

FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA METRICS IN TRANSFORMING AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT VIS-À-VIS NEWSROOMS

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at understanding the changing dynamics of the newsrooms with the availability of the real-time data of the audiences' choices and preferences. It also explores how audiences are increasingly becoming an important stakeholder in the process of news selection. It also analyses the transformation of the 'passive' audience of the news media to the 'active' audiences who actively engage with the news content through the options provided by social networking sites such as share, comment, like, retweet or post. This new intervention and active engagement by the audience has an impact on the editorial autonomy in the newsroom. These changes will also impact the gatekeeping idea of journalism with the editor and senior editors had full autonomy of choosing the content and may also affect the social responsibility of the media in a democracy. The paper tries to analyse the changing structure of the Indian newsrooms and how it impacts the media at a macro level.

Keywords: Social Media Metrics, Audience Engagement, Gatekeeping theory, Active Audience

Introduction

Traditional understanding of "audience" is undergoing a dramatic yet refreshing shift due to social networking sites. Audience of the news media are no longer 'passive' as per the conventional understanding of mass communication and have transformed into an 'active' audience with multiple choices from both mainstream and alternative media. Thereby ushering a need for audience engagement by the newsrooms in India. Web analytics and social media metrics have forced news media outlets to re-discover their 'audience' with the help of data and understand their preferences and choices for specific themes, topics, and areas of interests for enhanced TRPs or readership. The active audiences are now determining the choice of news content, its distribution networks through posts, reposts or sharing of news stories and their virality in the digital age. Newsrooms are no longer the sole bastions of the editors rather audience are increasingly being involved in the processes of journalistic decision making, editorial choices and content due to the almost immediate and real time feedback opportunities far different from the earlier days of letters to editors being published or aired. Such a transition to active audiences favours participation over inherent paternalism (Thomas, 2016).

Though, Audience engagement is not a new aspiration for the newsrooms yet, quantification of the audience behaviour through likes, shares, comments, subscriptions, retweets is an emerging area for traditional newsrooms in India. Earlier there were only qualitative audience feedback to be understood and analysed by the news editors. Anderson (2011) has asserted that there has been a significant intensification of audience quantification in the contemporary times that is bound to bring structural shifts to the roles, jobs, and overall structure of the traditional newsrooms.

Earlier, traditional newsrooms had ombudsman or public editors who were entrusted with the responsibility of looking into reader's complaints or feedback from the audiences, however,

new age newsrooms require editors who would navigate through audience data to make informed editorial decisions. Audience oriented editors must mediate between the data analytics and civic considerations of journalism. Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) believes that journalism is an endeavour based on civic responsibilities of the media that demands a fine balance between what a citizen needs to know and what they may desire to know.

Data driven journalistic choices is also altering the conventional gatekeeping theory and risks the civic foundations of the journalism and its rich legacy. Legacy of India's vibrant journalism goes back to the pre-independence times when most prominent nationalistic leaders where the editors of the newspapers and inspired the nation towards national struggle. Even though Gatekeeping Theory considers the 'audience' as important socio-institutional influence on the news values and news selection (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009), the social media has altered the dynamics and power equations present in the newsrooms due to the availability of the plethora of information and statistics regarding their audiences.

Such paradigm shift has led to the generation of newer forms of journalism in a more organised fashion such as citizen journalism which may also be referred to as 'reciprocal journalism' (Goode, 2009). Social networking sites have completed to altered the scenario as journalists no longer work for an 'imagined audiences' and have consider their social responsibility as well as a constant quest for how their news stories would affect their audiences. However, data driven journalism has its own perils as newsrooms are increasingly under pressure to create a balance between editorial autonomy and audience desires (Usher, 2013) to keep the journalistic values alive and thriving.

