgren**; **Olsson**, 2015).

In comparison with other fields of study related to social networks, the users' motivations for sharing or debating in online media have received little attention. The few existing studies, most of which are quantitative, indicate personal motivation or entertainment as the main reasons leading users to participate in the redistribution of news or in the debate on social networks, as opposed to an active motivation to produce or enhance the journalistic content, in a similar way to that which occurs with comments in the news (**Baden**; **Springer**, 2014; **Larsson**, 2014; **Paskin**, 2010; **Heise** *et al.*, 2013). The lack of interest in an in-depth analysis of citizens' attitudes and motivations for publishing, redistributing content, and entering into debate on social networks follows the traditional trend in communication research of undervaluing the perceptions of the public, in contrast with the large amount of research devoted to analyzing the newspaper messages or the behavior of newsrooms and journalists (**Van-der-Wurf**; **Schoenbach**, 2014; **Slavtcheva-Petkova**, 2016). The previous studies on social networks tend to follow what we could call a certain "methodological convenience", focusing almost exclusively on *Twitter*, which provides open data, allowing researchers to analyze the flow of messages and the construction of a network of tweets, re-tweets, mentions and hashtags (**Paulussen**; **Harder**, 2014; **D'Heer**; **Verdegem**, 2014).

2. Objectives and methodology

This article forms part of a broader research project[1] with the general aim of studying the role of active audiences (**Masip** *et al.*, 2015b) in the current hybrid media system. Specifically, it has three main objectives: (a) to achieve a greater understanding of the role played by social networks in the consumption of news; b) to determine citizens' reasons for interacting with the news in social networks, and (c) to ascertain whether citizens regard social networks as suitable spaces for public debate.

To meet these objectives, a qualitative approach was taken, based on focus groups, which were a follow-up to quantitative research previously undertaken (**Masip** *et al.*, 2015a; 2015b). The qualitative technique of focus groups is aimed at stimulating participants' reflection through group conversation (**Morgan**, 1997). Participants may express their "latent thoughts" (**Hansen** *et al.*, 1998) and show how they construct their own personal meaning on public affairs (**Gamson**, 1992).

In December 2014, 12 focus groups were carried out in Barcelona, involving a total of 106 individuals. This number of groups was similar to those used in studies with similar characteristics (**Coleman**; **Anthony**; **Morrison**, 2009; **Couldry**; **Livingstone**; **Markham**, 2007). All the focus groups were recorded in audio and video to facilitate the subsequent transcription of conversations.

Research using focus groups makes it difficult to reach conclusions which can be generalized. With the aim of minimizing the problems arising from their representativeness, **Morgan** (1997) recommends selecting participants through theoretically motivated sampling. Thus, in line with other research (**Schrøder**; **Phillips**, 2007; **Coleman**; **Anthony**; **Morrison**, 2009), participants were selected by taking into account criteria such as age, sex, and level of education. With regard to the latter, 43 of the participants were not university-educated, whereas the other 63 had at least a 3-year university degree. Additionally, two extra selection criteria were added as they were considered to be relevant to the objectives of the research: *civic engagement* and *media engagement*.

It was broadly established that, to meet the requirement of civic engagement, the individuals had to be regularly involved in, members of, or linked to a political party, trade union, NGO, cultural association, or social movement. Thus, 43 people with "civic engagement" were recruited, while the remaining 63 were not involved in any association of this kind.

Lastly, in the process of recruitment of participants, there were three predefined levels of media engagement:

High media engagement	People who read the news every day of the week using one of the two media (printed or online), and, at least two days a week, read news in the other medium (printed or online) that they do not use on a daily basis.
Medium media engagement	People who read the news in the printed media or online more often than once a week, but less than six times per week, or who read the news online more than once a week but less than six times per week *and* at least once per week in the printed media.
Low media engagement	People who read the news online once a week (irrespective of how often they read news in the printed media).

