News as a Service: Thirteen Danish Online Newspapers Adapting to the Social Web

Soley Rasmussen, Jyllands-Posten and Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This article presents a longitudinal study of the utilization of Social Web features by the thirteen main Danish online newspapers from 2008-2010. The current shift from mass media and print products to social media and web-services forms the background for the study. The aim of the study is to produce a baseline of information for media professionals and scholars engaged in identifying the added value of Social Web features in online newspapers. The research approach is mainly exploratory and descriptive. The analysis of the empirical material, which consists of content analysis of the websites, is supported by two recently developed theoretical frameworks for studying interactivity (Chung, 2008) and user participation (Domingo et al., 2008) in online newspapers. The empirical data reveal increasing utilization of the Social Web. The analysis indicates that newspaper organizations are primarily interpreting the emerging “media-as-a-service” paradigm as a way to engage news users in the distribution and interpretation of news. The production of news remains controlled by the media. However, recent developments (e.g., Facebook tools, Google ads, mash-ups and mobile apps) indicate that major new changes are indeed on the way.

Keywords: Online Newspapers, Social Media, Social Web, Web 2.0, Web Services

INTRODUCTION

In most digitally advanced economies print newspapers are experiencing immense circulation and revenue declines, as consumers and advertisers are replacing print with digital services. Apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Wall Street Journal) newspaper organizations have not succeeded in identifying online business models that substitute lost print revenues (OECD, 2010). News users generally consider online content to be free (Åkesson & Ihlström, 2008), and global content and service providers have entered the media market disrupting established value chains and business models of national, regional and local media companies.

The growth of the Internet/WWW is not the only source of change in the newspaper industry, and digital services could be considered only the latest challenge to traditional news delivery methods (Chung, 2008). Many other factors influence the contemporary news market, such as the growth of free newspapers, and longer-term changes in patterns of work and lifestyles are crucial in explaining the decline in newspaper readership (Franklin, 2008). However, Internet/WWW companies like Google and Facebook represent a new type of competitors for news
organizations (Nguyen, 2010). They operate on a global market and they are much bigger than online newspapers in terms of visits and page views. Their advertising models differ markedly from the business models of traditional news media—both print and online—as they are based on user-behavior and user-generated content. Finally, the production of content is challenged by the new mode of creating and disseminating informational and cultural goods, which is based on non-market or commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2006), and often referred to as Social Media, Web 2.0 or Social Web.

In a review of literature published since 2000 Mitchelson and Boczkowski (2009) conclude that online news production and the study of it are at a kind of liminal moment between tradition and change. Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism has suggested that we are witnessing a major shift; the news product is turning into a service for user empowerment (PEW, 2008).

Rupert Murdoch’s introduction of paywalls and Apple’s launch of the iPad have created new hopes for paid-for digital news, but not everybody is optimistic, and paywalls might not be able to rescue the newspaper industry, because empowered users are not willing to pay for news commodities (Shirky, 2010). How to deal with user-generated content, interactivity and participatory journalism are some of the most controversial topics within the news industry and in online newspaper literature. Compared to print, online newspapers enable users to play more active roles in their news consumption experience (Chung, 2008), and news organizations are constantly “upgrading” their websites to meet the new “standards” for user interactivity. However, the body of literature on users’ perception of online news is relatively small, and little is known about whether users perceive that the new “empowerment” features add value to the online newspaper medium. Whether integration of interactivity and participation features can be turned into profitable business models for news organizations is not clear, and none of the studies that do exist include the most recent Web 2.0/Social Web related developments, such as bookmarking, sharing via social network sites or mash-ups. Finally, little is known about how the integration of new features develops over time; longitudinal accounts of current developments in online newspapers are rare (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009).

The aim of the present study is to produce a baseline of information about the adoption of Web 2.0/Social Web features by online newspapers. The study covers the thirteen main Danish online newspapers from 2008 to 2010 and employs exploratory content analysis to give an empirical account of the recent developments. The main research question it answers is: What Social Web features are Danish newspaper organizations integrating on their news websites?

The approach in this paper is mainly exploratory and descriptive. The intention is to form an updated basis for understanding how recent Web developments may add value to the online newspaper medium. Understanding the added value of integrating Web 2.0/Social Web features is a prerequisite for determining their economic characteristics and in turn for identifying potential business models related to them. Therefore, the analysis of the empirical material will discuss the potential added value of Social Web features for the news users and for the news organizations. To inform the analysis, two typologies from media and communications literature developed by Chung (2008) and Domingo et al. (2008) will be employed.

The article is structured as follows. The following section presents the background behind the study by giving an overview of the Danish (online) newspaper market. The next introduces the concepts Web 2.0 and Social Web, identifies the main challenges that traditional news organizations are facing as a consequence of the recent Web evolution, and introduces the two typologies that will be used in the analysis. The online newspapers included in the study are introduced in the research approach section together with the method used for collecting the empirical data. The empirical material and analytical findings are presented in the findings section, and discussed in the following section. The final section summarizes the main conclu-
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