Data in the newsrooms is a double-edged sword where the journalists have the luxury to track, record, and quantify their audiences' digital footprints however, it may hamper the stories that may not align with their audience choices and restrict the scope of stories pertaining to the audiences who are digitally not active. Data provides a faster, automated, comprehensive, and more inclusive understanding of the audiences. It has also led to evolution of newer revenue models and revenue streams in the news organisations and enhanced role of the marketing professionals and sales team in the newsrooms who are well trained to analyse the metrics and key performance indicators of the news stories and bulletins and aid the process of content creation. Though, real time digital communication has facilitated a two-way symmetrical communication between audience and journalists facilitating the dialogic flow and greater engagement between the two important stakeholders of news.

At the conclusion, the publishers and editors remain critical to the newsroom functions yet their roles are becoming less central as distributors and gatekeepers and audiences now enjoy far greater and diverse choices for their media diet. The media diet of the new age audiences are increasingly determined by the social media, messaging applications and search engines (Bell et al 2016, Nielsen and Ganter 2017). But, the skewed scope for the gatekeeping of the news stories has given an impetus to the fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and fabricated information. Circulation of such false information has impacted the opinion formation process and enhanced the skepticism towards media credibility.

Research Questions

1. Understanding the various debates and discourses on ‘active audiences’ of the news media.
2. Understanding the difference between Gatekeeping and Gatewatching process and its impact on journalism.

Discourses and debates of ‘Active Audiences’ of the News Media

Users have been involved in the process of news production (eg. Letters to Editors) even before the advent of Web, though the feedback mechanism remained delayed. However, the active audiences have now ease of access, creation tools and sharing of the news through various social networking sites thereby leapfrogging from the ‘former audiences’ to being co-creators in the news production process (Goode, 2009).

Participation of the audiences has remained an important issue in news media and communication studies yet, most recent work has been related to participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011), audience material (Wardle and Williams, 2010), reciprocal journalism (Levis et. al, 2014). These ‘active’ audiences are being facilitated by the Web 2.0 tools that enable and empower citizens to participate and engage with the news content in a more effective, real-time and easier manner. Such a proposition has disrupted the long-established relationship between the sender-receiver and has even impacted the functions and responsibilities of professional journalism including the requirement to view and understand the agenda setting theory, gatekeeping theory and framing (Goode, 2009; Peters and Witscghe, 2014). The direct citizen participation or ‘active’ audience has also impacted the concept of mediated participation which has been continuing since the inception of the profession.

The change in the dynamics of the relationship due to the changing nature of mediated participation has resulted into a debate between the cyber optimists and cyber pessimists. The scholars deemed as cyber optimists believe in the emancipatory capacity of the social networking sites and other Web 2.0 tools (Jenkins, 2006) whereas other believe that increased engagement helps to enhance the civic power of the audience thereby opening new possibilities and potential for opinion formation and deliberations (Dahlgren, 2013). Dahlgren (2013) also believes that such a participation by the audiences is a changing the nature of professional journalism along with being a democratic asset. Similarly, Manosevitch and Tenemboim (2017) believe that it Web 2.0 tools enables the citizens to access public spaces and public debates more effectively and goes much beyond the traditional role of the media i.e. informing the citizenry.

On the other hand, cyber pessimists argue that there is a limited potential of the civic engagement by the audiences as the institutions and centres of power involved in the news making process are extremely powerful such as the journalists, media owners, interest groups and advertisers and they decide the organisational structure and communication structure (Van Djick, 2009). Though scholars like Anderson (2011) believe that such a participation by the active audience has compelled the news media to re-negotiate their gatekeeping powers as well as taking advantage of these technological tools available. Singer (2014) believes that

real time participation by the audiences have raised questions on the power shift as well as changing dynamics of user-agency and pushing the boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis, 2015).

Carpentier (2011) distinguishes between the participation through the media and participation in the media where the former means that media provides a platform to the citizens through which they could participate in the public debates and voice their opinions and the latter where audiences are co-decision making is important and participation is conducted through professional and managerial decisions. It is significant to note that Carpentier (2011) has also given a AIP model which defines three different levels/phases of user agency: Access-Interactivity-Participation. Though, participatory journalism overcoming the structural hierarchy of the communication and newsrooms seems like a utopian concept.