In the focus groups that were formed, there were ultimately 37 people with a high level of media engagement, 46 with a medium level and 23 with a low level. Since one of the objectives of the research was to find out the citizens' motivations and the use they make of the participating mechanisms of digital media and of social networks for news purposes, in the criteria for defining the three levels of media engagement, the consumption of print news was taken into account, but the consumption of online news was the key focus. The use of television as a source of news was not included as a variable because this is not a discriminatory criterion, since 71% of Spaniards claim to watch the news on television on a daily basis (*CIS*, 2013).

Lastly, with regard to the specific configuration of the groups, each had participants who shared a common characteristic from the three selection criteria we have described and a balance was maintained across the groups between sex, age, and the other criteria. Thus, there were two focus groups whose participants did not have a university education, two that had a university education, two groups with civic engagement, two without civic engagement, one

with a high media engagement, one with a low media engagement and two with a medium media engagement.

3. Findings

Most of the participants in the focus groups stated that they received content about public affairs through their social networks on a more or less regular basis (several times a day). We use "public affairs" to indicate those topics defined by **Mouffe** (1997; 2005) as "political", a concept that encompasses topics beyond the strictly political and includes subjects that concern or affect citizens but are outside the daily political debate or the struggle between political parties. The following focus group conversations reflected the general trend of a high reception of content related to public affairs:

> MG36: Oh yes… several times a day…yes
> MR63: Yes, yes, all the time…
> JLM67: I read more than I share.
> JMA60: Yes, me too.
>
> (all): Every day…
> GC23: Constantly… though I might look at it later or I might see the picture and think "what a load of rubbish"
> MB23: Yes, you look at a few lines and that's it…

The extracts above and other comments made in the focus groups highlight the large number of formats in which citizens received content on the "political": links, photographs, videos, text, and image compositions (memes), etc. However, the majority of the participants stated that most of the content they received was links to news produced by media or by journalists. This is in line with the quantitative data from previous studies, in which it has been noted that access to news is the second motivation for the use of social networks, after relationships with friends and acquaintances (**Masip** *et al.*, 2015b, p. 366).

> " Participants expressed greater confidence about the content found in social networks if the content had been previously published by media "

The participants, especially those older than 40, expressed greater confidence about the content found in social networks if the content had been previously published by mainstream outlets. These participants still respected a certain hierarchy of the media with regard to the content generated by third parties in social networks, as shown in the following comments:

> BA43: [what do you read on social networks?] A little bit of everything, newspapers in general and then specific journalists, Julia Otero, for example. I like the way she talks a lot, although I don't like some of her ideas; I like Ana Pastor, for example, how she discusses the news, I follow her.
>
> JA70: I read *The vanguardia*, because it's like a habit now. It's the only medium I follow on an ongoing basis. What we are talking about here, links, I don't like them very

much, I need a degree of reliability that there is some truth in it, otherwise… it's just spreading rumors and I dislike that…

Selective exposure in social networks

In the focus groups, a general view was identified in support of social networks because they allow people to access news outside their usual subjects of interest or that would otherwise go unnoticed, since it does not form part of the media selection that the person usually consumes. Social networks, in this way, could break with the pre-established dynamics of selective exposure of individuals (**Prior**, 2007), as acknowledged by the participants themselves in the focus groups:

> LS24: Yes, I think so, because you have a lot of people on *Facebook*. Not all of them think differently, that is to say, not all of them think the same. There are a lot of different things and yes, they offer you something new. The good thing about it is that, when you see a piece of news, other items are always displayed underneath and you end up turning your attention to a lot more things because you look at what people are saying to each other.
>
> ABF53: There is always something that is posted that you end up looking at and thinking: Wow, isn't that amazing? Because you haven't seen it on TV, nor are they talking about it in the media.
>
> ILG57: Yes, especially international news, they send you things where you say: I don't normally read this.

