

Chapter 6

Mobile Social Networking and the News

Laura Forlano

In recent years, mainstream media coverage has integrated mobile social networking and micro-blogging tools such as Facebook and Twitter. These interactive communication channels have transformed our interpersonal relationships as well as our links with organizations and content including news and entertainment. In particular, our experience of the news has become mediated through these platforms. These tools have transformed one-way transmission channels into two-way interactive media. While there has been significant discussion of the role of online forums, listservs and blogs as arenas for democratic participation and citizen journalism, there has been less analysis of how micro-blogging social networking tools are transforming the social practices around news and information. Drawing on James Carey's ritual view of communications, this chapter will analyze the role of these tools in the experience of our daily lives as well as our consumption of news and participation in significant media events of our time. First, this chapter will describe the changing habits of individual users in their daily news rituals. Second, this chapter will describe the ways in which news is represented on Facebook and Twitter as well as how these channels are reintegrated with mainstream media broadcasts. Third, this chapter will describe the use of CNN's Facebook plug-in during political media events such as the 2008 Presidential election and the Obama inauguration in 2009. Finally, this chapter will recommend future directions for the use of mobile social networking in mainstream media coverage.

There are three primary theoretical perspectives that ground the following analysis of social networking sites and micro-blogging tools: the ritual view of communications from communication theory, actor network theory from science and technology studies, and the theory of affordances from design research. Carey's ritual view of communications offers an insightful theoretical lens to the understanding of the shifts in news rituals that we are currently experiencing (1988). While the majority of studies of the media and communications focus on the content of the news as a transmission of information, facts, and worldviews, Carey argues that a ritual view is more appropriate to the understanding of our communications as a

L. Forlano (✉)

Interaction Design Lab, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA
e-mail: lef55@cornell.edu

cultural practice. By studying the use of social networking sites and micro-blogging tools as ritual or cultural practice rather than analyzing the content of the information that is being transmitted, it is possible to understand the social transformations that are occurring with respect to the media's transition into the digital realm.

The social construction of technology and actor network theory, perspectives imported to communications research from science and technology studies, also offer instructive ways of understanding the emergent phenomenon with respect to the transformation of the media and news. The social construction of technology stresses the ways in which technologies – in this case, social networking sites and micro-blogging tools – are the product of complex interactions between developers and users of the tools (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987). By telling the social, economic, political, and cultural stories behind the technologies that we interact with it is possible to gain a deeper knowledge of the role of such tools in society. Actor network theory focuses on following the actions of the user as well as an expansive network of human and non-human actors and their relationship to one another (Latour, 2005). As such, I will explain in detail the process by which users (namely, myself) engage with the various tools and artifacts including laptops, browsers, social networking sites, the television, mobile phones, mobile applications, etc.

Finally, the theory of affordances from design research by way of psychology is helpful in understanding the perceived and actual properties of tools, objects, and artifacts (Norman, 1990). This theory is important because it allows room for the discovery of new, unanticipated uses by users themselves. In particular, users of Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites have been actively engaged in the creation of new ways of using the tools beyond those intended by the developers themselves. Twitter's use by protesters during the Iranian election in June 2009 is a good example of the appropriation of social tools for political purposes.

For the purpose of this analysis, I employ ethnographic methods, relying on self-reflection my own experiences using Facebook and Twitter. In particular, virtual ethnography, network ethnography (Howard, 2002), and trace ethnography (Geiger, 2010) have been developed specifically to account for the analysis of online communities, listservs, chatrooms, and data-streams. As such, I will use specific examples from my own Facebook status updates and Twitter postings in order to illustrate the use of these tools with respect to the socio-cultural transformations that I argue are occurring vis-à-vis the news and media events.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are among the fastest growing media and platforms for expression in human history. According to a study by Pelli and Bigelow, "authorship," or the ability to publish in books and new media, is growing 100 times faster than traditional media (2009). While it took 600 years for the number of book authors to reach 1 million, Facebook reached 75 million users in 4 years and Twitter reached 1 million in only 3 years. In this assessment, authorship is defined as anyone whose writing reaches over 100 people. While I would disagree with the study's definition of authorship – specifically, I would argue that what Facebook and Twitter represent is more akin to verbal communication exchanges rather than written text – Pelli and Bigelow illustrate the great speed at which these innovations have diffused through selected social networks around the world. Their

study provides a useful benchmark against which to understand the way that these sites are integrated into our experience of news, media, and our everyday lives.