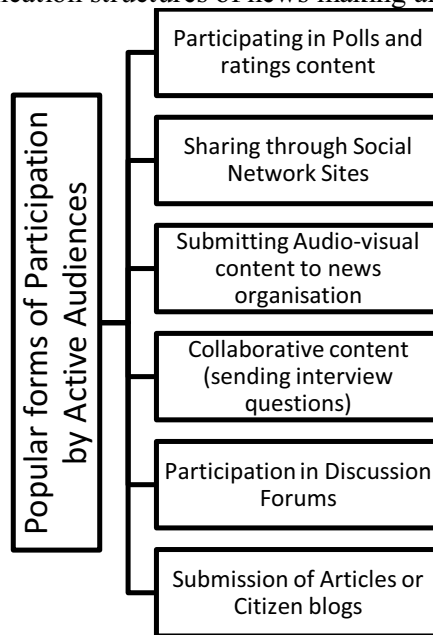
Various studies have been conducted to understand the motivations and intentions of the users to participate and create user generated content (UGC). Leung (2009) research pointed out that content generation may be directly linked to the cognitive, social and entertainment needs of an individual user and found that those with higher needs for recognition and gratification are more likely to be active on blogs, YouTube among other platforms. Mitchelstein (2011) believed that participation in blogs is linked to discussion and socialisation needs and many users posted comments on online newspapers and websites for self-expression. Ekdale et. al (2010) emphasis that the top three motivations of the most active political bloggers was to provide a counter narrative to the mainstream media, informing the fellow citizens and influencing public opinion. Even Naaman (2011) validated the claims that contributing comments on the news websites is for information-centric needs as well as assertion of personal identities. Whereas Springer et. al (2015) found that comments on news through online mediums may have cognitive needs as well as an urge to interact and discuss their stance and opinions with the journalists or authors of the news story. Whereas analysing the Swedish audiences, Bergstrom (2008) believes that user generated content is created as a leisure and fun activity rather than being perceived as a democratic exercise or civic engagement.

Spyridou (2019) has developed the sub-categories of participation instead of using the umbrella term 'interactivity' to understand the participation of the audiences on the news websites. The categories defined are:

1. **Very Low Participation:** It entails to participation by the audiences in the polls and ratings content which requires minimal effort.
2. **Low Participation:** It requires commenting or participation in the discussion forums on the news websites, and it may impact the published content and requires a little more effort than the previous category.
3. **Medium Participation:** It requires to submit multimedia content to the news organisation or a collaborative endeavour, however, the media organisation has autonomy to publish or not publish the content. Though, this stage may be unique as the organisation is willing to involve the audience in the planning stage of the content itself.

4. **High Participation:** It would require the users to submit full blogs or articles and allows the users or audiences to have full autonomy over the content being published.

Though, Spyridou (2019) believes that ‘sharing’ the news content on the Social Networking has immense potential but do not require any creative effort on the part of the audiences, however, Singer (2014) calls it as secondary gatekeeping from the audience’s perspective. Scholars like Marwick and Boyd (2011) have theorised social networking sites as networked public spaces consider sharing as the contribution towards discussion of important public matters and news making, they also believe it has the potential to reorient or disrupt the existing professional communication structures of news making and meaning making.



