Study explains why some new stories get more clicks from social media than others

March 24 2021, by Juliana Sutanto

Credit: Katerina Holmes from Pexels

Few industries have suffered more disruption from the internet than the news media. Over two decades or more, journalism has been hit by a "perfect storm" due to the loss of geographical monopolies that national

and regional news organizations once enjoyed as well as the emergence of amateur content producers such as bloggers.

Perhaps what is the most disruptive element of this assault on news organizations is the "unbundling" of content production and content aggregation—or, in layperson's terms, the fact that most people aren't getting their news directly from news sites but via social media or other places on the internet.

This has led to more than a decade of argument between media companies and news aggregators such as Apple News, Google and Facebook. News aggregators tend to post headlines and short extracts of articles, linking through to the site on which they were originally published. Every click brings additional traffic to the news producer's site—and the all-important advertising revenue.

Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has been particularly outspoken on news aggregators, referring to them as "parasites". His company News Corporation and other media organizations have accused them of preventing readers from going to their sites—"stealing" advertising revenues by "free riding" on their content. More than 11 years ago, in an interview with Sky News Australia, the news mogul said he would consider removing the content from his news sites from Google's search index. It never happened.

In February, the Australian government passed legislation, the first of its kind in the world aiming to make the likes of Apple, Google and Facebook pay for news content. After a short stand-off between Facebook and Australian news organizations, during which Facebook refused to post any Australian news content on subscribers' newsfeeds, a deal was struck, setting up a bargaining code for publishers and aggregators.

Symbiotic relationship

A central debate on news aggregators is whether they are harmful to news producers by raking off advertising revenues or beneficial by reducing search time and costs for consumers. Our research examined whether news producers and aggregators can have a beneficial symbiotic relationship. We developed news aggregator apps for the iPhone and iPad and carried out our own field experiments.

The apps aggregated news from 13 major news publishers in Switzerland (with their permission) and were available for download by anyone in that country. The two-week field experiment with the iPhone app involved more than 2,000 users who viewed extracts of almost 5,000 articles a total of more than 32,000 times. The iPad app ran for 16 weeks, during which we had close to 1,400 users viewing extracts of almost 30,000 articles more than 65,000 times.

We varied the amount of text in the extracts, and experimented by accompanying some extracts with an image. We also looked at whether it made a difference if there were a number of other competing articles on the same issue. What we wanted to find out was how likely readers were in various different scenarios to click through to read the full article at the news publisher's site.

How the app works

The default length of the snippet of text in our experiment is 245 characters—which we found was the average number of characters of the snippets in Google News.

We then reduced or increased the number of characters in increments of 20%. The longest snippet we used was 343 characters (+40%) because

of the constraint of our copyright agreements with the news providers. The shortest snippet on our iPhone app is 98 characters (-60%). In our iPad app, we sometimes show no snippet at all (only the headline and corresponding image).

We found that as the extracts grew longer, people were less likely to click through to the article on its original site. It appeared that an article's headline could often provide all the information the audience needed. Any additional information provided by the aggregator, in the form of snippets of text or images, actually decreased click-through rates.

There is massive difference in click-through from iPhone and iPad. The iPad has a richer interface and is the closest to a web browser—which means the limitations of the mobile phone interface may increase the click-through rate. Nevertheless, decline in click-through rates is consistent across both platforms.

Interestingly, the opposite happens when the snippets of several related articles of the same story compete for readers' attention. Aggregators tend to group these snippets together, which creates direct competition for readers. We found that in cases like this, 30% of readers do not click through to any article and 66% of readers click through to only one article—paradoxically, it's the snippet with longer text and accompanying images that gets the clicks.

The results of this experiment present a dilemma for news publishers. On the one hand they know that the more information they allow an aggregator to reproduce in terms of text and images, the less likely readers are to visit their site. On the other hand, by limiting the amount of text or images that an aggregator is allowed to reproduce they risk losing out to their competitors who might not follow the same strategy.

Our research leaves us with two insights: one is that news organizations

will need to keep experimenting with ways to get people to their sites. The other is that the news industry as a whole needs to negotiate with news aggregators to ensure fair treatment for all.

Provided by The Conversation