

The relative importance of social media for accessing, finding, and engaging with news: An eight-country cross-media comparison

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Roskilde University and the University of Oxford

and

Kim Christian Schrøder

Roskilde University

All correspondence should be directed to Rasmus Kleis Nielsen via email (rasmuskleisnielsen@gmail.com) or by mail to Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Roskilde University, House 43.3, Post Box 260, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark.

Abstract

The growing use of social media like Facebook and Twitter is in the process of changing how news is produced, disseminated, and discussed. But so far, we have only a preliminary understanding of (1) how important social media are as sources of news relative to other media, (2) the extent to which people use them to find news, (3) how many use them to engage in more participatory forms of news use, and (4) whether these developments are similar within countries with otherwise comparable levels of technological development. Based on data from a cross-country online survey of news media use, we present a comparative analysis of the relative importance of social media for news in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, the UK, and the US, covering eight developed democracies with different media systems. We show that television remains both the most widely used and most important source of news in all these countries, and that even print newspapers are still more widely used and seen as more important sources of news than social media. We identify a set of similarities in terms of the growing importance of social media as part of people's cross-media news habits, but also important country-to-country differences, in particular in terms of how widespread the more active and participatory forms of media use are. Surprisingly, these differences do not correspond to differences in levels of internet use, suggesting that more than mere availability shapes the role of social media as parts of people's news habits.

Keywords

News consumption, cross-media news, online news, news media, media use, comparative research, social media

Word count: 8,902

Introduction

The increasingly widespread use of social media like Facebook and Twitter is in the process of changing how news is produced, disseminated, and discussed. Studies of individual events, processes, and websites have led researchers to suggest that we are moving from a traditional “news cycle” dominated by journalists and professional sources to a more complex “information cycle” that integrates ordinary people in the ongoing construction and contestation of news (Chadwick 2011); that new “participatory cultures” increasingly complement existing consumer cultures (Jenkins 2006); and that the dichotomy between producers and users is being blurred by the rise of active “produsage” where social media users take the lead in content creation and dissemination of news (Bruns 2008).

But so far, we have only a preliminary understanding of (1) how important social media like Facebook and Twitter actually are as sources of news relative to other media, (2) the extent to which people use them to find news, (3) how many use them to engage in more participatory forms of news use, and (4) whether these developments are similar within countries with otherwise comparable levels of technological development. There is no question that social media can facilitate new flows of communication, enable people to engage and network around public issues, and to produce and share their own content, political or otherwise. Nor is there any question that they have done so in several important cases. But how important are social media relative to other ways of staying informed or other ways of engaging, and how many use them to stay informed or engage? This is less well understood, and as Sonia Livingstone rightly notes (2013: 28), researchers need to attend not only to the potentials afforded by new media and communication infrastructures, but also to study how people actually use them to stay informed about and engage with current affairs and public life. In this paper, we focus on key aspects of that question.

Based on data from the 2013 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, a cross-country online survey of news media use conducted by YouGov, we present a comparative analysis of the relative importance of social media in the news information cycle in eight countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States), covering a range of developed democracies with historically different media systems but in a global perspective high levels of internet use (ranging from 58% in Italy to 90% in Denmark, as opposed to an estimated 39% of the world’s population in 2013).¹ The comparative perspective is important, as several scholars have noted (e.g. Goggin and McLelland 2009; Hepp and Couldry 2009; Jensen 2013), to contextualize results from individual countries and to challenge the assumption that all countries are developing along a similar path. Developments in the United States, for example, are not necessarily indicative of where other countries are heading.

Across these eight countries, we identify a set of similarities in terms of the growing importance of social media as part of the cross-media news habits of especially younger generations, but also important country-to-country differences in terms of how widespread especially the more engaged and participatory forms of media use actually are, even in countries where more than half the population use Facebook and the like for other purposes. Overall, social media, despite growing use more generally, continue to play a relatively limited role as sources of news, even for the younger generations, but are seen as one amongst several important gateways to finding news online, especially by younger generations. While social media are clearly increasingly integral to the social life of many, our analysis shows that it is still only a

¹ International Telecommunication Union.

minority, even of the younger generation, that regularly use these widely disseminated tools to participate in sharing, commenting on, or producing news.

Throughout, we will document that these general trends are combined with considerable national variation in the role and relative importance of social media in the news information cycle. Surprisingly, the differences identified do not correspond in any simple way to differences in levels of internet use or standard indices of ICT development, suggesting that much more than mere availability shapes the role of social media in the news information cycle. Our results underline the continued importance of legacy media platforms, especially television, but also the online editions of established news media organizations in the news information cycle, as well as the need for more comparative analysis of how and why people integrate social media into their news media habits in different countries.

