

All the news that's fit to Tweet

Using the microblogging platform Twitter to conduct a discourse analysis of experts discussing the future of newspapers

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Grounded theory method, Twitter, Computer-mediated discourse analysis, Journalism, Newspapers, Social media, Innovation.

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Introduction

The Current State of Newspapers

A persistent point of discussion among those in media is the current state of journalism in the developed world, with attentions focused specifically on the future of the printed word. With the continued increase in the reach and use of the Internet, the newspaper industry is an illustration of a larger shift in the way in which civil society functions. It is not been an easy or smooth road for an industry that is known to be resistant to change, slow to react and equally slow to innovate (Jones, 2009; Franklin, 2007; Preston, 2007; Boczkowski, 2004). There are many changes that are effecting not just what they do, but how they do it, as well as who can do it.

The Web has transformed traditional mass media, historically viewed as a one-way channel of communication, into a two-way channel of communication. Increased choice, customized consumption and instant availability allow users to consume news through what has been dubbed “The Daily Me” (Negroponte, 1995). Whereas the audiences of mass media were perceived as passive, anonymous, heterogeneous and primarily assembled for advertisers (Pavlik, 2008), “the Daily Me” can be seen as a 24/7 online news cycle in which the user personalizes their news consumption. This has caused a revolutionary shift in the balance of power between the news producer and the news consumer (Lasica, 2002; Shirky, 2009; Jenkins, 2006).

The idea of revolution is a recurring theme in much of the discourse surrounding the future of the newspaper. NYU professor and frequent commentator Clay Shirky

(2009) argues that the newspaper business is not undergoing an upgrade but a revolution. Author and self-proclaimed anti-Christ of Silicon Valley, Andrew Keen (2009), claims that the industry is experiencing the death of its niche through the collapse of a centralized industrial age.

The current upheaval in the North American newspaper industry can be typified by plunging readership numbers, economic instability and an influx of new actors. All three of these factors can be squarely attributed to the increase in popularity of news consumption via the Internet.

The Internet is bringing forth an age of shifting models, restructuring society from an industrial model to one based on networks, knowledge and information (Benkler, 2007). The Web offers a platform that disrupts traditional models by offering a new paradigm, in which society functions in a collective, collaborative and transformative way through a global, interlinking system.

However, the state of newspapers is not all doom and gloom. Online readership numbers overall have been steadily increasing (Edmond, 2010). The growth can be attributed to the Internet because of the ever-growing popularity of the web and the move to online for news. In particular, this growth can be attributed to social networking or social media, the fastest growing segment of the Internet.

Social media play a dual role as part of both the problem and the solution for newspapers in that people are increasingly turning to their social networks for their news (Ludtke, 2009). A recent Project for Excellence in Journalism report reported that 92% of participants use multiple platforms to get news on a typical day and

over 60% of respondents said they some of their get news online (Purcell, 2010). In Canada an estimated three and a half million people signed up for Twitter¹, although that number is dwarfed by the 13 million who use social media giant, Facebook² (Akin, 2010).

Social Media and Twitter

Launched in August 2006, Twitter is a platform that is considered to be microblogging³. Users broadcast themselves publically through “tweets”, messages restricted to 140 characters at a time. This limitation dates back to its initial roll out as a system based on text messaging which prompted you to answer the question “what are you doing?”⁴ The user “follows” and is “followed” by other users. Through this channel users engage in discussions and often link to external articles, blogs and other sites of interest that they discover on the web. It also has the benefit of archiving the conversation as it happens; once a tweet is “tweeted” or published, it cannot be deleted.

Although Twitter may not have been designed for collaboration, the extended conversations that occur show that users are using the service for informal collaborative purposes (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009), such as breaking news of US

¹ www.twitter.com

² www.facebook.com

³ Wikipedia states that a microblog differs from a traditional blog in that its content is typically much smaller, in both actual size and aggregate file size. A microblog entry can consist of nothing but a short sentence fragment, or an image, sound bite or embedded video while most blogs tend to be more verbose.

⁴ The question has since been changed to “what’s happening?” and there has been some discussion surrounding whether or not this was done to reflect the use of Twitter as a news gathering tool. (<http://mashable.com/2009/11/19/twitter-whats-happening/>)

Airway Flight 1549 landing in the Hudson River, or of protests against the war in Iraq. Increasingly, users are using Twitter as a tool to gather, disseminate, filter and aggregate news collaboratively. In addition to offering a place for amateur journalists to partake in producing the news, Twitter also offers a vibrant and strong online community for journalists.

