Chapter 29

Who Brings the News?
Exploring the Aggregators Apps for Mobile Devices

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ABSTRACT

The spread of mobile devices and digital networks generate new perspectives for the circulation of news. The development of mobile communication technologies and the migration of habits consolidated in personal computers promote the expansion of news aggregators for smartphones and tablets. This work seeks to inquire the operational logic of applications designed to aggregate journalistic content. An immersive analysis shows that the general operations of these apps are based on three dimensions: integration between news and online social media, always-on recommendation systems, and parameterization of outputs. It is argued that the approach between aggregators and social media makes the news extrapolate its information domain and start to circulate as symbolic reference for online interaction. Finally, this work posits that the operational logic of aggregators neglect fundamental aspects of new technologies related to locative information.

INTRODUCTION

The circulation of news content on mobile devices is rapidly growing but at the same time it is facing huge experimental dispersion. The traditional media conglomerates have different approaches when it comes to the search for mechanisms to adjust their outputs to smartphones and tablets (Wolf & Hohlfeld, 2012; Westlund, 2013). Concomitantly, new agents, without any links to news companies, emerge as important intermediaries in the complex mobile ecosystem (Castellet & Feijóo, 2013).

In this paper we attempt to understand the functioning of a specific group of such intermediaries, i.e. news aggregator mobile apps, some of which are very popular among smartphone and tablet users, such

as Flipboard, Pulse and Zite. We have worked on the assumption that news aggregators are not mere adjuvants, but rather important stakeholders that draw direct benefits from an ubiquitous and pervasive media system (Deuze, 2012; Ling, 2012) made up of high-speed digital transmission networks and "always-on" mobile technologies (Baron, 2008; Turkle, 2008, 2011).

Despite frequently cited in studies on mobile journalism, aggregating apps still require further consistent research. We believe that this gap in research may conceal a phenomenon which is decisive for our understanding of the present and, especially, of the future of news distribution and circulation, bearing in mind that the search for news is one of the most common habits of mobile digital device owners. (Taylor, Samuels & Ramey, 2011, Pew Research Center, 2012; comScore, 2013; Newman & Levy, 2014).

Some relevant data stress the need to have more in-depth analyses about aggregating apps. In only three years, Flipboard has reached an impressive 85 million registered users (Yeung, 2013). The app interface simulates on mobile devices the habit of reading paper magazines by combining visual and touch features. It is better adapted to tablet size but also has good usability on smartphones. It further allows users to integrate in a single platform their online social media and their favourite news channels. Although exact data about the activity of registered users is not available, suffice it to know that even if only 1% of them access the app on a daily basis that alone represents a contingent of 850,000 people.

The success of aggregating apps is reflected in the existence of several businesses that actively seek a means of adapting to the new distribution platforms. The rapid rise of Flipboard has caught the attention of traditional media such as The New York Times, which signed a contract in order to allow their subscribers to have full access to the newspaper contents through that app. It was the first time that this newspaper implemented a paywall strategy in a platform that does not belong to the group. CNN, The Telegraph, Forbes and other traditional channels also have agreements with Flipboard, but without immediate charging for access to the contents. Instead they explore the advertisements (featuring others and themselves) that pop up in between the news items.

Other businesses in the sector go beyond the actual contents and directly involve the aggregators and media conglomerates. In August of 2011 CNN purchased Zite under the justification that it aimed to expand its presence in the universe of mobile devices. The business value has not been officially announced but values ranging from 20 to 25 million dollars have been reported. Less than two years later, in May of 2014, Zite changed hands again. The buyer was now Flipboard, paying CNN approximately 60 million dollars (Bercovici, 2014). In addition to being in control of a direct competitor, Flipboard announced that it would incorporate part of Zite's recommendation algorithms to enhance its performance and subsequently discontinue their rival[1].

Another important negotiation for the sector took place in November of 2013 when the social media LinkedIn acquired Pulse for 90 million dollars (Geron, 2013). In addition to promoting the integration of two gigantic networks (at the time of negotiation Pulse had 30 million users), LinkedIn was also interested in increasing the number of visits and the users' time online by encouraging greater interaction with news content.

It should be further noted how technology giants shifted towards news-aggregating services for mobile devices. Facebook chose to develop its own aggregator, i.e. Paper, which incorporates news channels into the social media.

These examples show that the circulation of news combines traditional media (CNN, The New York Times) with major companies of the digital sector (LinkedIn, Facebook) and emerging start-ups (Flipboard, Zite, Pulse).

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