~~Our data allows only a snapshot of social media use for accessing, finding, and engaging with news in 2013 in a fast-changing media environment, and growing social media use and generational replacement points towards increased importance in the future. But even as the number of people using social media as part of their cross-media news habits change, we expect two important empirical patterns identified here to persist, namely (a) the gap found in all eight countries the wide use of social media for private purposes, and the more limited use for public purposes like accessing, finding, and sharing news and (b) the fact that there are considerable country to country variations in patterns of use, even within a most like sample of comparatively similar high income developed democracies.~~

In part one, we position our paper in relation to the growing literature on social media and news media use, drawing on work from both journalism studies, audience research, and media and communication studies more broadly. In part two, we explain the thinking behind the country selection for the comparative design as well as the advantages and limitations of the data used. In part three, we go through our results in terms of the relative importance of social media as a source of news, a way of finding news, and a way of engaging with news in each of the eight countries covered. In the final part, we discuss the implications of our findings.

Social media in the news information cycle

With internet use in affluent post-industrial democracies averaging around eighty percent and between half and one-third of the adult population in many of these countries using social media, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly integral parts of our media and communication environments in the so-called developed world.² Andrew Chadwick has provided one way of thinking about the implications for how people access news and engage with public affairs, describing the move from a mass media “news cycle” dominated by interactions between journalists and professional sources resulting in content subsequently disseminated in a one-way, centralized fashion to audiences, to a new mixed-media “news information cycle” in which ordinary people can use social media and other new internet tools to actively engage in commenting on, sharing, and producing news in a more interactive and decentered environment. Like many others (e.g. Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012; Hermida et al 2012), Chadwick (2011, 5) underlines that the rise of social media does not represent a complete break with the past mass media environment, but that new media and new forms of media use

² International Telecommunication Union, Pew Global Attitudes, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/12/12/social-networking-popular-across-globe/>

increasingly supplement (and only sometimes supplant) older and more established forms of media use:

Old media, primarily television, radio, and newspapers, are still, given the size of their audiences and their centrality to the life of the nation, rightly referred to as “mainstream,” but the very nature of the mainstream is changing. While old media organizations are adapting, evolving and renewing their channels of delivery, working practices, and audiences, wholly new media, driven primarily by the spread of the Internet, are achieving popularity and becoming part of a new mainstream. Politicians, journalists, and the public are simultaneously creating and adapting to these new complexities.

Here, Chadwick captures key parts not only of the change he describes as one from a mass media news cycle to a mixed media news information cycle. He also, with his emphasis on (1) existing media organizations’ adaptation, (2) the growing popularity of social media, and (3) their complex creative potential, identifies the three main ways in which scholars have analyzed this new environment and how it is connected with news use specifically.

First, a growing number of studies coming out of journalism studies focus on how existing media organizations are adapting to the new environment and integrating social media into their production and dissemination of content. (A similar line of work in political communication focuses on how political actors use these tools.) Building on earlier research on the integration of so-called “web 1.0” technologies in the daily routines of news organizations, scholars have studied how journalists in different contexts and countries use Facebook (Thurman and Schifferers 2012; Ju et al 2013), Twitter (e.g. Hermida 2010; Lasorsa et al 2012), and other social media (see Russell 2011; Singer et al 2011 for useful overviews) as part of their work. These studies have often focused on how journalists’ existing norms and values shape their use of new technologies, on how the practices and routines of existing news organization influence their decisions to adapt, develop, and use certain tools, and on how journalists and the news organizations they work for often struggle to deal with what they consider “unruly” users of more interactive and participatory media platforms (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Domingo et al 2008; Braun and Gillespie 2011). But despite these qualifications, media organizations have, in the words of Alfred Hermida and his co-authors (2012, 815) “embraced social media ~~as a way to distribute news and connect with audiences, providing a range of mechanisms for users to share and recommend news content.~~”

Second, audience researchers increasingly study social media both as a distinct media choice amongst others and as part of cross-media studies, assessing their popularity and their various roles in people’s wider media repertoires. Research focused specifically on social media as a distinct form of media use has dealt with how people use social media to engage with news (Purcell et al 2010; Hermida et al 2012) as well as with what motives and forms of gratification lie behind different forms of use, including the sharing and commenting on news stories (Lee and Ma 2012; Zúñiga et al 2012). (A burgeoning literature of course deals with the more widespread social uses of social media.) Studies have shown that even in countries where access is less and less of a barrier, variation in “web use skills” or “digital literacy” constitute a significant second-order digital divide, underlining that one should not presume universal adoption of new tools nor automatically assume that, for example, younger generations necessarily master the technologies at their disposal (Hargittai 2010; van Deursen and van Dijk 2011). But research adopting a broader cross-media perspective has placed social media as increasingly integral parts of the

repertoires of media users in various countries (Hasebrink and Popp 2006; Taneja et al 2012; Yuan 2013, Schröder 2011), focusing amongst other things on generational differences (Weibull and Westlund 2013).