Community Building

Twitter plays host to weekly online chats for those in the communication industry, such as #journchat⁵ on Monday nights and #wjchat⁶ on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. #Journchat describes itself as an ongoing conversation between journalists, bloggers and PR professionals that was launched in November 2009. It routinely involves 200 to 250 people per week and reports that they had 25,000 participants for their CNN version. #Wjchat modeled itself on #journchat but wanted to move away from the public relations aspect. It describes itself as a weekly Twitter chat for web journalists who talk about journalism, technology, ethics, content and the business of journalism on the web.

These Twitter chats act as a hub for journalists, bloggers, communication professionals and those who have a general interest in the discussion of news production. The chats play an important role in the online discussion for the future of newspapers as well as a place to build the collective intelligence of web journalists. A moderator will run a question and answer period during which each participant can post their thoughts, ideas and questions by simply using the

⁵ <http://journchat.info/>

⁶ <http://wjchat.webjournalist.org/>

#hashtag for the conversation. These chats allow participants to extend their networks, find people who are in similar positions as them, debate common issues, share best practices, collaborate and problem solve together.

There are also #hashtags that are used to denote a longer form of conversation, which more closely resembles a loose grouping of interested parties, or an IRC chat room⁷, for example #futureofnews, #journalism or #pubmedia. Twitter has become a hotbed for online discussions about all aspects of journalism be it economic models, gatekeeping, best practices, new start-ups, breaking news and almost anything else.

There is a strong emphasis within the journalism industry on innovation, a sense of lead or be left behind, and this can be seen through the conversations happening on Twitter – journalists are discussing what the next big thing may be while they muse about the future of their profession. There is a strong move toward computer assisted reporting, apps for mobile devices, be it cellphones or iPads.

New Opportunities

Because it is a new tool, there is very little existing empirical research on Twitter and even less on the methodology surrounding how to use it to capture a specific event or topic. Journalists can be observed embracing the platform to discuss, promote, network, collaborate and learn about their craft. The purpose of this paper is to explore a researcher's ability to use the microblogging social network to collect the publically archived data on Twitter to map the discourse surrounding the future

⁷ Internet relay chat was a popular social networking tool in the 1990s.

of newspapers. This paper will also try to build a framework or guideline for other researchers to be able to use Twitter to undertake their own discourse analyses.

Methodology

This study applies qualitative methods, more specifically a discourse analysis, to explore how the debate on the future of newspapers occurring on Twitter is structured, to identify the main players and arguments, and to glean from this a sense of the users' perspectives on the current state of journalism.

Qualitative research furnishes the researcher the ability to interpret while maintaining sensitivity to the social-historical contexts as well as allowing for a narrowing of the topic throughout the study (Neuman, 2007). As this study aims to summarize and analyze the discourse, a qualitative method is more effective in highlighting the concepts, players and issues underlying this online conversation.

Qualitative coding entails three basic procedures: "noticing relevant data; collecting examples of those phenomena; and, analyzing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures," (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 29) The data will be assessed using a grounded theory method - in the initial stage, the data will be analyzed to identify reoccurring themes and categories that seem of interest (Esterberg, 2002). This allows for a more hands-on, neutral assessment of the data which avoids subconscious or unconscious pigeonholing of the data. Open coding will be used to identify recurring themes, and from these the framework for analysis will be structured (Esterberg, 2002).

An analysis based on computer-mediated discourse (CMD) will be employed to explore the Twitter discussions. CMD offers a way to analyze interactions between humans “transmitting messages via networked computers” (Herring, 2001, p. 612). CMD takes into account that the Internet is its own medium, a platform where the exchanges are faster than other types of written interactions. It allows multiple participants to communicate simultaneously and messages are distributed to an often unseen and unknown audience (Herring, 2001).

Research Question

RQ 1: How can Twitter be leveraged to study the future of newspapers?

Research sub-questions

RQ 2: Who are the people involved?

RQ 3: What are the people involved trying to accomplish?

RQ 4: How do they do this?

RQ 5: What are the key issues for these people?

RQ 6: What types of language do they use to describe what is important?

Research Design

The research design utilized a discourse analysis of the top 20 commentators chosen through non-random, handpicked sampling by tracking their conversations on Twitter. Data was collected for two months from February 1 until March 31, 2010.

Twitter was chosen as a platform for a few reasons. Firstly, user accounts are set to public as a default. Secondly, users often engage in discussions with each other and act in collaborative ways by posting links to external articles, blogs and other sites of interest that they discover on the web. That the discussion is conducted mostly in

public means the researcher can track the debate without having to interrupt or engage. It also has the benefit of archiving the conversation for posterity.

The data was collected through an online database that archived each tweet and listed the user, the tweet identification number, date, time, message and any links. This database was then exported to Microsoft Excel.⁸

Due to the limitations of 140 characters at a time many of the top thinkers and writers in this debate use their Twitter streams to link back to a more in-depth analysis of the situation and their opinions on it. In the original plan for the discourse analysis, the first level of links and the resulting comments on that page have been included in the analysis but not hyperlinks found within the blog or article as the amount of information was overwhelming.

