

# **THE MEDIA CONSUMERS' CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS CHOICES - A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE NEWS MEDIA CONSUMPTION OF TOMORROW**

Ester APPELGREN, Journalism Department, School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, 141 89 Huddinge, Sweden, ester.appelgren@sh.se

Sara LECKNER, Dept. of Media technology, Faculty of Technology and Society, Malmö University, Östra Varvgatan 11 A, 205 06, Malmö, Sweden, sara.leckner@mah.se

Thomas MEJTOFT, Dept. of Applied Physics and Electronics, Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå, Sweden, thomas.mejtoft@umu.se

## **Abstract**

The digital society of today is dramatically different than that of a decade ago. During the past decades computers have gone from being clearly visible and at the center of attention to becoming an integrated and omnipresent part of our everyday lives. Today, individuals are catching up on a reality where homes, workplaces and society to a large extent consist of microprocessors that collect, analyze and present information. With regards to news and information sharing, it may seem that the users, thanks to greater ability to choose content, hold the upper hand in this process. However, since these data are constantly collected and analyzed for various purposes by companies, for example in the media industry, the users' choices may not be as unconditional as they may think they are.

Using the Swedish media market as an example, this exploratory paper discusses the interdependency between people's choices and the market-driven choices made by the media industry in relation to news, and the impact these choices may have on media consumption and the media market.

## **Introduction**

The digital society of today is dramatically different from just one decade ago. As the range of content is exploding, especially in digital channels, search for information, such as news, is also changing. It may seem that the users, thanks to greater ability to choose content, hold the upper hand in this process. The users can increasingly choose news platforms, when they want to consume news, and to what extent they want to participate in the news publication or sharing of news information. At the same time, users are constantly generating data that can be collected, analyzed and used by the media companies. Does

this mean that the users' choices may not be as unconditional as they may think they are?

Data is an important factor in the discussion about the greater possibilities for individual and market-driven choices. When using a computer device, people are generating data through their actions every second, consciously or unconsciously, for example related to demographic, corporate or leisure-time aspects. These data are stored for both short and long term by public authorities, companies and, in many cases, by the users themselves. How do this sharing and collecting of data shape the development of new technologies, such as news channels, and the way people consume news?

Using the Swedish media market as an example, the aim of this paper is to discuss the conscious and unconscious choices people make when choosing content in news media and the impact these choices have on the relationship between media consumption and the market-driven choices. Specifically, this paper elaborates on the technological perspective in the following areas: 1) data analysis and business strategies in the media industry 2) changing conditions and behaviour in the use of news media, and 3) the synergy between private and professional choices in relation to data. The paper is discussing technological advances in news media from a conceptual and exploratory standpoint.

## **1. Big data at media companies**

Today, we are facing a reality where homes, workplaces and society to a large extent contain microprocessors. Those who are active and connected to the Internet via different devices generate large quantities and many different types of data, that can be stored, compiled, analyzed and used in real time for a variety of purposes. Although, neither data analysis nor the use of large data sets are new concepts, what has changed in recent years is the magnitude, speed and variety of the data collected (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012). This trend is called Big data, data sets whose size exceeds that handled by commonly used software tools (Manovich, 2012), and which make it easier to rely solely on statistical relationships rather than the cause and effect (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013).

For market participants data are a valuable commodity. Since most of the users' choices are registered digitally, media companies can measure behaviour and reactions in detail and real time, personalizing products, services and marketing. Thus, media companies can become more scientific in their decision-making (e.g. Brynjolfsson in Lohr, 2012), and approaching each

consumer individually, rather than basing their strategies on experience or intuition as they have done previously (Leckner 2007).

## **2. Data journalism**

The use of Big data can also be a source of editorial material for news. Data can provide the foundation for potential news articles and serve as reference material for content, although news stories based on user data may be controversial, exemplified by the case of Bloomberg where journalists had access to critical user data (Reuters, 2013). Data for journalistic purposes is however typically based on public data from government, companies or institutions, or crowdsourcing methods where the audience chooses, sorts and filters from compiled datasets (Nygren et al., 2012). In Sweden, media companies are currently venturing in data journalism, hoping to increase quality and journalistic depth and ultimately retaining control as guarantor and gatekeeper (Appelgren & Nygren, 2014). The trouble with seeking a meaningful needle in massive haystacks of data is that "many bits of straw look like needles" (Hastie cited in Lohr, 2012). To a large extent, data-journalistic services means that journalists have interpreted the causes and effects from large data sets, as opposed to letting the data speak for itself (cf. Anderson, 2008).

## **3. Charging for choices**

When consumption of media content in digital channels becomes more widespread, and eventually replaces traditional media consumption, it will be difficult to defend the free publication of news content, which has been common online. Today, several media companies have started charging for content to different degrees. In Sweden, newspaper companies are testing various forms of payment models for their news online editions: *Integral payment* - pay for what you want to read at that time; *Frequency model* - read a number of articles for free, pay if you read more; and *Monthly subscription* - pay monthly for what you want to read. Still rather new, the outcome remains uncertain. News companies are also exploring other types of funding models, for example *Crowd Funding* (e.g. McCarthy, 2013) or *Pay What You Want* (Kim et al., 2009). The models imply that the reader can make a donation for content either before or after reading. Examples of such services are *Spot.us*, *Krautreporter* and *Flattr*, and have been used by e.g. *NYT*, *Wired* and the *Boston Review* (Lindgren, 2013). The content that people decide to pay for shape the development of different publishing channels, as companies will dedicate more resources for this purpose, not only in terms of content but also in terms of technological development.