Third, researchers from a range of different fields have focused on the complex creative potential of social media, including the question of whether the development of new media and communication infrastructures points towards a more participatory media environment in which ordinary people play a larger and more active role in the creation, dissemination, and discussion of news. Whereas journalism studies have historically focused on (professional) media production, and audience research has historically been concerned primarily with (lay) media consumption, these newer studies often focus on media use and especially new media's potential for more participatory forms of use (e.g. Bakardjieva 2005; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006). At a high level of abstraction, scholars have talked of a "networked public sphere" (Benkler 2006) and "mass self-communication" (Castells 2009). More granular studies have offered case studies of how "the people formerly known as the audience" sometimes engages actively in news, sharing, commenting on, and producing their own content (Rosen 2006), how fan communities preface a possible wider shift from older notions of passive media spectatorship to new forms of "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006), and how the development of accessible and open online platforms have enabled new forms of user-led content creation or "produsage", blurring traditional distinctions between production and consumption (Bruns 2008).

This paper builds on all these lines of inquiry to provide a comparative overview over how citizens in eight affluent, post-industrial democracies with different media systems but relatively high levels of internet access and social media use, use social media as part of their cross-media repertoires to access, find, and engage with news. ~~From journalism studies, we know that news media organizations have embraced (however grudgingly), social media as one of the platforms via which they try to reach people. From audience research, we know that different people have integrated social media into their cross-media media habits and repertoires in different ways and to different degrees. From discussion of new forms of participation we know that new technologies at least hold out the possibility of a more engaged, interactive, and participatory media environment. But the four questions raised at the outset of the paper have only begun to be addressed: (1) how important are social media as sources of news relative to other media, (2) how many people use them to find news, (3) how many use them to engage in more participatory forms of news use, and (4) to what extent are developments in these respects similar or different from country to country, even within a sample of, in a global perspective, relatively similar affluent post-industrial democracies? As and takes up Klaus Bruhn Jensen's has noted (2013: 338), call for "more international and comparative studies are needed... to move beyond universalistic hype about 'the internet' as such, and to evaluate its specific potential in those local and regional contexts where citizenship and democracy must be accomplished in practice."~~

Data and country selection

Data from the 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey gives us a unique opportunity to address these questions in a genuinely cross-country comparative perspective. The survey was conducted by YouGov using an online questionnaire at the end of January and beginning of February 2013. The sample of respondents is based on YouGov's panel and representative of the part of the population that has access to the internet in each country included here. The data was weighted

to targets set on age and gender, region, newspaper readership, and social grade to reflect the total population of each country. As the survey deals with news use, respondents who said they did not use any news in the past month were filtered out to ensure irrelevant responses do not adversely affect data quality. This category was between 2% and 4% in most countries but as high as 9% in the UK (see below) and brings the final sample down from above one thousand (two thousand in the UK and the US) to slightly below one thousand.

The advantages of using the Reuters Digital News Survey data are several. First, the study includes an extensive list of questions that capture news media use across platforms (broadcast, print, online) and types of use (frequency of access, relative importance, engagement, etc). This allows us to understand social media as part of the wider media environment. Second, the survey provides comparable data using the same questions at the same point in time across a range of different countries, affording a comparative analysis of the relative importance of social media in each.

The Reuters Digital News Survey, however, also has some limitations that need to be kept in mind. First, the data is based on an online panel. Therefore, while weighted to represent the online population, the respondents do not represent a random sample and results will under-represent the media habits of people who are not online, generally older people, less affluent, people with limited formal education.³ This is particularly important to keep in mind in terms of the data from countries like Italy and Spain where much of the population is still offline. Second, like with all surveys, social desirability bias and the like means that the data may not always provide an accurate picture of people's actual news media use. Third, the survey is focused on news in a fairly conventional sense and explicitly instructs respondents from the outset that the study is concerned with how they access information about "international, national, regional/local news and other topical events." The question has been phrased in this way to encourage respondents to differentiate between more general sources of information (when do the shops close, what year did Liverpool last win the Premiership?) and sources of news more narrowly defined as information about topical events. This could mean that the survey underestimates some new ways of gathering information about public affairs that people do not think of as "news" in this particular sense. But it is important to underline that the survey is not premised on a "old media" or "hard news" understanding of news, as it includes a (a) range of questions that directly address a number of ways of finding, accessing, and sharing information that are native to the online environment and (b) operates with a wide range of types of news, listing not only international news, business news, and political news, but also entertainment and celebrity news and news about sports.