Evaluating the Experts

There is a core group of current and ex-journalists, academics and public intellectuals who regularly engage each other in debate about the future of news. For the purpose of this study, the list has been narrowed down to the top 20 Twitter users who tweet about the future of news at minimum once a day.

The users were chosen based on their influence by quantitatively calculating their Klout⁹, TweetLevel¹⁰ and Topsy¹¹ rankings. The Klout application program interface

⁸ The original list included 25 users, but the resulting number of tweets was too high (more than 18,000).

⁹ www.Klout.com

¹⁰ www.Tweetlevel.edelman.com

¹¹ www.Topsy.com

(API) assigns the user a score ranging from 1 to 100 that represents a person's overall influence by using semantic analysis to determine what a person talks about and then measures how influential they are on a topic. The higher the users' number the more influence their tweets hold. The TweetLevel API is similar but takes into account many more factors than Klout - there are four result metrics: influence - which is the primary ranking metric; popularity; engagement; and trust. Each score is rated out of 100 and the higher the score the more impact the user has. (See Appendix 1 for the complete explanation on the calculation of the metrics for both Klout and TweetLevel.)

Each user was also assessed qualitatively in two ways; first, to ensure they tweeted on a daily basis about the topic and secondly through an online tool called Topsy. Topsy is a Twitter-powered search engine that tracks every tweet, and also counts the number of times a link is posted. It enables the user to see how influential someone's posts are by seeing how many people "re-tweet" them. Each expert included in the study has been dubbed as "highly influential" by Topsy.

The specification of participants in the discourse limits the study to a non-representative sampling. That being said, it is important to pick those who are considered to be the opinion leaders in the debate as they are the ones that are most often heard and broadcast to a larger audience.

Crunching the Data

A cursory read of the data has provided a wide array of coding categories. For example:

Community building:

*"@stevebuttry: New blog post: Wanted: Vision for community engagement.
<http://bit.ly/d76CR3>"*

Comparison of new and old:

"@ajkeen: what's the difference between a blogger & a journalist? <http://bit.ly/dx8ZFz> one reports the news, the other talks about reporting the news."

Economic models:

"@digiphile: @awallenstein No monetization via acquisition? MSNBC acquired @BreakingNews. They've now launched on Facebook <http://j.mp/awJ0KH> #newsfuture"

Influence:

"@mathewi: RT @Literanista: @jeffjarvis #brite10 not just influence but relevance of message and also trust/rep are important too - the message is key"

Multimedia:

*"@dangillmor: RT @10000Words: Mark Luckie has published THE DIGITAL JOURNALIST'S HANDBOOK, guide to online and multimedia journalism
<http://bit.ly/6SCR3j>"*

Once the coding is complete, a discourse analysis will be applied to the categories with special attention paid to both content but also the conversation between these 20 experts to see how much interaction there is between them. At this time, the data analysis has not yet begun to be coded. Results and themes are pending upon a successful import into Nvivo but a quick scan of the tweets show many reoccurring topics of discussion like the ones above but also including engagement, trust, user-generated content, new technologies, gatekeeping, education of new journalists, anonymity on the Internet, open access, intellectual property, and the role of the public in newsgathering to name but a few reoccurring themes. Interestingly there

is no discussion thus far about what happens if all these models fail and journalism as society currently recognizes it falls away.

Conclusion

The newspaper plays an integral role in maintaining a safe and informed citizenry. Newspapers, and in turn their journalists, are responsible for an estimated 85% of all original news reporting that occurs on a daily basis (Jones, 2009). Without newspapers, who will report the news? What would a world without print newspapers look like? Will civil society continue to function without a newspaper? Will traditional newspapers make the transition to the online world?

Questions like these have fueled a lively and fiery online debate; there are many different ideas about what the future holds for newspapers. Some see the newspaper as a dying species while others argue it will continue to survive, but in an altered state. Quite possibly the new print newspaper will focus on the local, print fewer copies and spend less time breaking the news and more time offering analysis and meaning. There has been little work done around the discourse involved in this debate. The numerous actors, all with varying interests, play an important role in the comprehension of the power structures within the debate, which is paramount to gathering knowledge of the possible future outcomes. A mapping of the concepts in the debate may offer a greater understanding of the intricacies involved and may prove useful for those trying to grasp the nature of the debate.

Twitter offers a great research venue from which to observe the discussion of many of the important players within a debate. The nature of the language used on Twitter, constricted by the 140 characters, dictates very concise well thought out posts as does the public nature of how the service is constructed.

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