

The Future of News Media

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Abstract:

The transition of news journalism from print, radio and television to online is well underway, but most of the people in the field are still employed by major print publications. The field is trying to navigate the transition but old business models and practices are not working. The immediate future however, is heatedly being discussed, debated and created right now.

This framework was crafted for the use of a social media company such as Facebook that has an active role in the way news is being consumed online. A projected baseline future and alternative future explore how news aggregators like Facebook might navigate the increasingly diversified and decartelized news eco-system that is emerging. The time horizon for this report is 15 years.

The following section outlines current conditions, trends, plans, and projections that are used to explore what the future for the field might look like if it unfolds as is expected.

Baseline Future

Journalism in Crisis – The future of news media remains unclear.

Journalists are making less money and many are finding they are being replaced by amateur content creators on blogs, by crowd-sourcing through twitter, content aggregators like buzz-feed and many other internet 2.0 platforms. Many of the news media companies that have transitioned online are operating at a loss or close to breaking even. Advertising revenue is not nearly as lucrative online, and most people are hesitant to pay for content online when it is readily shared and easily available for free.

There remains demand for some print media, particularly for local news and older readers. The 24/7 news cycles is being replaced by the news feed and content congregated from across the web. This has great benefits, but the major draw backs include; lack of a common narrative, mis-information and sensationalism (particularly in order to go viral), dependence on centralized corporate social-media networks, lack of fact-checking and rigor, less accountability of independent journalists, and no singular, comprehensive, penetrating outlet when it comes to emergency situations.

De-centralization means more room for fringe and minority voices to be heard. It also means that anyone can produce content and add to the ongoing debate. A de-centralized news eco-system means that outlets are less likely to be swayed by corporate or political interests. Whistle blowers and platforms that publish their work are a heated issue in the field currently. The draw back to this means the users have a lot more content to wade through, and often-conflicting sources will leave the audience overwhelmed. Data analytics hopes to solve this problem and tailor the news specifically to each user using news reading apps like pulse and Facebook news. This leads to the danger of people only hearing about news and opinions that are inline with their own.

As the media eco-system grows into the Internet framework; news outlets are becoming less concerned with objectivity or bias. In fact, many of the most successful news outlets rely on consistently delivering news from the same polarized view-points, vis-à-vis the rise of fox news (extremely conservative) and the explosive growth of Vice news (a publication geared at young millennials who grew up with the internet and find value in irony and novelty above all else). Another trend that supports this development is the success of satire news outlets (the onion, the daily show, Colbert report). They disperse the news to an otherwise more reluctant audience but their stories are sometimes taken at face value, and believed to be true (people miss the satire).

Also, massive amounts of data and analytics are giving promise to the idea of Big Data having a huge impact on journalism. People are speculating on the promises of predictive news; outlets that might be able to predict when an earthquake will happen, or a major social revolution might be eminent by scanning local news for signs. News may also use big data to tell more “meta-narratives”, adjust content and attract targeted advertisements. Many sources agree that the journalism professional of the future will be one that can curate, navigate data, and leverage engaging forms of storytelling by incorporating emerging technologies.

The merging of news media with the social media landscape means that the news is no longer one way. Viewers actively contribute to news landscape by sharing photographs, eye-witness accounts, asking questions of reporters in comments sections, and engaging in debates online. This 2-way stream could give rise to a type of news atmosphere that is entirely user-directed, perhaps to the detriment of more carefully researched, and investigated news stories. User-demanded news could also help give rise to crowd-sourced investigations, ones where people gather, contribute money using platforms like kick starter, and help create high-quality well produced content that is not possible with out the funding of large news networks.

Drones and virtual reality also hold promising prospects for the future of journalism. As drone photography grows and lawmakers de-regulate them, we could see more instantaneous video and photography of news events. Virtual reality, CGI, and immersive media could also be useful for telling more engaging stories. Many outlets are already using realistic animations and simulations to re-create visualizations of news stories that were not captured efficiently.

In Summary, the key drivers that are shaping the future of News Media are as follows:

- need for more diverse content, voices, sources
- need for more transparency, people want to know where the information is coming from since smaller networks have less accountability.
- Moving from a top-down one-way communication system to a 2-way open dialogue.
- Filtering through vast amounts of content and information
- Discovering new business models to create revenue for news media, (subscriptions, pay per article, donations, corporate sponsors)
- Making room for “opinion” and “bias”, there is evidence people want their news to not be neutral, but come from a value system they are aligned with.
- How to handle mis-information, satire, and gimmicks used to make stories viral/click-bait.