In our analysis of the data, we have focused on how people report using social media as a way of accessing news, as a way of finding news, and as platforms for engaging in more participatory forms of news media use. To understand the *relative* importance of social media compared to other media platforms, we have also included data on television, the websites of

³ All surveys, whether face-to-face, paper-based, done by telephone, or conducted online, face problems of bias determined in part by practical constraints, in part by people's reluctance to take part, and in part by lack of information about the population. The Reuters Institute Digital News Survey relies on YouGov's online panels, weighted to represent the adult online population of each country covered here. YouGov use targeted quota sampling as opposed to random probability sampling and, like many other online panel surveys (e.g. Papathanassopoulos et al 2013) uses a matching procedure to deliver the equivalent of a probability sample on the basis of specified demographic attributes. As internet use grows and the problems of doing land-line based telephone surveys mount, this approach is becoming increasingly widespread in the social sciences due to its ability to produce robust data at a reasonable cost.

legacy news media organizations like broadcasters and newspapers, and print newspapers. We include data on television because most studies suggest this is still the most widely used and important source of news for most people, even in highly wired countries (e.g. [Schröder and Kobbernagel](#) AUTHOR 2010; Papanthanasopoulos et al 2013). We include data on news media websites because these organizations, despite the challenges they face in an increasingly competitive overall media environment, in many cases still tend to dominate online news provision ([Nielsen](#)AUTHOR 2012). We include print newspapers as a historically important platform that is under increasing pressure. These three points of comparison help us assess the relative importance of social media as part of people’s cross-media ways of accessing, finding, and engaging with news.

The eight countries we cover here allows for a broad comparison of countries that are all, in a global perspective, affluent, democratic, and highly wired (and in this sense a “most-similar” comparison), but also represent different historically developed media systems and different levels of technological development representing real variation. In terms of media system differences, the countries covered includes two countries with what the comparative media researchers Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) call “democratic corporatist” media systems characterized by a combination of strong commercial news media and strong public service media organizations (Denmark and Germany). It also includes two countries characterized by Hallin and Mancini as “polarized pluralist” media systems, with weaker and more politicized commercial and public service media (Italy and Spain), as well as one country with a “liberal” media system with strong commercial media and very weak public service media (the United States). Finally, it includes three countries that are harder to place in relation to Hallin and Mancini’s typology, namely France (which has some traits associated with the polarized pluralist model), Japan (which is not discussed in their work but has some traits associated with the democratic corporatist model) and the United Kingdom (which is sometimes categorized as liberal though it also has much in common with the democratic corporatist countries). In terms of technological development, all the eight countries covered have more levels of internet use well over the global average, but also different levels of overall technological development. Table 1 presents an overview of the survey data as well as data on the percentage of internet users, estimates of the percentage of Facebook users, and the International Telecommunication Union’s aggregate information and communication technology development indicator (IDI) for each country. The figures listed on “sample” is the total sample size, “final sample” includes only respondents who reported that they had used news at least once over the last month. All percentages reported throughout are as a percentage of adult (18+) online news users, and hence not representative of the total population.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The data provides only a snapshot of news media use in early 2013, in a rapidly changing media environment, and we know from single-country studies that the relative importance of different media platforms sometimes change substantially in the course of a few years (Purcell et al 2010, [Schröder and Kobbernagel](#)AUTHOR 2010). This point only further underlines the importance of following up on the few existing cross-country comparative news media studies conducted (e.g. Papanthanasopoulos et al 2013).

Social media as sources of news, means for finding news, and ways of engaging with news

In this section, we investigate the importance of social media as sources of news relative to other sources, their role in terms of how people find news online, and how many people use social media to engage in more participatory forms of news use. In each case, we will present data on all the eight countries covered here and discuss some of the main national similarities and differences.

Social media as a source of news: When asked “Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news?”, a sizeable minority in every country covered here mentions social media. Between a third (Denmark) and a sixth (France, Germany, and Japan) of all online news users name social media from a long range of options that also include television, radio, printed newspapers, the digital offerings of these legacy media as well as blogs and various pure-player websites like aggregators and online-only news organizations. (Keeping in mind that the data is representative of the online population only, the percentage for the population at large is in all likelihood lower, especially in Italy and Spain.) Considered in the context of the other sources of news people report having used in the last week, it is noteworthy that social media are, amongst online news users, less commonly consulted as a source of news than television, the websites of legacy news media organizations, or even printed newspapers in every single country covered.

Our data, however, provides information not simply about how many report *using* particular sources of news, but also which source, of the ones they report using, they consider their *most important* source. Table 2 includes data on television, the websites of established broadcasters and newspapers (“news media websites”), print newspapers, and social media on both use and importance. For each platform, the first column reports the percentage of all online news users in that country who report they have used the platform as a source of news in the last week. The second column reports the percentage of all online news users who identify the platform as their “main” or “most important” source of news. (Only respondents who report having used a given platform were given the opportunity to name it most important.) In parenthesis after the second column, for each platform, we have included a figure on how many, of those who report using the platform for news, also name it their most important source of news (i.e., 5-in-10 for television in Denmark, 1-in-10 for social media in the United States).

