Chapter 37
Spreading the News:
Spreadable Media, Social Networking, and the Future of News Production

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is concerned with the process of "spreading the news" through social media. It suggests a method of rhetorical analysis that focuses less attention on the content of news productions and more attention on analyzing how audience members might make use of the news. This transition of focus from content to audience use should lead news producers to see the value of content that engages with audiences and enables audience members to engage in the sharing and spreading of news content. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: 1) to help journalists design content that engages their audiences in the process of spreading the news in ways that can go far beyond the reach of traditional news formats and 2) to provide journalism scholars with a means of understanding the ways in which audiences and the news media interact in social media-rich communication environments.

INTRODUCTION

More people are getting their news from social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, while more traditional news formats like newspapers and TV broadcasts decline. The Pew Center's 2012 study of trends in news consumption finds an overall decrease in the percentage of people getting their news from television (55%), radio (33%), and newspapers (29%). The same report noted that amid all of these decreases in traditional news formats, the number of people *regularly* getting news from social networks rose from 7% to 20% (Pew Research Center, 2012, September 27). The Pew Center's 2013 *Social Media Update* cites "73% of online adults now use a social networking site of some kind" (Duggan & Smith, 2013, p. 1). A more recent report by the Pew Center highlights the role that news content plays in social media use and finds that 30% of adults use Facebook and 8% of adults use *Twitter* to get news (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014, March 26). Social media provides many opportunities for news producers to reach new audiences, but it also provides its own set of unique challenges. On

social media platforms, photos from last night's party, status updates from far-flung family members, and "hard news" all wage battle for a user's attention. When journalism, as a discipline, discusses new and emerging trends in news production and news research, it must account for these new means of accessing "the news." At the same time it must also examine how these new ways of accessing news content affect news production, distribution, and analysis.

The modern social media user is not *only* a passive consumer of information. He or she is engaged in a constant blur of activity: creating, consuming, repurposing, and sharing content from a variety of sources to tell his or her own social media story within a community of other social media users. In light of this, it's important for journalists and journalism scholars to recognize that today's social media users can, and often do, play an active and important role in spreading media content among their social networked peers.

Journalists need to be cognizant of this new second-hand, socially-mediated flow of content and must actively engage with their audiences as a part of the digital media information economy. Journalism scholars must account for this new means of "spreading the news" when trying to understand the impact of a story, or trying to make sense of how news audiences encounter and work content into their social media interactions and daily lives. This shift, from a passively consuming audience to an actively sharing audience, requires journalism to place a greater emphasis on user experience and search for new analytics that can explain the role that sharing can play in spreading the news.

With all of this in mind, this chapter is concerned with the process of "spreading the news" through social media communities. It looks at the rhetorical dynamics of sharing and offers a way of analyzing the news that focuses less attention on the content of news productions and more attention on analyzing how audience members might make use of the news. This change of focus, from content to audience use, should help lead journalists and other news producers to see the value of content that both engages audiences and allows opportunities for audience members to assist in the process of sharing and spreading news content. The goal of this chapter is to help journalism scholars gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the news media operate in a social media-rich communication environment. At the same time, journalists can use this information to design content that engages audiences in the process of "spreading the news" in ways that go far beyond the reach and scope of traditional news formats. In doing so, it provides a new analytic lens with which to view news content.

In order to understand the ways in which social media is changing journalism, and the powerful role that audiences can play in this larger process of "spreading the news" through social media platforms, this chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section examines the role of what Jenkins (2008) terms "convergence culture" in creating the current media landscape. It looks at how media convergence has shaped the modern media economy and the key role that social media plays in an increasingly converged media culture. The second section draws upon Kenneth Burke's rhetorical concept of "identification" as a means for understanding how social media communities function rhetorically, the rhetorical aspects of sharing, and the role that community plays in social media interactions. It also draws on the recent work of Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) and examines their concept of "spreadable media" as a model for understanding the flow of media messages in converged, social media communities. It looks at the question of how one analyzes and understands media content (including news content) in this new spreadable, socially-mediated media environment. The third section asks the important question: how does one create content that will succeed in a spreadable social media environment? In doing so, this chapter seeks to equip future journalists with tools and concepts they can use to succeed in the current, social media moment.

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