Chapter 41
Viral News Content, Instantaneity, and Newsworthiness Criteria

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ABSTRACT

Social networks have modified the activities of the press, the actions of audiences, and the perceptions of societies. The strategies displayed to avoid losing consumers aim at fulfilling the audience's needs and the gap between the producers' and the consumers' interests tends to widen. This leads to a crisis point in news financing, affecting the traditional logic of the media industry; while advertisers are now able to reach their audiences without its mediation, viralization and instantaneity force the media to publish information incompatible with the public interest as considered by the press. In this way, traditional newsworthiness criteria are replaced by other criteria that redefine the concept of information. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the way in which instantaneity and viralization have affected not only the journalistic activity but also the information selection criteria and the audiences' input on the web.

INTRODUCTION

Digital tools have been used for the production of news since the eighties (Canavilhas, 2009). In the beginning, the editing of texts and images simplified the journalistic tasks and accelerated the speed of the construction of news. While technology progressed, the press began to publish news online. At first, they only posted the information that had been published on their print editions. In only twenty years, the possibility of combining print editions with information search and narrative experimentation tools grew in such a way that the digital media became independent of their print origins, while audiences gained ground through collaboration and participation. In the beginning of the 21st century, the gap between the producers of news and their audiences—that had relied on asymmetric knowledge, interests and information sources—started to narrow. At the same time, the thematic choices, coverages and information preferences began to diverge more and more (Boczkowski & Michelstein, 2013). The

reduction in the price of digital devices, the widespread use of mobile phones, and the lower costs of Internet brought about a rapid increase in the number of users and opened new business opportunities for the media and the press. And although the news companies insisted on thinking the business with the same logic of before, the new consumers' habits made that situation change.

In 1995, Randy Conrad created "Classmates," a social network to find old classmates. It is considered to be the main precursor of Facebook, since it was created with the same purpose (Ponce, 2012). With this project, the idea of "digital network" took root. However, it was not until the first decade of the 21st century—with the massive inclusion of users and the incorporation of networks based on general issues—that the ideas of participation, discussion, collaboration and agenda-setting became possible. In this scenario, the press is faced with two problems. On the one hand, the digital tools have become inputs for the construction of news. On the other hand, these very same tools have been used as platforms for the media to post material and interact with their audiences. Interactivity, which is inherent to the digital platforms, subverts the languages and structures of journalistic communication. Although news companies are present in all these platforms, they end up using them as ad-blackboards, coverage channels and transmission bands that almost in no case enable vertical interactions. While the news consumers throw themselves into the digital platforms, interaction between peers becomes more frequent: Discussion, collaboration, conversation and participation among users take place on a horizontal level. However, an analysis monitoring national, regional, local and Latin American press companies, which includes in-depth interviews with the editors of such companies (Luchessi, 2016a), shows that the news companies and the journalists working for them do not give answers, correct, acknowledge or argue with the public, and keep a distance from their audiences.

Since the beginning of Twitter, in 2006, and Facebook, in 2004, an extensive mass of consumers has begun to use the social networks for different purposes. Online entertainment, ideas spreading, interactions and the consolidation of networks and communities where people socialize, have been crossed by news inputs, which always fit the media logics. In some cases, the news media even question their audiences about the news material they cannot have access to. For example, a local editorial department has created a WhatsApp line to receive inputs from the audience and to cover some events without having to leave the newsroom; also, certain news materials they use have been published in other sites or emerge from the audiences' inputs within the social networks, especially in those cases in which the witnesses of relevant events transmit live or upload photos or videos of events, which are distant from the news professionals (Luchessi, 2016b). In this regard, YouTube channels, Facebook pages, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram accounts combine with Telegram and WhatsApp. It is through all these platforms that the media receive reports, videos, data and other inputs to generate content. Nevertheless, there are very few records of acknowledgments, mention of the sources or answers to the demands made by the audiences through these channels. In this situation, users tend to assume an unexpected role and start to produce information, breaking the logics of the traditional construction of news. As social networks became massive, the audiences' subject matters and concerns began to circulate without the mediation of the press. Furthermore, with the use of segmentation and audience identification tools based on metrics that allow to see nodes contained inside them, advertisers may also have access to their consumers without having to resource to the media. Consequently, news companies are now faced with two problematic issues: On the one hand, the financing of the contents and, on the other hand, a drastic change in the idea of information (Aguado, 2013).

As advertisers are now able to hire hosting services and community managers that skip a step between them and their potential customers, communication budgets drop and advertising investment

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