As is clear from table 2, television is not only far more widely *used* as a source of news than social media, it is also but also more frequently named people’s *most important* source of news. The responses further underline the continuing centrality of television in the news information cycle of even highly-wired nations with high levels of social media use (see Papathanassopoulos et al 2013). In most countries, at least three times as many report having used television as a source of news in the past week as report having used social media. Between 33 percent (Spain) and 57 percent (France) of all online news users report that television is their most important source of news. In all countries, as reported, at least half of those who *use* television as a source of news also considered it their *most important* source of news. Of the four platforms included here (radio has been excluded), the second most widely used source of news is news media websites. Like television, these sites are not only frequently mentioned as sources of news, but also often as the most important source of news.

Perhaps more surprisingly, in every country covered here, more people report having used print newspapers as a source of news in the last week than report having used social media, and in every country but France, significantly more people report that print newspapers is their main source of news than report social media as their main source of news. As documented by

the Pew Research Center and many marketing studies, very sizable portions of the adult population of every country covered here use social media regularly. But our data shows that many—despite widespread and often intense use for other purposes—do not use social media very often as a source of news and that those who do rarely consider social media their most important source of news.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The danger in reporting such aggregate figures is of course that they frequently paper over important differences, including generational ones. It is clear from many studies that younger generations have different news media habits than older generations, and this is particularly important when it comes to newer media like websites and especially social networking sites.

The sample size of the Reuters Digital News Survey limits our ability to break down the results by age group, because the number of respondents in any given age cohort is limited. With this caveat, and the considerable statistical margin of error that follows from it, we include below in table 3 an overview over what the 18 to 24 year old respondents reported as source of news they had used in the past week, and as their most important source of news of the ones they use.

We are well aware that the sample size prevents us from saying anything conclusive, but even keeping in mind the data limitations, we find it noteworthy that social media in every country covered here is identified as a source of news by fewer 18 to 24 year olds than report using television and the websites of news media organizations. Only in Denmark and the United States do significantly more 18-24 year olds report using social media as a source of news than report using printed newspapers—in the six other countries, the difference between social media and print newspapers are within the margin of error.

Finally, it is important to note that social media are not generally regarded as the main or most important source, even by those younger news media users who actually report using them. Only in France and the United Kingdom do marginally more of the younger respondents who report using social media as a source of news also identify them as their most important source than is the case in the population at large.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Overall, our data suggest that social media, even where they are widely used, still play a relatively modest role as a source of news, both in terms of frequency of use and how important respondents consider social media as a source of news. Even amongst respondents aged between 18 and 24, with the limitations that come with the small sample size in this age group, social media are not widely seen as an important source of news. In a way, this is not surprising. If people take “news” to mean professionally produced content, social media, after all, produce no news, they simply allow people to share news, comment on news, etc. While many news media organizations use social media as a platform for distributing their news content, people may well see the social networking sites more as gateways to this content than as sources of news. Therefore, we turn next to the question of how people find news online, allowing us to assess the role of social media in processes of news discovery.

Social media as a way of finding news: One of the reasons journalists and news media organizations have embraced social media as part of their distribution strategies is that these sites help drive traffic to websites as people recommend stories and click on links shared or liked by

their friends on Facebook and people they follow on Twitter (Hermida et al 2012, Ju et al 2013). The British newspaper the *Guardian*, for example, in late 2012 attracted an estimated thirty percent of its web traffic via Facebook alone.⁴ This idea, that people use social media less as a routine source of information than as a way of sharing and finding news also underlies some of the notions of information cycles, participatory cultures, and produsage briefly discussed above.

But how many people actually use social media specifically to find news? Table 4 provides an overview and allows us to compare how many online news users consider social networking sites (including both Facebook and Twitter in one option) one of their main ways of finding news online, relative to the number who report that branded websites (typically of legacy news media, i.e. *bbc.co.uk*, *spiegel.de*, etc) or search engines (overwhelmingly Google) are among their main ways of finding news online. Respondents were asked “thinking about how you find news online, which are the main ways that you come across news stories” and asked to choose up to five from twelve options. The distinction between using something as a “source” of news (the figures reported above) and as a way of “finding” news (the figures discussed here) is not clear-cut and depends on the respondents’ own interpretation. The two different phrasings were included in the questionnaire to capture both people who consider social media an integrated part of their routine news habits (“sources” of news) and people who, when they want to follow a particular story or issue, turn to social media (“finding” news).