> " Social networks allow people to access news outside their usual subjects of interest or that would otherwise go unnoticed "

Similarly, participants noted that pieces of news reached them through friends in social networks, and that they were not from their usual sources of information, which included news that directly challenged their points of view and/or ideological positions. Although the data obtained in other studies (**Masip** *et al.*, 2015b) has shown a low rate of consumption of this type of content of the total ("only" 7% of the news received through social networks is from media that have a different ideological stance to their own as opposed to 77% from media they usually consult), this fact was significant in itself from a quantitative point of view and is even more so because of how it was perceived by participants in the focus groups. As several scholars have highlighted (**Mouffe**, 2013; **Sustein**, 2003; **Barber**, 2006), a democracy requires, for its proper development, the creation of spaces in which citizens may come into contact with visions of the political world that challenge their own. Social networks, as is reflected in the following extracts from the focus groups, seem to fulfil this function, in some cases creating citizen discussion and debate on public affairs, and differing points of view, thus potentially promoting pluralism:

XB23: On *Facebook* there are some pages people follow that publish information which is contrary to or approached from a different point of view from my own.

AC20: I have a friend who isn't that different to me, but who often sends me news items that don't affect me, but go against my ideas and sometimes I counterattack and send him others back.

MJ34: They give you another point of view. It is always good to be aware of both sides of the coin and listen to everyone, because if you only believe one side maybe you are missing the other; it is good to know your own view and everyone else's.

> ❛ Social networks create citizen discussion and debate on public affairs, and differing points of view, thus potentially promoting pluralism ❜

Motivations

The examples above display some of the reasons why citizens share information on social networks. Participants expressed a wide range of motivations for interacting with current affairs news, sharing news items, and discussing them.

- The need to share a news items and discuss them with friends or acquaintances on social networks:

    FA64: A need to share and to ask your friends' opinions.

    OV40: If I come across something undisclosed and I'm the first to find it, then I post it.

- The belief that the story is important and that it is worth passing on to followers or contacts:

    BPB25: When there is something important. Then you think you should give it a bit of publicity.

    GC23: Things you think really define you, like, this is exactly what I think and this guy explains it very well – I'm not good at writing myself – and I publish it.

    JC49: Basically things that spark my interest; they are not necessarily negative, it might be something I really like and I also want to share.

- A special interest in the subject:

    GL58: Because the subject concerns you; so maybe you tell your friends, people who are on *Facebook*, to find out their views about a topic that you are concerned about and interested in.

- A method of ideological proselytism:

    IE26: Due to political affiliation I post things that have been done or in which I've taken part or that have been done by my party and that sometimes don't make the press, or also the odd article of my own.

- A reaction of protest or of indignation to a news story. This is one of the most frequent motivations:

    CCM29: Protest.

    FRB20: Indignation.

JMA60: Indignation...

- The dissemination of topics not usually published in the conventional media:

    AC33: It tends to be news that draws attention to things the traditional media make invisible; it tends to be news of a critical nature such as cases of corruption, etc. Sometimes when I share, I copy a bit of the article.

In short, a strong connection was found between the individual and the content that they shared or commented on. This was the main motivation, which was expressed in differing ways: because of interest in the news, because the news is important in itself, because it sparks a reaction of indignation or anger, because it is thought that the news has a low profile or is little-known and that it is pretty much "a first", because there is a strong identification with it, due to ideological affiliation, and so on. Whereas the sole motivation given in which the importance of the content was not openly expressed was pure relational activity: the need to share with friends. This identification between content and user implies that the selection of the content and the attitude towards it defines the individual socially. We could sum up this connection in one sentence: tell me what you share and I'll tell you who you are (socially).

> ❛ A strong connection was found between the individual and the content that they shared or commented on social networks ❜

Therefore, audiences interacted with the news items according to their interest, concern, emotion – their connection, in short – to the content. And this happened in a social networking environment where their interlocutors were usually nearby and close to them, or at least more so than in other environments, such as the spaces provided by the media for participation. Here the interlocutors were friends and acquaintances (*Facebook*) or followers (*Twitter*). In this environment, despite the specific difficulties that are discussed in the next section, they were sharing and commenting on current affairs, on what interested them, concerned them or motivated them.

Social networks as a space for debate

As previously noted, the participants in the focus groups held differing views on the suitability of social networks as a place for debate and exchange of views. Some participants also referred to specific or differentiated behavior between *Facebook* and *Twitter*. They pointed out that *Facebook* is a relational space where family and acquaintances meet, whereas on *Twitter*, due to its nature as a public publishing system, the contents can be seen by everyone.