Transition from Gatekeeping to Gatewatching

“Freedom of the Press is guaranteed only to those who own one. Now, millions do”

(Original Quote Liebling, 1960; Transformed by Bowman & Wills, 2003)

The original statement is “Freedom of the Press is guaranteed only to those who own one” by A J Liebling issued in 1960 which was transformed by Bowman and Wills in 2003 to reflect upon the changing nature of media ownership with the advent of Web 2.0 tools and its widespread acceptance and usage by citizens to create and publish their own reports. Jay Rosen (2006) believes that the citizens who earlier constituted the category of ‘audiences’ have started to publish their own news reports, commentaries, blogs and opinion pieces related to current affairs on the virtual platforms and there seems to be a reduced dependence on the mainstream news flow structures for accessing news and opinion formation. Thus, there seems to be shift from the gatekeeping towards gatewatching phenomenon. With the enhanced internet penetration resulting into a multitude and plethora of information sources,

the citizens no longer rely on the journalists to either get news or its interpretation and get information which seems relevant to themselves and their wider personal and community interest leading to the phenomenon of gatewatching (Bruns, 2005). Though, it should be highlighted that news agencies and media organisations kept a watch on government and corporate organisations with the intent of larger public interest, whereas scholars have often criticised citizen journalists and gatewatching phenomenon as ‘random acts of journalism’ (Lasica, 2003) which may only be catering to their personal or narrow concerns.

Though, gatewatching differs significantly from the gatekeeping process, as citizen journalists often deal with the process of information discovery whereas gatekeeping process entails a much elaborate process. The process of gatekeeping involves selection of the news amongst various current affairs and events (McQuail, 2005; Shoemaker, 1991) at the input stage. It is important responsibility of the editors and journalist to select the news that the newspaper or television bulletin would cover. The second fundamental question in the gatekeeping is addressed in the gatekeeping process is regarding the presentation of the news i.e. which facts to be included, hook/angle to be brought into the prominence and the sequence or the slot in which the story would be presented (Front page story or the first story in the TV bulletin). The last crucial aspect of the gatekeeping aspect would be regarding the small fraction of the feedback to be covered in terms of ‘Letters to the Editor’ or call-in in the tv bulletins from the audience thereby having editorial selection regarding the feedback to be covered.

The gatewatching endeavour is different from traditional journalistic practice and news gathering process, here the citizen journalists only involve themselves in information discovery and then present it without accessing and analysing the development from a multiple sources and perspective and then providing a coherent news report with sources of information, backgrounders and comments from relevant stakeholders to provide balance, objectivity and neutrality. The report present by citizen journalists is not complete and can be called as a summary of a particular event or information gathered or accessed which is not complete and is open for other citizen to contribute through their comments, addition of information, providing background information, debunked, criticism thus, leading to a distributed collaborative effort. Gatewatching can be classified into two categories i.e. open which is widely available to all and can be edited and contributed by any of the citizenry while there are website that constitute internal gatekeeping as a means of sorting information and material discovered through gatewatching. Thus, one could easily conclude that the news stories produced by the gatewatchers are not a static product rather an ever-evolving product with the more and more information being added by the co-creators with the development or interest in the stories commonly known as ‘produsage.’ It marks an important shift from the passive consumption of media products to the active involvement who are participating at various levels to create, distribute and further amend the stories that interests them or concern them without mediators.

Though, there have criticism and denouncement of such practises and citizen journalists themselves as they have been dubbed as ‘amateurs’ providing low quality content or rookie

journalists with untrustworthy content. However, news organisation needs to re-calibrate such an approach and re-invent and re-imagine their relationship with their audiences.

Conclusion

The rise of social media has transformed the traditional understanding of audiences, creating an active audience with multiple choices of mainstream and alternative media. This shift has resulted in a need for newsrooms to engage with their audiences and understand their preferences and choices through data analytics and social media metrics. Data-driven journalistic choices are altering the conventional gatekeeping theory and risking the civic foundations of journalism. Journalists now consider their social responsibility and the impact of their stories on audiences. Data in newsrooms is a double-edged sword that provides a comprehensive understanding of audiences, but may also restrict the scope of stories that do not align with audience choices. The role of publishers and editors is becoming less central as audiences have greater and diverse choices for their media diet, but the skewed scope for gatekeeping has given an impetus to fake news and misinformation.

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