We had expected that more people considered social media one of their main ways of finding news than routinely used social media as a source of news. The data does not bear this out. The number of people identifying social networking sites as one of the main ways in which they *find* news online is, in several countries, not significantly different from the number of people who report they have used social media as a source of news in the last week. Only in Italy and Spain significantly more people say social networking sites are amongst the main ways in which they find news online than say they have used social media as a source of news in the last week. In most of the countries the difference is small and within the margin of error.

While social media are undoubtedly one important way of finding news online for a sizable minority, in no country does a majority of online news users identify social networking sites as one of their main gateways to news on the internet. Comparison to the position of branded websites (typically of legacy news media organizations) and search engines (typically Google) is instructive here. Just as comparison to television and the like can contextualize the relative importance of social media as a source of news, comparison to these other pathways to news can give us a better understanding of the relative importance of social media as a way of finding news. In every country but Spain, significantly more online news users name search engines as one of the main ways they come across news online. In four of the countries covered—Denmark, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom, all countries with strong legacy news media organizations well-established online—branded news websites are more frequently named as one of the main ways of finding news online than social media are. In France, Italy, and Spain, all of which have much weaker legacy news media organizations, branded news sites are named as frequently or less frequently than social networking sites. This is the case in the United States too.⁵

⁴ www.guardian.co.uk/gnm-press-office/changing-media-summit-tanya-cordrey

⁵ With respect to the 18-24 year old respondents, keeping in mind the data limitations discussed above, news websites are as frequently mentioned as amongst the ways in which this younger generation find news online, social media are more frequently mentioned (and in two countries, Spain and the United States, more frequently mentioned than any other way of finding news) and, interestingly, search engines are *less* frequently mentioned.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Overall, our data lead us to suggest that while undoubtedly an important driver of attention and traffic online, even widely used social media like Facebook are perhaps somewhat less frequently used specifically as a way of finding *news* that is sometimes assumed.

Social media as a way of participating in the news information cycle: As has been the case with previous generations of digital tools (and indeed many other media and communication technologies), the rise of social media has been accompanied by a widespread hope that through interactivity and decentralization these tools would contribute to a democratization of media environments frequently seen as too one-way and too centralized in terms of how they facilitate communication about current affairs and engagement in public life to properly serve the needs of democratic societies and citizens (e.g. Benkler 2006). After a century in which largely one-way mass media like printed newspapers, radio, and television dominated our media environments, the rise of the internet and especially the development and dissemination of free and easy-to-use interactive blogging platforms and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (“web 2.0” tools) have the potential to dramatically change how media are used, adding a participatory or even production dimension to consumption practices (Jenkins 2006; Bruns 2007).

But, as Sonia Livingstone (2013) has rightly underlined (echoing Bertolt Brecht’s famous essay on the radio), we should not jump from the fact that social media potentially provide technological affordances for a far more participatory media environment than earlier mass media technologies to the assumption that they are in practice part of a more participatory media environment. Whether and how people who have the technical means to participate actually do so in practice is an empirical question, and here our data challenges the assumption that social media necessarily leads to more engaged forms of news media use.

As table 5 makes clear, in every one of the eight countries covered here, only a minority of respondents report that they actually use social media to participate in the news information cycle during an average week. Even amongst our sample of online news users, a majority seems to prefer relatively passive forms of news consumption coupled with—by far the most widely reported way of engaging with news coverage—offline conversations with friends and colleagues. Respondents were given a list of twelve ways of engaging with the news ranging from talking to friends and colleagues offline over various forms of web 1.0 forms of participation (sharing via emails, commenting on websites) to web 2.0 forms of participation (sharing via social networking sites, writing a blog). In four of the countries covered (Denmark, Japan, Italy, and Spain), more people report using web 2.0 tools like social networking sites to share news stories and comment on news stories than report using older web 1.0 tools. In four countries (France, Germany, the UK, and the US), web 1.0 and web 2.0 forms of participation are equally popular. Despite the high hopes that accompanied the rise of blogging some years ago, only between one (UK) and five (Italy) percent of online news users report blogging about current affairs during an average week.

Interestingly, in every single country, more people report talking with friends and colleagues about news during an average week than report engaging in any kind of internet-enabled participatory news use. It is noteworthy that the differences in how many report talking offline with other people about news are not matched by differences in how many use online tools to participate in news coverage. Italy, Spain, and the US have relatively more respondents engaging online. Denmark and the United Kingdom have fewer, comparable to the number