There is a reasonable consensus that social networks are more appropriate for debate and exchange of views than other spaces, such as the spaces provided by the media to comment on news (**Suau**, 2015; **Suau**; **Masip**, 2015). However, social networks are not presented as ideal contexts for

debate, according to comments made in the focus groups. *Facebook* is preferred because "it is more suitable for chatting, saying hello, or arranging to meet" (BPB25), while *Twitter* may facilitate debate. Some people regularly entered into discussion specifically in the media's profiles on social networking sites like *Twitter*:

> BS57: When I want to have a discussion, I go to *Twitter* to whatever program it is, for example *Catalunya Ràdio*'s *El suplement del matí*, also the radio station *Cadena SER*, and Julia Otero's *Twitter*; that's where the debate is, where you also realize that people will respond to you.

One participant raised an interesting point, making a distinction between commenting and discussing:

> XB23: On *Twitter* you can tweet, you make comments and it's not a debate, you're expressing your position. They aren't debates, in the sense of a conversation where points of view are exchanged, rather, you comment on a piece of news or you retweet, whereas to start a debate, an exchange of ideas, I'm more inclined to do it in person with whoever I want to, and not with a stranger whose opinion doesn't matter to me.

Twitter was, therefore, regarded as a suitable place to express a point of view, but not for a debate. On the whole, participants recognized that the right conditions for debate were not always present in social networks:

> RR23: Sometimes you see a news item and you say, I feel like making a comment and you do, and then someone answers you and you spark off a debate, and they can sometimes get awkward [*all laugh*], because you sometimes come across some idiot who makes you say, bloody hell, I am going to make my *Facebook* account even more private.

> This study confirms the paradox, which was demonstrated in previous research, that users distrust the media, but that, when sharing news on social networks, they are their main reference points

As is the case with comments on the news (**Ruiz** *et al.*, 2013), the lack of courtesy and good manners could easily degenerate into confrontation and even insults:

> JC49: I participate as long as everyone behaves courteously; when that is lost, I'm not interested anymore and I'm out of there. Yes, when people start insulting each other and that kind of thing, you say look, this is where I leave you, I don't want to get into this.

> LS24: That's why I don't make any comments, I don't fancy getting into arguments and, well, when you express the opposite idea to what people think, then they all turn on you and it doesn't pay off... it's not worth it for me.

> RR27: Because there is always someone who oversteps the mark and then someone else who goes even further.

Because of the differences between *Twitter* and *Facebook*, people were even more wary about entering into debates on *Facebook* than on *Twitter*. The "friendship" that linked the members of a community on *Facebook* led, for some, to a fear of "losing friends" because of the tone or the subject of some debates. This unease carried over into the offline environment:

> CF47: Well, like he said, on the same lines, that by being honest you lose friendships; so, you're politically correct – at least I am – depending on the comment, depending on the debate, you leave it as soon as you see things start to... If I express an opinion, if it's when I'm at a family get together or with friends... I don't give it, because if we are going to talk about politics or whatever, everyone will give their own view, what they feel, their ideology, and that's not going to change, it would be like changing religion.

> IE26: On *Facebook* you have family, people with whom you don't want to get into debate, but on *Twitter* I don't like to get into controversy either because it goes down in writing and that's off-putting.

> The role of gatekeeper in the hybrid media system is distributed consecutively between the media when they decide to publish the content

As we have noted above, social networks enable users to access a wider range of sources, some of which have differing ideologies. However, this does not always lead to dialogue and social networks are not perceived as suitable spaces for public debate.

Debate on certain subjects, such as politics or ideology, was also noted to be more difficult by participants. These were subjects that were seen as liable to produce more confrontation. There was also greater caution regarding privacy and the public exposure of one's political ideas or stances. This was in contrast to other subjects that lent themselves more to "positive" discussions, such as health or spirituality.