Baseline Inputs:

Research that informed the baseline future described above is outlined below.

Constants

No expected change before the time horizon expected is these regards

The media will continue to be influenced by politics and corporate stakeholders. Ever Since Obamas 2008 Campaign, Social Media has been key to reaching politicians constituents.

Source: <http://mashable.com/2010/11/01/future-social-media-politics/>

The issue of Bias, left/right wing Conservative/liberal voice of sources will always be around.

Source: <http://mashable.com/2010/11/01/future-social-media-politics/>

The freedom of the press will continue to be protected by the US constitution.

Source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_the_press_in_the_United_States

News will continue to be filtered and skewed by the various outlets that report on it, objective reporting has always been, and will likely continue to be a challenge.

Source: http://www.opednews.com/articles/Complaints-about-Left-Wing-by-Jonathan-Maxwell-Bias_Biased-News-Coverage_Conservatives_Fairness-140128-222.html

Trends

General thrust of developments in News Media

More fragmented media sources; blogs, twitter, social media, internet television news, freelance journalists, crowd-sourced news, and #trending topics.

Source: http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2096504_2096506_2096799,00.html

People rely on social media and their own networks to learn about articles and news pieces, there will be fewer and fewer users who go to a specific site or source to get all of their news.

Source: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/24/net-us-facebook-study-news-idUSBRE99N0SV20131024>

Video content and reporting/documentary is moving away from just television production towards being produced specifically for the internet. This makes it shareable, interactive, and allows for commentary and responses. (linking, data analytics and a traceability of what news one consumes are issues)

Source: <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/news-video-on-the-web/>

Traditional news sources are also encouraging audience participation and sourcing using social networking.

Source: <http://www.mushroomnetworks.com/infographics/social-media-news-outlets-vs.-traditional-news-infographic>

Most people consume the news online, television news remains strong but print media and radio news is quickly being replaced by the internet and digital sources.

Source: <http://www.mushroomnetworks.com/infographics/social-media-news-outlets-vs.-traditional-news-infographic>

News sources are increasingly moving towards including “fluff” entertainment, style, art stories and not just hardline news.

Source: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ted-turner-on-cnn-today-would-like-to-see-a-little-less-fluff/>

Sensational, novel, spectacle fueled news that feeds into a viral feedback loops across platforms and a medium is most widely read and spread.

Source: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/viral-news/>

Fewer jobs and less pay for professional and traditional journalists.

Source: <http://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1902202,00.html>

People turn to journalists for analysis and commentary, major breaking news is increasingly first reported by crowd sourcing, the commentary is increasingly interactive and participatory using comments and social media like twitter.

Source: <http://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1902202,00.html>

Rapidly changing business models where people pay subscriptions for news sites, or pay per article, on top of revenue from advertisements. Even incentives for “crowd-funded” editorial pieces where the viewers contribute money for a story to be told.

Source: <http://www.stateofthedia.org/2013/newspapers-stabilizing-but-still-threatened/7-operating-profit-margins-continue-to-decline-for-media-companies/>

Local news remains an important source of revenue for the few remaining print and television outlets. (radio news in particular for suburban communities and cities where people drive a lot)

Source: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/09/26/how-people-get-local-news-and-information-in-different-communities/>

The news is delivered in shorter, more image rich segments. Photos essays, video reels, montages, list-sicles with gifs (buzzfeed).

Source: <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/aug/11/21-things-you-need-to-know-about-buzzfeeds-success>

Diversity in the news and journalism industry continues to be skewed, minorities are very much under-represented, but there are signals this is changing.

Source: <https://www.spj.org/diversity.asp>

Plans

Announced intentions/plans of key stakeholders

New York Times just announced TheUpshot, a data-based reporting platform that is looking to capitalize on analytics to tell more comprehensive news stories using Big Data.

Source: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/23/upshot/navigate-news-with-the-upshot.html?_r=0

Almost every social network is introducing news sharing and consuming apps that make it easier to navigate digital news content being shared by those in your network. Linked in recently purchased the news app Pulse, Facebook just launched a news reader app. Outlets like NYtimes and CNN have also recently launched their own apps.

Source: <http://appadvice.com/applists/show/best-apps-for-news-junkies-rss-feed-readers>

Projections

The state of the news media is decidedly unknown, some are even calling it a crisis, as the transition to online and digital news progresses, organizations are actively looking for new business models to produce revenue. There are several organizations that are speculating the future of news media, albeit, none have come to a consensus.

The newseum has an ongoing project dedicated to the future of news media.