active in France and Germany, where offline participation is lower.⁶ That offline participation through conversation with friends and colleagues remains by some margin the most widespread form of engaging actively with news does not mean, of course, that the emergence of online ways of engaging has made no difference or no contribution. Between a fifth (Denmark) and a third (Italy) of online news users only engage in more participatory news practices online, suggesting that for a sizable minority in all these countries, web 1.0 and 2.0 tools have indeed increased the number of people who regularly engage with news.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Overall, our data suggests that even in countries where about half the population use social networking sites like Facebook, and where a very large proportion of the online population are also online news users, only a minority chose to use social networking sites to engage in participatory forms of news media use on a regular basis. In very broad terms, we can identify two countries with very low levels of web 2.0 engagement with news (Japan and Germany), three countries with slightly higher but still modest levels of engagement (Denmark, France, and the UK), and three countries with higher levels of engagement (Italy, Spain, and the United States).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have used data from the 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey to assess the relative importance of social media as a way of accessing, finding, and engaging with news in eight affluent post-industrial democracies. Building on a growing literature dealing with how social media like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly integral to what Andrew Chadwick (2011) has called the “news information cycle” as news media organizations increasingly embrace these tools, more and more people use them, and they sometimes enable new “participatory cultures” (Jenkins 2006) and forms of “produsage” (Bruns 2008), we have compared their relative importance to other parts of contemporary cross-media repertoires and identified significant similarities and differences across the eight countries included here.

Overall, we have shown that social media at this point still play a relatively limited role as sources of news—less widely used and less important than printed newspapers in all eight countries—that they in some cases play a somewhat larger role as a way of finding news, and that only a minority use them to engage in more participatory forms of news use like sharing, commenting on, or publishing their own stories. Social media (as the name suggest), seems to be more frequently used for social purposes than for public purposes. Even in 2013 in countries with very high levels of internet access and social media use, more engaged and participatory forms of media use via social networking sites are a minority phenomenon. Of the eight countries covered here, Germany and Japan have relatively low levels of social media use for news purposes, Italy, Spain, and to some extent the United States have higher levels, and Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom lie somewhere in between. We have made no attempt here to account for these differences, but documenting them only further underline the need for

⁶ Our data, with the limitations that come with the small sample size, suggest that 18 to 24 year olds in most countries only marginally more frequently use social networking sites to share or comment on news stories, and otherwise differ very little from the general population. Only in the United Kingdom and the United States are the differences larger than the margin of error.

additional cross-country comparative analysis (e.g. Goggin and McLelland 2009; Hepp and Couldry 2009; Jensen 2013). It is striking that the United States, which many scholars have argued is quite different from most other developed democracies (Nielsen, 2012), and Italy and Spain, the two case countries that comes closest to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) "polarized pluralized" ideal type, are the cases that most consistently differ from the other countries included here.

Our argument is not that social media play no role or are completely insignificant. It is simply that sometimes both academic and public discussions of their relative importance for contemporary media users suggest that the glass is full to the brim when in fact the data suggest more of a glass-half-full-half-empty situation. Social media are clearly important to the news habits of a significant minority, but they still remain a minority. Our analysis here provides a comparative snapshot of a fast-changing environment, and we are conscious that single-country studies have shown how the relative importance of new media can sometimes change over just a few years (Schröder and KobbernagelAUTHOR 2010). But it is worth noting that social media for many people in the countries covered here are not particularly "new" media anymore, as they have been integral parts of wider cross-media repertoires for years. This makes the significant gap between the large number of people who use Facebook and the like for social purposes, and the smaller number of people who use social networking sites for more publicly-oriented purposes like accessing, finding, and engaging with news particularly striking.

Longitudinal data is needed to pursue a comparative analysis of how this gap will evolve, and the study of similarities and differences in the relative importance of social media in the news information cycle in different countries probably need a stronger and more direct connection here both to the uses and gratifications-tradition of media use and to more general studies of relations between media use and differences in social and cultural factors, political systems, and media systems. It is clear from the striking differences between relatively low levels of social media use for news in technologically highly developed countries like Germany and Japan, and much more widespread use of social media use for news in technologically slightly less developed countries like Italy and Spain that technology alone does not drive developments in how many people use social media for publicly-oriented purposes. The wider perspectives are clear: one should never assume that access equals use or that potential equals practice (Livingstone 2013), nor that trends in, for example, the United States necessarily foreshadow developments elsewhere. The internet, like other media platforms, calls for continual comparative empirical analysis to document similarities and differences in developments in media use and to identify the different structuring forces that shape our media systems.

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Table 1. Data on countries covered

	Sample	Final sample	Media system	Internet users	Facebook users	IDI score (2011)
Denmark	1024	1007	Democratic corporatist	90%	55%	8.29
France	1016	973	(Polarized pluralist)	80%	39%	7.30
Germany	1099	1062	Democratic corporatist	83%	32%	7.39
Italy	1003	965	Polarized Pluralist	67%	44%	6.28
Japan	1004	978	(Democratic corporatist)	80%	14%	7.76
Spain	1016	979	Polarized Pluralist	58%	32%	6.62
United Kingdom	2308	2078	(Liberal)	84%	52%	7.75
United States	2170	2028	Liberal	78%	53%	7.48

Data: 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey (sample), Hallin and Mancini (2004) on media systems, International Telecommunication Union and Internet World Stats for internet users, Facebook users, and IDI score.