I have been “on” Facebook since summer 2007. Currently, I have 824 friends and 29 photos in my profile (only one of which was posted by me). I have installed TripAdvisor’s “Cities I’ve Visited” and Dopplr’s “Where Next” applications in my profile, which broadcast my travel patterns to my social network, and I belong to nine causes including Access to Knowledge, Barack Obama is My President, MobileActive, Net Neutrality, and Creative Commons. I typically do not install any other applications in my profile or participate in the myriad of games and quizzes that frequently make the rounds on Facebook. Compared to my friends and colleagues that are more active on Facebook, I would classify myself as a moderate user.

I have been a user of Twitter since November 16, 2008 at 4:43 P.M. when I sent my first Tweet. Since then I have posted 269 updates. Currently, I follow 196 people and have 106 followers. Compared to my friends and colleagues, I would classify myself as a very light user of Twitter; on some days, I do not check it at all or post anything and, on other days, I might post one or more updates. When I am attending a conference where tweeting is considered to be part of the documentation or participation, I am more likely to post multiple updates on one day. Recently, I’ve begun posting photos directly to Twitter with a short post or description of the image.

Twitter as News Ritual

I fondly remember James Carey quoting Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* in the Social Impact of Mass Media course, which I took in Fall 2001, my first semester as a doctoral student in Communications at Columbia University. “The nation was born when we got up and read the newspaper together,” he said. According to Anderson, the subsidization of newspapers by the United States Post Office and the development of print-capitalism played an important role in the emergence of our national conscience through the daily habit of newspaper reading (1983). Given the current crisis in the news industry with declining newspaper subscriptions, the shift to online news, the decrease in television viewing, and the increase in Internet use, it is important to ask how our changing media rituals and daily news habits might shape an emerging consciousness that considers the self or one’s social network rather than the nation or the world to be the primary focus of attention.

On September 30, 2009, I awoke, opened my 2-month-old MacBook Pro, loaded the Safari browser and logged into Facebook. You see, there was something very important that I had to share with the world. I replaced the thought-provoking “What’s on your mind?” in the status update with the words “Woke up covered in mosquito bites – the Med fly strikes again” and hit the blue “Share” button. I had made my own headlines in the daily news feed of life. Within minutes, a friend posted the comment “could be worse,” which included a link to a September 16

New York Times article entitled “A Vacation Bug Bite That Keeps Biting,” a health column by Tara Parker-Pope that recounts a woman’s story about a trip to Belize that resulted in an unwanted stowaway insect, which I would not have otherwise have even glanced at. While sociologists of the mass media and public opinion as early as Lazarsfeld have long recognized the importance of one’s first-degree social network such as family and friends in models of voting and social influence, such models get increasingly complicated when attempting to assess the current situation of the mass media and news in everyday life.

Media historian Paul Starr has emphasized the importance of accidentally coming across news articles while reading the analog newspaper, a ritual that he laments will no longer occur with the movement of journalism to online portals; however, as the above example suggests, one of the affordances of Facebook’s status update and commenting features is the ability to create a conversation around news stories themselves as they relate to individual experiences. In this example, the user’s own experiences come first and the references to news come second. However, the reverse may also be true. While discussions of the news may have always been self-referential, social networking sites and micro-blogging tools have allowed such discussions to be increasingly self-referential – in fact, they appear in one’s personal profile alongside a plethora of more personal information about one’s daily life – as well as being tracked and recorded as traces of one’s social relationships with friends, colleagues and onlookers (depending on one’s privacy settings).

To digress briefly, the sharing of intimate personal details alongside a smorgasbord of political news, entertainment, and ongoing commentary has called individual privacy into question. For example, one Sunday morning I awoke to find that one of my Facebook “friends” (to remain anonymous) had allegedly posted a recording of himself making love to his girlfriend. I dared not click the link. “Was this akin to sex on a park bench?” I wondered. Another “friend” had posted that her young son kept her up all night because he “had the runs.” These examples are by no means outliers among the kinds of status updates and tweets that are the currency of social media. However, they raise important issues about the amount of transparency that one allows into their personal lives, the size of the network that is privy to such details and the nature of the privacy settings that may vary from person to person. Legal scholar James Grimmelman has argued that while Facebook allows for a great degree of control over one’s privacy settings, users misunderstand the risks involved with using the site and, as a result, they rarely modify the privacy settings (2009). Philosopher Helen Nissenbaum’s concept of “contextual integrity,” which ties privacy protection to contextual norms, offers one approach to the governance of personal information on social media sites (2004).