Source: <http://newseum.org/programs/future-of-news/index.html>

The economist also has a blog dedicated to discussing the issues news media is facing. The main discussion they are having is the transparency vs objectivity debate. With online news, transparency might be more important than the impossible goal of objectivity. This source does not forecast or make any predictions, but just hosts a debate about the direction of the field.

Source: <http://www.economist.com/ideasarena/news>

One of the most prolific organizations dedicated to learning about the future of news media the Niemen Journalism Lab.

This organization is hosting continuing panels and discussions about where news media might be headed. The report includes about 2 dozen interviews with people in the industry that predict what might happen in the next year or so in journalism. No two reports point to the same future, or even common trajectories.

Source: <http://www.niemanlab.org>

State of the News Media – Pew Research Journalism Project

The pew research center just concluded an extensive research project to determine the current landscape of the journalism field, this study is perhaps the most cited and referenced in discussions about where news media is headed, but it once again does not point to a singular future.

Source: <http://www.journalism.org/packages/state-of-the-news-media-2014/>

Alternative Future

The Real News Reel

The state of news media is in a self-professed emergency, many people are speculating but there is little consensus of where the field is heading as it transitions from legacy models. Many of the key issues are the same as in the baseline, but this alternative future imagines a great transformation that might resolve the uncertainties and dilemmas with a transformative new system.

Key Uncertainties to be considered:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Censorship
- Diversity of views / representation
- Quality of crowd sourcing
- Revenue models, what is news outside the capitalist frame.
- Need for channels of mass-communication incase of emergency
- Finding a common or meta-narrative in deluge of content.

In this alternate future the United States faces a crisis, a natural disaster coupled with a serious attack on its sovereignty. People increasingly turn to the media to make sense of what is going on, but a de-centralized media eco-system only frustrates people. People are sick of the spin, commentary and sensationalism they find in the media. Restoring and protecting the Internet infrastructure becomes a key issue and so it is nationalized. A constitution is created to ensure its neutrality. Because the Internet is nationalized, there is a channel created by which the government can efficiently communicate with the population at large, especially during a crisis. Tax incentives are introduced for people to share knowledge, news, and information with others over this new Internet network. News sharing and discussion platforms exist at local, federal, and global levels. News and information shared at the local level is up voted, amended, and added onto by others nearby. Journalists are civil servants with specific training and

education who curate this content with the help of data and analytics, they themselves are nominated and appointed by the people.

Stories and information that get up voted (or liked) all the way to the federal level is constructed into immersive media experiences that everyone has access to. These media experiences are like virtual reality where you can engage with the information being presented at your own pace. It is simulated using references videos, images and words ordinary citizens share but also from footage from technologies like drones , which the central media organization has access to.

Other countries follow suit and their media infrastructure evolves in the same way. International news is also socially constructed, fact checked at different levels, and then shared across borders. Along side of news that comes from this “official” stream, platforms where people are not geographically close but share vested interests emerge. They organize to create their own hierarchies and systems of checks on the backs of existing centers of information (the UN, universities, and other such institutions).

Information is free to flow as it does now as well. People want viral content, spectacle, and sensationalism, and they get it, but this content carries a disclaimer. When reading through your news feed, people can opt to only see verified news, or only free flowing news, or a combination of both.

Since the baseline and current state of news media is in heavy flux, this proposed alternative is on that attempts to address all the uncertainties and issues the field is currently facing. Key differences that this Alternative Future images from the present are:

- This new system has both local and global reach. It has a top-down hierarchy as well as a bottom-up stream for generating content.
- It attempts to solve disparity by pushing for a neutral open Internet where everyone has a voice.
- It is based on a system of ‘checks and balances’ that is already accepted as a pillar of American values.
- It has a system for insuring credibility that the current media landscape lacks
- It attempts to differentiate “authenticated” versus “non-authenticated” information
- It allows for cross-pollination of news and information beyond geographies.
- It has room for “expertise” and “outsider knowledge” to both be incorporated into the news media narrative.

Alternative Future Inputs:

Research that informed the alternative future described above is outlined below.