Table 2. Sources of news: use and importance (all online news users)

	Television		News media websites		Print newspapers		Social media	
	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>
DEN	85%	44% (5-in-10)	69%	29% (4-in-10)	47%	11% (2-in-10)	31%	3% (1-in-10)
FRA	84%	57% (7-in-10)	50%	13% (3-in-10)	31%	4% (1-in-10)	18%	3% (2-in-10)
GER	82%	43% (5-in-10)	47%	15% (3-in-10)	55%	16% (3-in-10)	18%	2% (1-in-10)
ITA	74%	39% (5-in-10)	60%	22% (4-in-10)	50%	11% (2-in-10)	27%	5% (2-in-10)
JAP	69%	35% (5-in-10)	13%	13% (all)	59%	19% (3-in-10)	17%	2% (1-in-10)
SPA	72%	33% (5-in-10)	65%	29% (4-in-10)	52%	13% (3-in-10)	28%	5% (2-in-10)
UK	79%	41% (5-in-10)	64%	29% (5-in-10)	57%	15% (3-in-10)	20%	2% (1-in-10)
US	72%	43% (6-in-10)	55%	19% (3-in-10)	41%	9% (2-in-10)	27%	4% (1-in-10)

Data: 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey, question 3 “Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news?” and question 4 “You say you’ve used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is most important or which would you say is your main source of news?”

Table 3. Sources of news: use and importance (18-24 year olds)

	Television		News media websites		Print newspapers		Social media		N
	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	<i>Source of news</i>	<i>Most important source</i>	
DEN	67%	32% (5-in-10)	66%	37% (6-in-10)	34%	7% (2-in-10)	50%	7% (1-in-10)	107/107
FRA	79%	52% (7-in-10)	57%	21% (4-in-10)	27%	2% (1-in-10)	20%	5% (3-in-10)	108/108
GER	68%	34% (5-in-10)	53%	33% (6-in-10)	37%	9% (2-in-10)	33%	2% (1-in-10)	110/110
ITA	60%	27% (5-in-10)	67%	23% (3-in-10)	41%	8% (2-in-10)	39%	9% (2-in-10)	90/90
JAP	56%	27% (5-in-10)	11%	11% (all)	35%	10% (3-in-10)	29%	8% (3-in-10)	88/88
SPA	45%	21% (5-in-10)	72%	41% (6-in-10)	32%	8% (3-in-10)	35%	7% (2-in-10)	115/115
UK	57%	24% (4-in-10)	77%	46% (6-in-10)	41%	9% (2-in-10)	40%	7% (2-in-10)	249/249
US	59%	20% (3-in-10)	64%	34% (5-in-10)	25%	7% (3-in-10)	45%	5% (1-in-10)	198/198

Data: 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey, question 3 “Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news?” and question 4 “You say you’ve used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is most important or which would you say is your main source of news?” N reports the number of respondents between 18 and 24 who responded to Q3 and Q4, respectively.

Table 4. Main ways of finding news online (all online news users)

	News websites	Search engines	Social networking sites
Denmark	55%	30%	22%
France	16%	45%	18%
Germany	32%	40%	15%
Italy	35%	49%	38%
Japan	28%	39%	12%
Spain	38%	40%	45%
United Kingdom	34%	24%	17%
United States	20%	33%	30%

Data: 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey, question 10 “Thinking about how you find news online, which are the main ways that you come across news stories? (Please choose up to five)”

Table 5. Ways of participating in the news information cycle (all online news users)

	Web 2.0			Web 1.0		Web-only	Offline	
	<i>Share a story via SNS</i>	<i>Comment on a news story via SNS</i>	<i>Write a blog</i>	<i>Share a story via email</i>	<i>Comment on a news story via news website</i>	<i>Online-only participation</i>	<i>Talk with friends</i>	<i>None of these</i>
Denmark	13%	11%	2%	10%	5%	17%	49%	34%
France	14%	10%	2%	18%	8%	28%	34%	38%
Germany	8%	8%	2%	10%	8%	21%	39%	40%
Italy	33%	26%	5%	19%	16%	35%	50%	15%
Japan	8%	7%	4%	4%	4%	23%	17%	60%
Spain	30%	27%	3%	24%	8%	29%	55%	16%
United Kingdom	11%	10%	1%	10%	7%	19%	44%	37%
United States	22%	21%	4%	23%	16%	23%	51%	26%

Data: 2013 Reuters Digital News Survey, question 13 “During an average week in which, if any, of the following ways do you share or participate in news coverage? (Please select all that apply)”