Now, back to my morning media diet. After posting my mosquito-ridden update, I spent 30 min skimming the happenings of my social network on Facebook and Twitter by reading through a litany of status updates. Rather than asking the question, “What is going on in the world today?” I instead seek to know “What is going on in MY world today?” I quickly catch up on the most salient occurrences in my network since last logging on. These include life-changing events such as, for example, who has had a baby, moved to a new city or taken a new job as well

as the more mundane remnants of human existence including who is mad at their dog, who ate what for breakfast, and who needs a break from their work or their kids. After that, I listen to the BBC's World News for about 30 minutes and start my day.

As described above based on an auto-ethnographic account of my own daily experience, among Facebook and Twitter users, reading the "social network news" has become an important ritual of everyday life. In trying to understand this cultural practice through Carey's ritual view of communications, one might ask what the consequences of granting one's social network the time and status that once might have been reserved for Walter Cronkite or Good Morning America. While this brief analysis does not offer a quantitative account of the adoption of such practices by the users of social networking sites, nor does it attempt to classify the content of the information being shared, it offers a perspective on how these tools operate within a network that includes both human actors such as real-life friends, Facebook "friends," colleagues, and onlookers as well as a host of websites, plugins, applications, browsers, interfaces, and computing tools alongside the traditional components of the media and news such as journalists, articles, videos, and news organizations themselves.

In so describing such a complex network of actors, we must not forget that news organizations themselves are also present on social networking sites to add as "friends" or, more commonly, to become "fans" of or "follow." For example, CNN's iReport team has a Twitter feed that follows over 30 thousand people and/or organizations and has nearly 30 thousand followers. The feed provides followers with links to new assignments, photos and video footage about breaking news. This further complicates the relationship of individual subjects with the media and the news by transforming what was once known as the audience into a fan, which denotes approval of the content rather than mere consumption. Unlike previous discussions of the emergence of blogging and citizen journalism, which address the user's role in writing about and commenting on the news (at least for a select group of users), micro-blogging via Facebook status updates and Twitter feeds are more lightweight forms of engagement that appear to be less time-consuming and more widely accessible. The next two sections will focus more specifically on the transition of the news with respect to breaking news and media events as well as on Facebook and Twitter's role as important intermediaries in bringing people together around particular news stories.

Breaking the News, One Status Update at a Time

The socio-cultural transformations described above are particularly interesting with respect to breaking news. Facebook and Twitter have emerged as important intermediaries between people and important political, economic, social and cultural events and issues. As early models of social influence might have predicted, there are people within everyone's social networks that are more deeply engaged with the news.

These “news junkies,” those who spend a lot of their time reading and commenting about news coverage of important events, many of which are also expert users of social networking sites, are undoubtedly an important source of information for their wider social network. Similar to discussions about the role of bloggers, the status updates of such users filter the news for their social network. However, when there is an important worldwide event or breaking news story, one can see the diffusion of the news through a social network as people post links to specific news stories and comment on those that their network has posted.

Many mainstream news organizations have added features on their websites that allow their readers to easily post stories to their Facebook status updates or Twitter feeds. Such features have the affordance of speeding up the distribution of a particular news story through one’s social network as well as allowing for the formation of micro-communities around specific stories through Facebook’s “like” and comment tools. In addition, some mainstream news programs such as CNN Newsroom’s Rich Sanchez have allowed people to instantly “talk back” to the anchor by posting comments and questions on Twitter. The comments posted by viewers, which are most likely screened prior to their appearance on the broadcast, are scrolled across the bottom of the screen as well as displayed in their original form on screen while Sanchez reads selected comments aloud.

