

The Intersection of Social Media and News

"It may be coincidence that the decline of newspapers has corresponded with the rise of social media. Or maybe not." - Ryan Holmes

We are now in an era that is heavily reliant on social media services, which have replaced traditional news organizations as a source of news for many people. Social media is a market for news, with industry leaders currently competing to expand the news features that they employ. In a study analyzing the impact of social media on the press, it was noted that, "News organizations are rushing into social media, viewing services like Facebook and Twitter as opportunities to market and distribute content" (Hermida, 815). Social media has had a drastic impact on how people receive, share, and interact with news. Previous studies have analyzed the importance of sharing and how this action has become central to the public's interaction with news. The rise of social media has dramatically changed the entire news media process, but there is still research to be done on the extent of these changes.

In the past couple of decades there has been a dramatic increase in the rise of soft news, as stories of a political or civic affairs oriented nature continue to be replaced by those containing an entertainment subject matter. Again and again, we have heard about the dangers of such a development, as people worry about the decline in news containing more substantive content. Those in the news industry have interpreted this trend as a cause for concern. Jay Hamilton writes in his essay *Economic Theories of News*, that the market dictates the amount of soft versus hard news, depending on a mix of the preferences of viewers, advertisers, and broadcasters (Hamilton 15-17). The interplay of a variety of factors can determine the relative amounts of soft and hard news, but research has shown that more and more soft news dominates the news media. In John Zaller's study of the relationship between civic affairs content and audience

share during the time of O.J. Simpson's trial, he found that "news programs lost audience share when they ran more civic affairs news than competing shows, and gained share when they ran more O.J. news than competitors" (Zaller, 1). Zaller further explains that these results indicate market demand drives the amount of civic affairs programming. It is evident that soft news has come to the forefront of the content in news media, but could this observation be explained by the concurrent rise of social media? Since social media has changed the way that people interact with news, it might also have led to a change in the type of content that people would prefer to see.

One trend that has affected the type of stories people are exposed to is pack journalism. Pack journalism is exhibited in a uniformity of news coverage, and occurs when reporters from a variety of news media outlets cover the same story. Another characteristic of pack journalism is that once market leaders stop covering a particular story, others will also stop. Thus a market leader, such as the New York Times, might run a story that is then picked up by the smaller news organizations around the country. The influence of news media leaders can dramatically impact the type of content of other media organizations, and subsequently what is seen on social media.

Agenda setting is the idea that exposure to media programming has an impact on what you care about. For instance, the crime script in local news, where crime is displayed disproportionately to the amount it actually occurs, causes people to be more concerned about the issue of crime. In a Gallup poll, individuals are asked what the most important problems are today in America and their answers are consistent with what is covered in the news. This paradigm is important because it impacts the entire democratic process. The issues that people care about determine what they eventually vote for, known as the priming effect of news. Additionally, the manner in which this information is presented can change how individuals

choose to vote on a particular policy. This trend is referred to as the framing effect of news. Both the priming effect and the framing effect are essential to the decisions that people make when they vote, and thus their importance cannot be overstated. Not only does media coverage impact the public's preferences and voting behavior, but it also affects what issues politicians choose to focus their time and energy on. Media programming has such a broad reach on many important aspects of the democratic foundation of America.

In this paper, my hypothesis is that stories shown in Facebook's trending feature will parallel those published in the New York Times, since the NY Times is seen as an agenda-setter for news stories. This relationship follows the pack journalism trend described above, where a homogeneity of stories is seen throughout the media landscape. Trending could be viewed as a better indicator of the preferences of the American public since trending reflects what people want to see, and thus market forces may be more powerful in social media's distribution of news. The Trending component of Facebook shows a list of topics that have recently become popular by Facebook users around the world. There are approximately 10 short blurbs that make up Facebook Trending (as shown in Figure 1), and these blurbs change throughout the day.