> MP53: But things that are positive, like matters of health, natural remedies, spirituality... I don't want to get into talking about politics because the discussions don't lead anywhere, because everyone has their own beliefs, and nor do I want people to know my political ideas to be on the safe side. It is something public that anyone can see, so I keep them to myself, as anyone can see *Facebook* and we don't know who is behind *Facebook*, do we?

In this regard, a specific topic in the current political scene was mentioned by a number of participants--the issue of Catalonia's independence.

> JRF65: The subject of the independence of Catalunya has given rise to a situation in a group of friends where, for example, in *WhatsApp*, a few say: Come on, let's create another group because I've got a "pro" or "anti" sentiment. And so then they have split up.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In most academic and professional discussions the media and social networks are regarded as alternative channels which are used by citizens to obtain news. However, the findings of this study suggest that there is an ongoing interaction between the two according to the users' behavior. A qualitative approach enabled us to identify some of the mechanisms that characterize this ongoing interaction in the behavior of audiences.

1) Social networks were viewed by users as an appropriate space to share news and views on public affairs. In line with previous studies carried out in other countries (**Nielsen**; **Schroder**, 2014; **Almgren**; **Olsson**, 2015; **Newman**; **Dutton**; **Blank**, 2012), the majority of the participants stated that they received content through this channel several times a day.

> Social networks appeared to be more of a space for opinion rather than debate, particularly for disseminating people's own views

2) The content that was shared by participants had very varied formats (from links to memes), but the content normally came from items that had been published by the media, who have maintained citizens' trust as the main source of information. This study confirms the paradox, which was demonstrated in previous research (**Suau**; **Masip**, 2015), that users distrust the media, but that, when sharing news on social networks, they are their main reference points. Therefore, there was a double-filter for our participants in determining their confidence in the content: that of their friends in the social networks who "shared" the content, and that of media that originally published the content. This observation would merit a more in-depth examination, but points to the possibility that the role of gatekeeper (**Singer**, 2014) in the hybrid media system is distributed consecutively between the media (when they decide to publish the content) and the users' contacts in the networks (when they decide to "share" it). This situation would downplay the importance of the decisions made by the media and would give a greater role to the decisions of the users themselves when setting up their network of relationships in the media. This hypothesis would entail a fragmentation of the effects of the media and would confirm the hybrid nature of the new media environment (**Chadwick**, 2013).

3) The news contents shared in social networks broadened the range of issues and led them to consider points of view and approaches that were different from their own, strengthening the deliberative democracy (**Mouffe**, 2013). If this trend is confirmed in quantitative studies, it would require a rethink of the debate about the homogenizing force of social networks that are structured on the users' affinities. The users' responses seemed to indicate that the access to media content through social networks widened the range of editorial approaches that they consumed. They no longer only read one newspaper, listened to one radio station, or watched one television channel, but now also came into contact with items that aroused the interest of their contacts on social networks. Future studies would need to explore the degree of affinity between what is being shared and the ideology of the users.

4) Social networks provided users with access to topics which are often suppressed in the media where they regularly read the news. This conclusion, derived from the focus groups, opens up a very interesting debate on the silences produced by the actions of the media as a gatekeeper. While citizens only consumed information from traditional media, the "silence" was perceived only in their individual experiences as a consumer. So, whatever "their paper" didn't tell them was silenced. The dissemination of information via social networks caused a mirror effect so that the silences of certain media become more evident. Curiously, users did not attribute this break to the plurality of editorial policies, but to the contribution of the emancipated users, an aspect that had not been sufficiently highlighted in previous research (**Singer**, 2014; **Coddington**; **Holton**, 2014; **Vos**, 2015).

5) Social networks appeared to be more of a space for opinion rather than debate, particularly for disseminating people's own views which were expressed through the use of links to news that mainly reflected their own beliefs.

6) Lastly, it has been noted that users are somewhat wary of expressing themselves freely on certain issues, especially political issues, to friends and family (*Facebook*) or strangers (*Twitter*). The "spiral of silence" was also observed in the comments of the participants, where silence was preferred to social isolation, in this case, in social networks.

> Users are somewhat wary of expressing themselves freely on certain issues, especially political ones, to friends and family (*Facebook*) or strangers (*Twitter*)

Note

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