In my own case, while I would not classify myself as a “news junkie,” I certainly know a lot of people in my social network who follow and comment on the news voraciously. Out of my many Facebook “friends” and people that I follow on Twitter, there are a small number that consistently post links to news, reports, articles, and video that interest me. I have learned that by keeping up with their status updates and Tweets, I can stay on top of new developments in my field and participate in the conversations that unfold. For example, on Thursday, October 15, 2009, a dreary gray and rainy morning in New York, I was intrigued by a status update posted by my friend and colleague Adam Greenfield, a writer and designer working on the social implications of ubiquitous computing. He posted a link to a blog post called “On Immaterials.” I clicked the link and was shepherded away to another website, where I watched a video, “Immaterials: The Ghost in the Field,” created by Timo Arnall, a Norwegian researcher for a project on near-field communication called Touch, and Jack Schulze, a designer at the London-based consultancy BERG. After viewing the video, I read Greenfield’s essay and then went back to Facebook to comment on his status update (though I could have also commented on the blog directly). “Wonderful video and essay!” I wrote. This resulted in a few brief exchanges with Greenfield about our upcoming trips to Barcelona to participate in Urban Labs, a conference at a Spanish collaborative and incubator called CitiLab. Next, I decided to repost the link to the video in order to share it with my own social network on Facebook and Twitter. Reposting and retweeting (signified by a capital RT) are important features of these social media, which allow individual updates to move virally through social networks collecting comments, “likes” or thumbs-up and additional reposts along the way. (Note: There is no Facebook feature that allows one to “dislike” or give a thumbs-down.) Later that day I noticed that several of my colleagues working in research and development departments at

top technology companies in Silicon Valley had also reposted Greenfield's original status update, which confirmed my belief that the status update was not only of interest but also a good way of keeping up with the conversations in the field.

Facebook and Twitter are not only communication tools for keeping up with specialized knowledge in one's field or demonstrating one's professional interests and involvement, they are also valuable for getting a quick sense of other breaking news and headlines. Later that afternoon, I quickly scanned the updates on Facebook and noticed that several people had simultaneously posted status updates, links and comments about a boy and a balloon. These included "#balloonboy is down in a field" and "balloon has landed" as well as links to stories on the CNN and NPR websites, and, on Twitter, a link to the *New York Times* news blog *The Lede*. I spent the next few minutes exploring the links and videos about the breaking news story, "Balloon lands empty; search on for boy" on CNN, which detailed the developing story about the 6-year-old boy from Colorado that had allegedly been carried away from his home in a helium balloon. Unfortunately, it was later discovered that the incident was a hoax perpetrated by the boy and his brothers at the encouragement of their father, the mastermind of the event, which was designed to get attention for a reality show.

The story's prominence on intermediaries such as Facebook and Twitter reflected the mainstream media's own coverage of the story. These platforms allowed viewers to "commune" virtually in real-time while sharing their thoughts and reactions to the news. As such, social media are a forum for the world's "collective conscience." Within minutes of the breaking news, it was possible to see links, comments and updates from around the country, and, indeed, around the world, in multiple languages. Experiencing the news event through social media intermediaries is akin to being at a United Nations cocktail party buzzing with chatter about the fate of the boy soaring overhead in the balloon. Carey often referred to his memory of huddling with a group of bystanders watching the first television shows through a department store window as an example of the cultural rituals surrounding the media. It is this kind of "huddling" that we are now doing online through social media platforms. Yet, such rituals are not only reserved for the minutia of everyday life or the excitement surrounding breaking news, they are also significant for critical moments in political history as we will see in the next section.

On Twitter, it is possible to view "Trending Topics" on the main page, which allows people to quickly see the commonly used hash tags, such as #balloonboy, as well as the issues with the most activity (Fig. 6.1). The hash tags allow users to quickly search for specific mentions of their keywords without including commonly used words or phrases in their search. While public Tweets are easily searchable, Facebook status updates are not. This capability makes Twitter more useful for following topics, issues, and news while Facebook is more easily used for generating small group conversations among people in several overlapping networks of friends that are, at the same time, observed by many onlookers.

Perhaps even more influential than posting links to and commenting on the news, Facebook and Twitter, and in particular their mobile platforms, have been used to capture photos and video, which have found their way into mainstream media