Methods:

The setup of this content analysis is as follows: For five days, the types of news that make up the Trending feature and the articles included on the NY Times front page were recorded and categorized. The trending topics on Facebook were checked 4 times on each of

TRENDING

- ↪ **Benjamin Netanyahu:** Israeli prime minister tells AIPAC that reports of declining US ties are 'wrong'
- ↪ **Cindy Crawford:** Model's photographer says others doctored previously unretouched photo of her
- ↪ **Huntington Beach, California:** Hailstorm covers Orange County beach in layer of white
- ↪ **Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department:** Police looking for 2 teens reportedly abducted at gunpoint
- ↪ **IKEA:** Swedish retailer introduces furniture with wireless phone chargers
- ↪ **Whitewater, Wisconsin:** Missing University of Wisconsin-Whitewater student found safe, police say
- ↪ **Costco:** Retailer names Visa, Citi as 2016 credit card partners after American Express deal ends
- ↪ **Monoprix:** Archeologists find remains of more than 200 bodies buried underneath Paris supermarket chain
- ↪ **Interstate 95 in North Carolina:** Armed robbers steal gold worth \$4 million from truck, police say
- ↪ **Nelson Shanks:** Artist says he included reference to Monica Lewinsky in 2006 portrait of Bill Clinton

Figure 1: Example of Facebook Trending

these 5 days, and these times remained consistent throughout the period (i.e. 9am, 1pm, 5pm, 9pm). The front page of the NY Times was also categorized and coded each morning.

The NY Times content was compared to the categorization of Facebook trending to see whether or not stories would overlap. The comparison includes a direct count of stories that are of the same subject matter on both news outlets. Parallels in this comparison are indicative of the extent to which agenda setting and pack journalism are relevant in this context. The other analysis that was done on both of these sources was a coding of the type of content included in each story, i.e. whether each story was of a soft or hard news nature. The numbers that were used varied from 1 to 3 and the proportion of each type of story was compared at the end of the five-day period.

Content Analysis Codes:

1 = primarily hard

2 = mixed

3 = primarily soft

These codes are defined as follows: “Some news programs focus mainly on entertainment, health, or life-style information and carry very little public affairs information. These programs, which include Entertainment Tonight and Inside Edition, are often labeled as ‘soft news.’ At the other end of the spectrum, programs such as The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer are called “hard news” because of their focus on the details of government and politics. In between there are programs that offer a mix of soft and hard news topics” (Hamilton, 14). I suspect that there will be a much larger number of soft news stories on Facebook’s trending as compared to a greater proportion of hard news that makes up the NY Times front page.

Results:

A t-test for significance was done to determine if the two means of soft-hard news coding were significantly different. A statistically significant result would indicate that the two types of sources have different coding values that are not due solely to chance. The null hypothesis is that there is no difference between the distributions of types of stories of the two sources.

Soft-Hard Distribution:

	New York Times:	Facebook Trending
1	20	37
2	27	17
3	68	20

Mean values from analysis:

Mean value Facebook Trending (repeats included): 2.30

Mean value Facebook Trending (no repeats): 2.42

Mean value New York Times: 1.77

Number of stories overlapping on both sources: 14

T-test for significance:

$$t = x_1 - x_2 / \sqrt{((s_1^2 / n_1) + (s_2^2 / n_2))}$$

Calculating the P-Value:

Including stories that appeared more than once:

$$t = 2.30 - 1.77 / \sqrt{(.82^2/170) + (.85^2/74)}$$

$$t = .53 / .0726$$

$$t = 7.30$$

With this high of a t-score, the p value is basically 0

Statistically significant

Without repeat stories:

$$t = 2.42 - 1.77 / \sqrt{((.77^2)/115) + ((.85^2)/74)}$$

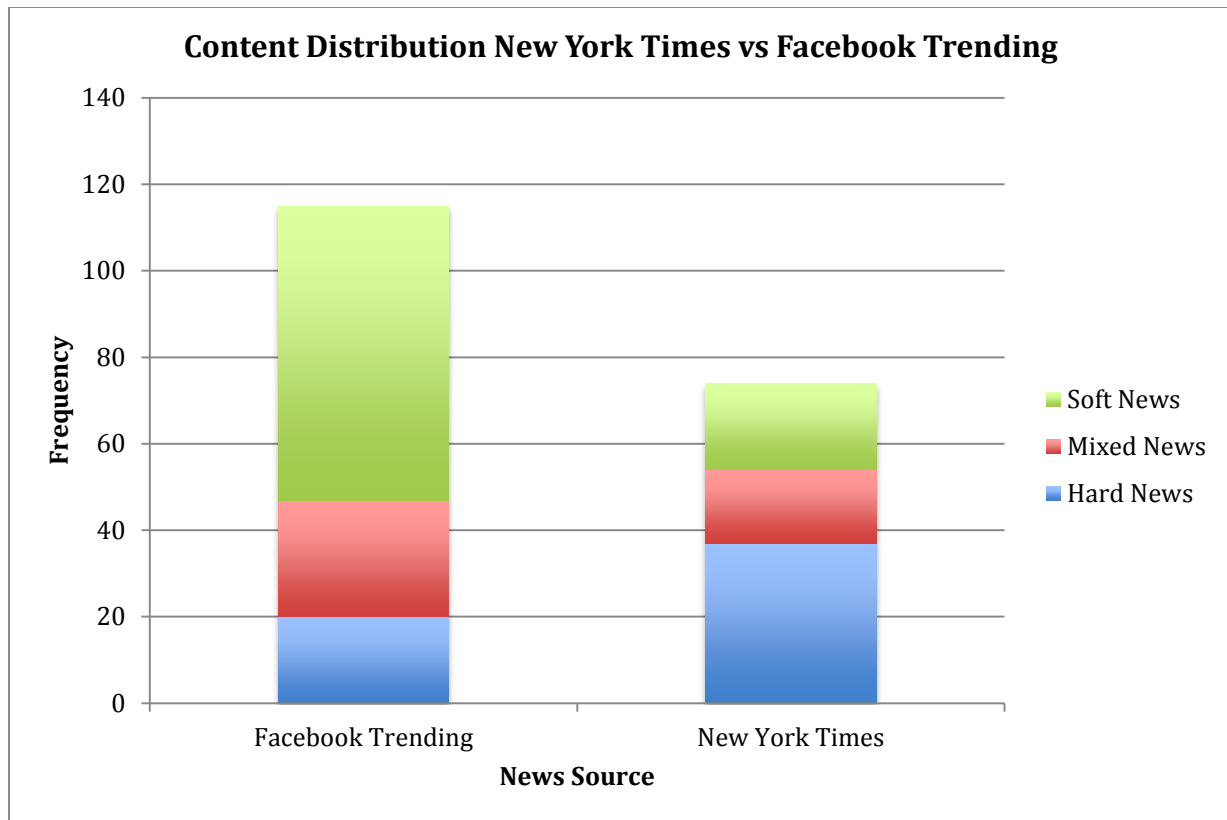
$$t = .65 / .0816$$

$$t = 7.965$$

With this high of a t-score, the p value is basically 0

Statistically significant

The graph below is a visual representation of the different amounts of each type of story on the respective news mediums. The number of stories in the sample was much higher in Facebook Trending because it was coded 4 times each day, whereas only the daily front page of the New York Times was coded.



After coding all five days of stories of both the New York Times front page and Facebook trending, basic statistics of performing a t-test indicates that the results are statistically significant. The null hypothesis is thus rejected and we conclude that there is a significant difference between the relative amounts of hard and soft news from the two sources. The mean value for Trending was also much higher than the mean for New York Times, showing that there is proportionately a much larger amount of soft news contained in this medium.

Discussion:

The New York Times has been seen as an agenda setter for countless other news sources, since the stories that the editors of the NY Times choose are paralleled across the news media. This trend was replicated in the current analysis of these two media forms, with many stories in common between the NY Times and Trending. Both pack journalism and agenda setting are

effects that could impact these results and can have a dramatic impact on how people decide to vote and what they believe is important.

Simply analyzing the mean value from coding stories soft to hard reveals that Facebook Trending had a much higher mean than the front page of the New York Times. Additionally the differences seen between the two samples are statistically significant, meaning that these results cannot be simply due to chance. Also, looking at the graph that displays the two distributions, there is proportionally a much greater amount of soft stories on Facebook Trending. It is obvious that the nature of news stories is primarily soft in Facebook trending, whereas content in the NY Times is much more political and substantive in nature. It was also interesting to see what types of stories overlapped on both mediums. Almost every single story that was repeated was coded with a 1, indicating that the more commercial stories did not necessitate repetition across sources. What this analysis has proven is that Facebook Trending includes a much higher number of soft news stories than does the front page of the New York Times. It has also shown that the New York Times is an agenda setter for solely hard news stories. Since both of these news mediums serve as a cursory glance for those interested in what is going on in the world, analyzing the type of content in both sources has provided insight into what each medium is trying to cater to in their audience.

This analysis also leads to comments on the role of social media in disseminating news and the relationship of this relatively new medium with the news industry. Could the predominance of soft news in social media indicate that people prefer a disproportionate amount of soft news? Since Trending is a relatively new feature in Facebook, it will be very interesting to see how the intersection of news and social media will develop in upcoming years and further research could analyze the trends of this growing relationship.

References

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