#### **4. Changes in individual choices in Sweden**

An important role of the media is to enhance the process users apply to make their choices, by selecting, refining and emphasizing certain content as a guarantor, or a so-called gatekeeper (McCombs, 2006). Today's media-value creation has however moved from one-way communication and is increasingly dependent on a social, reciprocal and cumulative sharing logic. Due to digitalization and the advent of new media channels that expand the possibility for interaction, mobility and convergence, opportunities for the user to not only select but also contribute and share content, so-called user generated content (e.g. Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2006), have increased. In addition to convergence and divergence, the media landscape is moving from the masses towards the individual, from depth towards variety, from the general towards the niche (Leckner, 2007). Singer (2014) states that the gatekeeping process has moved from the producer to the user, thereby transforming the process of selection into a two-step process. This is most evident in the use and integration of social media.

In Sweden, the reading of daily newspapers on paper decreased in 2012 by 10 percent (Nordicom, 2013). There has also been a decrease in the last year for traditional television viewing. Research points to the possibility that information gaps in society will increase if people opt out of newspapers and news broadcasts on radio and television, but at the same time shows that society has not (yet) reached a point where media has little effect on public opinion (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). In social media (such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), which over the past few years in Sweden are perceived as used more frequently than traditional media on the Internet, by both men and women, and mainly by young adults (Nordicom, 2013). Thus, users are accustomed to expressing their preferences and shaping the flow of information. A hashtag in a tweet can be seen as a new publishing channel (Messina, 2007), which are democratic in the sense that they cannot be controlled by anyone and the content cannot be censored (e.g. McDermott, 2012). Where media consumers previously only consumed content, for example in televised election debates, users can now get involved by creating and influencing content. Individuals' options and value creation are however also affected by technological developments and strategic decisions made by the social media companies.

Less than a third of the Swedish internet users and 15% of the mobile phone users state that they are consuming evening news on the internet respectively on the mobile phone daily. 10% state that they are reading a morning newspaper on the internet and 9% on the phone. (Nordicom, 2013) Thus, an interesting question is whether or not the journalistic choices appeal equally

to readers of different media channels. Research has shown that the selection of specific news content seems more dependent on the format of the medium, gender and interest in a topic than on whether the news appears in print or online (e.g. Leckner, 2007). However, traditional sources for news (especially TV, morning newspapers in print form and the online version of evening newspapers) are still regarded as more important sources of news and information than social media, even among the younger population (age groups 15-19, 20-24). The youngest age group is more eager to use friends and blogs as sources of information than the age group 20-24 (TU, 2010) although, social media are not yet overwhelming drivers of news (Beaujon, 2012). Nevertheless, Singer (2014) emphasizes the increasing role of social media as users are selecting news, thus affecting the gatekeeping process.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Technology is an important factor when choosing what media to consume and a trend is visible in the Swedish market in terms of increased use of Social media and decreased use of traditional media content on the internet and smartphones. Technology is sometimes deemed to be the main driving force behind people's choices as well as media development as a whole. The completely opposite point of view is that technological development is only a result of social change (cf. McLuhan, 2000; Liewrouw 2002). The tightrope between the meaning of technology and the social aspects involved in the development process is described by Wormbs (2013), who takes the position that just because technology does not dictate everything, this does not exclude that it dictates something. Is the choice of media content and technology, the shift that we are beginning to observe in Sweden a conscious choice or has technology crept into the lives of people in some other way? There are probably people who use technology just for the sake of the technology, however the majority may choose to use technology to find an outlet for a specific need. These needs would have found other outlets if a particular technology had not existed or had not been available. With the increased availability of various types of data and technical prerequisites, individuals are facing an increasing number of choices.

Most media content and platform choices may appear to be free, however generating user data might not be equally self-selected. To put it mildly, media companies know a lot about individuals in the society and their choices, and thus their habits and locations. Although companies themselves argue that these data are used to improve user services, this data collection can be regarded as a threat to the user's privacy. This is discussed in the European Commission Data Protection Regulation requiring consent from consumers in order for companies to be allowed to use their information, and would also

grant users the right to request that their information to be deleted (Brandel, 2013). This regulation has gained resistance from media companies as well as journalists.

The processes of collecting and analyzing data can be complicated, as the general use of Big data place demands on ethics and the limits of integrity. Awareness of generated data and their use is starting to grow in society among the general public. For example, previously secret documents about how security services worldwide monitor individuals through their email, social media activities and other digital activities were made available in June 2013 (e.g. see the "Snowden affair"). Users and journalists, at least in Sweden, seem to hold an somewhat ambiguous and naive attitude to that various actors collect data on individuals, first taken by surprise that such activities occur, and in the case of for example Malaysian airlines disappearance in March 2014, that it does not happen in a comprehensive manner. The question is whether this type of disclosure may affect ordinary people from making their choices and actions visible in a digital context.

Consumers' choices are not completely free, and nor can producers make their choice completely independently. Companies can choose to collect the data based on the individual choices made, to provide new services with the aim of making money, but also to provide users with new options for information gathering, an activity that also can be perceived as free. The content and channels that people will use for tomorrow's media consumption can be based on the choices that people make today. Then, media companies are influencing the direction of the coming active and passive choices. The choices of individuals and media companies thus result in a symbiosis. Like a tug of war, the power of the choices is distributed among users and producers, both of which experience positive and negative effects, directly or indirectly, as a result of each other's actions. Further research should involve a continued focus on the choices of the individual, the causes behind these choices and the technical conditions that facilitate or impede them as it will be the key success factors to understanding the media consumption of tomorrow.

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