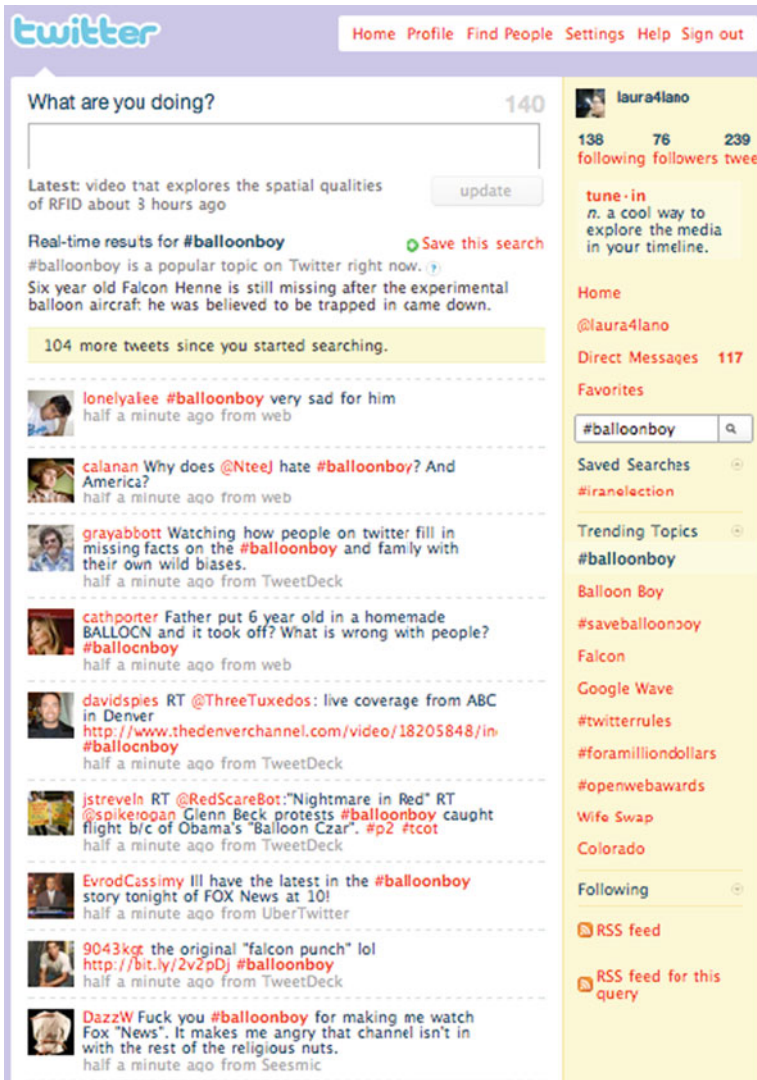


Fig. 6.1 A screen shot from the public Twitter feed about #balloonboy. Source: Twitter.com, October 15, 2009

reports. The role of these tools in documenting new events is similar to the role that the accounts of bloggers and citizen journalists have played in shaping the media. However, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, while bloggers only make up 12% of all Internet users, 35% of adult Internet users participate in social networking sites in the United States as do 65% of all teen Internet users (Lenhart, 2009). These tools are used by nearly three times as many people as blogs, which make them valuable for experiencing and documenting newsworthy events.

For example, over the past year, mobile phones, camera phones and Twitter have been used for the documentation of a number of significant breaking news events including the Bombay hotel bombing, the US Airways jet landing in the Hudson River in New York, and the Iranian election.

Facebook's Election and Inauguration of President Obama

The day after the historic November 2008 election of the first African-American president of the United States Barak Hussein Obama, Facebook, or at least my friends network on the site, was filled with exuberant accolades celebrating the previous evening's results. Yet, that same day, many voters around the country were angry over California's Proposition 8 resolution, which banned gay marriage in the state. By reading through the updates on Facebook and Twitter, it was possible to quickly get a sense of the political views of my social network. For the most part, based on a rough assessment of the status updates, it seems that my social network consists primarily of Democrats who are in favor of gay marriage. This finding supports theories of online homogeneity in which people are more likely to be exposed to people and information that support their own political views and less likely to encounter ideas that they disagree with. Given that Facebook are self-selected networks of "friends," the overwhelming support for Obama and disgust over "Prop 8" among my network makes sense. The reinforcement of homophilous networks, rather than heterophilous ones, via social networking sites is of some concern because more diverse networks are important for reducing inequality as well as for the spread of new ideas and innovations.

The use of these tools as a real-time political barometer during important media events such as presidential elections offers potential yet it is important to consider the impact of self-censorship, group dynamics, and the limited consequences of voicing one's opinions in such a transient and fluid forum. For example, the status updates and posts of an individual moment in time are easily buried in the deluge of personal and political information that is posted in a single hour or on a single day. The larger one's active network, the more difficult it is to keep up with the onslaught of updates. Thus, while individual posts maybe important for their instantiation of participation in the media ritual, they maybe nearly meaningless in the larger context. While status updates and tweets are written forms of communication, like instant messaging or chat rooms, the aesthetics and norms are more similar to verbal communication as mentioned earlier. And, while they are intended as the cultural traces of everyday life, they are in fact stored infinitely as written records – to be searched, surveilled, and cited. This raises serious concerns over the corporate nature of the intermediaries that host these ongoing conversations.