Trend Breaks

How might trends from the baseline play out differently

De-Centralization of News Network. Although the internet is giving rise and room for fringe voices and news sources, the corporations that own the cable infrastructure is another story. It was recently announced that time warner and Comcast are hoping to merge. This would create a huge monopoly that owns the infrastructure that delivers both television and internet to most people's homes. By controlling the network, they can block access of certain sites, networks and sources of news, particularly ones that compete with their own platforms, and interests. It also makes everything much less transparent

Two-way conversation. The ability to share, discuss and add to the news media conversation is having a huge affect on news media. However, many outlets are discontinuing the service because dealing with the liability of obscene comments left anonymously is too burdensome

Tired of mis-information and crowd-sourced news making, people find they would rather pay for highly-produced, seemingly objective, accountable news sources and the era of the news-blogger ends

Unfulfilled Plans

How might plans announced by stakeholders not achieve their goals

Big data does not deliver on its promise of harvesting vast data sets to tell more honest stories. Concerned with privacy people get more saavy and make it harder and harder for people to collect their data, making data less complete and reliable

Events

How might future events impact this alterative future.

In case of a major emergency (flood, earthquake, war) people don't want a fragmented media landscape. These types of events generally bring people together, and such type of event might make people demand a unified top-down media outlet that has resources and is reliable.

Issues

Conflicts, controversies, dilemmas and choices not yet made. Since the future of News Media is so un-certain, many of the key issues in the alternative future are carried over from unresolved issues in the Baseline.

Need for more diverse content, voices, sources
Need for more transparency, people want to know where the information is coming from since smaller networks have less accountability.
Moving from a top-down one-way communication system to a 2-way open dialogue.
Filtering through vast amounts of content and information
Developing new business models to create revenue for news media, (subscriptions, pay per article, donations, corporate sponsors)
Making room for “opinion” and “bias”, there is evidence people do not want their news to not be neutral, but come from a value system they are aligned with. Subjective vs objective journalism.
How to handle mis-information, satire, and gimmicks used to make stories viral/click-bait

Ideas

New images, perspectives and ideas about the future of News Media.

Big data and the idea of predictive journalism and self-fulfilling prophecies. (it simply gives voice to those already in power, hampers change)
The gameification of news, where people have active stake in adding content, and are perhaps paid for their opinions (make the internet less anonymous)

Government owned internet infrastructure
State-owned media outlets which remove profit from the equation but also adequately deals with problems of censorship, corruption and efficiency. (Al-Jazeera is often credited as being relatively free and open despite being owned and backed by conservative Qatari royalty)
Thinking beyond the mythology of news and its ritual consumption (/social constructivism), info-tainment, reality-television, PR-journalism, hyper-hybridity, news from completely virtual (not real) worlds,
What is / is not verifiable with respect to images, and video that can increasingly be manipulated by anybody
Fake news/fiction used to better the world; satire, scenarios, back-casting, science fiction, conspiracy stories that mimick news. (Fiction that reveals truths but it not objective fact reporting)
News as processes instead of a product. Less commentary and analysis, more first hand raw information. The slow-movement in entertainment spills over into the news media practice (certified un-edited footage only) Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/the-slow-news-movement_1_b_1613631.html
The US media breaks the un-spoken code of not showing casualties/footage from wars it is involved in, a practice that started after the Vietnam war. What does a fully transparent media imply?

Implications and Conclusion

How does the alternative future identified above affect stakeholders, particularly social media platforms like Facebook that are looking to become the main distribution channel for news media?

After drafting the alternative future, certain aspects were analyzed to see how their implications could inform strategies for stakeholders like social media platforms in the present.

One of the key issues a platform like Facebook needs to resolve is to design a system where information can be cross-checked quickly and accurately. The system needs to be loose, yet robust enough to not create lag or become too cumbersome to be truly democratic.

Non-verified information flows faster and has more artistic freedom. Important ideas are born on the fringes and the news ecosystem needs to allow for them to flourish in order to be progressive and useful. A system that allows for creativity and diversity but also breeds thoroughness and accuracy is the main challenge. "The Reel Gets Real" alternative addresses this challenge through disclaimers separating peoples news feeds between verified and non-verified stories.

This is but one example of how stakeholders may navigate the future of news media, but the domain is ripe with possibility. Countless start-ups are focusing their efforts to disrupt the industry and create new streams of revenue in the news media space.

The recent popularity of meticulous long form journalism as evidenced by record-breaking numbers of listeners tuning into the Serial Podcast on NPR can be juxtaposed with the rise in popularity of algorithmically curated news apps like Smart News. The Smart News app uses big data to deliver breaking news first, creating a story as details emerge. The Serial podcast is a weekly hour-long radio show that meticulously investigates that same event over twelve weeks. Its main goal is objectivity and transparency. Both formats are wildly popular developments in 2014, and the future of News Media will likely be built on the merits of both types of journalism.

Implications Analysis using Futures Wheels:

Implications of the Alternative Future were identified using the following futures wheels.