On to the inauguration. On January 20, 2009, audiences around the world witnessed Obama's inauguration. While many made the trip to Washington, DC to watch the much anticipated event from the cold and crowded National Mall, others gathered in video-enabled public spaces around the world such as New York's Times Square and some congregated around flat-screen televisions in restaurants and bars.

I stayed home in my pajamas. I had intended to take advantage of the relatively quiet January day – before the Spring semester’s crushing workload started up the following week – to get some writing done. Yet, like the rest of the world, I was so excited and distracted from my work that I soon took to watching CNN from a perch atop of my bed where I sat with my laptop. Around 11:30 A.M., I discovered the CNN’s Facebook plug-in (Fig. 6.2). The plug-in allowed me to view the status updates of my entire social network, as well as all of the updates posted by anyone using the tool, in a small box on the right-hand side of CNN’s live feed site.

According to top blog *ReadWriteWeb*, there were over 200,000 status updates from about 3,000 people – peaking at 8,500 people – commenting on the Facebook Connect plug-in during the event. CNN streamed the broadcast to 5.3 million viewers (Perez, 2009) but many complained of slow and broken connections and quizzed their networks for links to the best sources for online viewing.

What happened next was quite interesting. As excitement about the inauguration mounted, my friends, colleagues, and acquaintances (hereafter referred to as “friends” according to their designation as part of my Facebook friend’s list) around the world posted minute-by-minute status updates. To reuse the cocktail party metaphor, the experience was somewhat akin to being at an intimate gathering where you could hear snippets from all of the conversations in the room or a large soccer tournament where the crowd’s cheering roars throughout the stadium. It was not as much about what was said, but rather the fact that we were all together (or at least seemed to be). In short, it was an experience of a communication ritual.

As Barak Obama spoke his first words as President of the United States, one friend mouthed the most significant words of the inaugural address in LARGE CAPITAL LETTERS in her Facebook status updates. The practice quickly caught on as others around the world chimed in, silently pronouncing Obama’s words with a tap tap tap of the computer keyboard. Flipping to view the updates of “Everyone



Fig. 6.2 A screen shot from the CNN Facebook plug-in. Source: *ReadWriteWeb*, January 20, 2009

Watching” on the Facebook plug-in, it was possible to see multi-lingual notes from around the world.

At the time, I posted only a few updates to both Facebook and Twitter. The first:

“laura4lano is one minute away from President Obama!!! 12:00 P.M. Jan 20th.” Then, minutes later I wrote: “when is that last time everyone took the day off for an inauguration? 12:10 P.M. Jan 20th.” Finally, after watching the proceedings with gripping excitement for over 40 min I posted: “Can I go to the bathroom without missing anything now? 12:41 P.M. Jan 20th.” A few people laughed and forbade me from leaving my television before going offline (or, at least, off of Facebook) and returning to work.

I remember having been alone, in my pajamas in front of my computer, on several other significant days over the last decade; most notably, September 11, 2001 (the first day of my Ph.D. program) and the Blackout 2003 in New York (which occurred when I was in Tokyo for the summer). Since communications were severely disabled during these two events, it was difficult to understand what was happening. Furthermore, they occurred before the introduction of most social networking sites. With respect to the Obama inauguration, being plugged in greatly enhanced my experience of the news. I will never forget who was “there” alongside me chatting away on the Facebook tool. It was exciting, an important shift in how I experience and interpret media events that has persisted over the past year as I spend more time on these sites.

Conclusion

Social media platforms have become prevalent interfaces linking people, organizations, and content including news and entertainment. For avid users, these platforms are quickly encroaching on other modes of communication including the telephone and e-mail. Instead, users are relying on computers and mobile phone applications that allow them to share personal information, comment on the news, and participate in significant media events.

What impact will these changing norms have on the news institutions and the media as a whole? These industries are already suffering financially as people shift away from print media and television in favor of the Internet. Now, rather than going directly to a new organization’s web site, the “eyeballs” are scattered across a range of intermediaries such as blogs, aggregators, and social networking sites. When breaking news stories or media events take places, it is likely that they will make the rounds and become quickly diffused through social networking sites. However, less compelling stories, which still may be critical to the functioning of democracy and an informed citizenry may see even lower readership since they will not “go viral” in the same way. It is important that media institutions take such descriptive, ethnographic accounts of changing news and information habits into account as they continue to struggle with the difficulties of transitioning into the new media environment that is upon us.

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