

The impact of search engines, social media and tablets on the news

How journalism can reinvent itself in the digital era

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In 2009 many news organizations around the world collapsed in an unprecedented crisis, caused ultimately by the general economic crisis of the same year, but behind which hides a much more complex problem. Many publishers, journalists and people in the business think that the main culprit is the web. Firstly because websites like Amazon, eBay, Craigslist and any other online shopping website have subtracted power to news org in the advertising market. Secondly, and most of all, because of newspapers themselves that decided to distribute their contents for free on the web. From then on, readers have started to buy less and less copies of printed newspapers and got used to collecting news online, which is much more practical, immediate and customizable. Naturally, this behavior has increased after the economic crisis and the consequent need to save money.

The advantage is that news have never been so widespread, various and social. The drawback is that those who are creating the news, the content, are not earning enough money from it. The matter has become ever more controversial with the success of news aggregators like Google News. The argument over the copyright of articles has lasted for years and has still not come to a conclusion. News organizations know that Google News, Yahoo News and other news aggregators are important showcases for their products and that they are actually great promoters of their content and their brand. So, even though it means letting other organizations use their content for free, they have to

concede. Plus, from the day it was created, Google News has helped the struggling newspapers reinventing themselves, by projecting several useful instruments for news websites.

The question is, now, why is Google making such a great effort to help news organizations? The answer is quite simple: without the content created by others - in this case news organizations, blogs and journalists around the web - Google News, and Google in general, would be totally useless - because it would actually be empty, blank pages with no information. Every single title appearing on the Google News homepage belongs to news organizations, journalists or also independent citizens; and when somebody clicks on those titles they get redirected to the original source. In this sense Google is not taking possession of the content, but simply putting them in the service of readers. Easy to say, but hard to explain to journalists and publishers, who often feel defrauded. In fact, this is the purpose Google News was created for. Krishna Bharat, the father of Google News, has said in many interviews that when he founded Google News in 2002, there was no news aggregator. It was possible to look for information and articles with search engines like Google, but there was not a dedicated page that collected all the articles from all over the world related to a particular topic, event or personality. So Google News was programmed to be nothing more and nothing less than a useful instrument in the hands of readers, redirecting them to the sources of the articles they are interested in.

Krishna Bharat, Eric Schmidt and Hal Varian, chief economist at Google, have developed over the years a list of suggestions, guidance, points on which it could be possible to build an efficient online newspaper. To begin, their theory of the

newspaper model is divided into three branches: distribution, involvement and monetization.

As for distribution, Google is investing a lot on tablets, e-readers, smartphones: the Android OS is extremely successful, competing with the leader in the mobile market, Apple iOS. Tablets are pretty much functional for reading the news because they can be interactive, mix different kinds of media languages (texts, videos, photos, graphics). Furthermore, Google has worked a lot on the way pieces of news and articles are ordered in Google News homepage. Functionalities like "Standout" and "Editors' Picks" were created so that publishers themselves could select the most important news to show on the Google News homepage. Tested with relevant organizations such as NYT, Wall Street Journal, Reuters, ProPublica, The Guardian, they have brought great benefits to Google and to news orgs.

Talking of involvement, the main aim is differentiation. Too often articles from different online newspapers look almost identical. This has to change. Originality and uniqueness are fundamental to gain the reader's loyalty, and consequently its payment. Also, online newspapers should be extremely customizable. Readers should be able to model their home page according to their interests, their reading habits, their job, the place they live in. The Google News homepage is structured following this principle. From July 2011 it is possible for readers to collect badges that measure their interest on certain topics and to design their homepage accordingly. Moreover, news pages should be similar to Wikipedia pages. Which is, no more piles of different articles on a specific topic, but a single constantly updated page on the subject. The first try was "Living Stories" (2009), a constantly updated collection of articles on a selected topic.

Experimentation and transparency are the two watchwords that Google follows in its work. Google has a permanent beta philosophy, meaning it is always experimenting new solutions and never declares anything definitive. Plus, every program they launch, especially in the past with Google Labs, is directly testable by ordinary users. They also have a blog, the Google News Blog, where users are informed about new programs and features developed. Google would like to transfer those two watchwords to the news, inviting journalists to experiment and keep in direct contact with readers, for instance using social networks and showing the "behind the scenes" of their work.

Moving to the last branch, monetization, it is known that Google has achieved several goals in this area. Advertising is probably the piece de resistance of the company. Programs such as AdSense can be successfully used by everyone, bloggers or news organizations. Over the years ads have improved in terms of layout and selection of target.

But a strong brand cannot survive only thanks to advertising. Newspapers need their online readers to pay for content. Bharat suggests news orgs use the so called "freemium" content formula: part of the website - mainly hard news, articles that the reader can find anywhere - for free, whereas reports, investigations, exclusives on payment.

Google has recently developed One Pass, a payment service that allows publishers to choose between a set of payment methods (for a single article, subscription, daily pass) and allows users to read the content they paid on every mobile or personal computer they have.

A new method, a hybrid between payment and advertising, is Consumer Surveys, a program companies can use to pay for inserting surveys in newspapers' websites.

The new devices. The number of people owning a tablet and/or a smartphone is growing at a high rate.

On one hand, these new devices represent for news organizations a great opportunity: costs of distribution are cut; the potential audience increases; the contact with readers and their habits becomes more direct; publishers can offer their readers a more complete and involving experience.

On the other hand, tablets and smartphone represent a new challenge for the newspaper industry. And to avoid what happened with personal computers, news orgs need to make a fast and conscientious move.

The three devices are not considered alternative ways of getting news: who owns the three of them, a percentage growing faster every day, uses all of them to get news.

However, there is a slight difference in the consumer behavior between tablet users on one side and personal computer and smartphone users on the other. When people get news with the tablet they usually do it, according to statistics, in the evening, in the leisure time after work, and it takes them longer sessions, whereas people use smartphones and personal computer mostly during the day, at work, to give a quick peep to newspaper websites. Moreover, the brand - still the main criteria digital readers use to choose their news source - is more important in the behavior of tablet users, mainly because tablet readers tend to download and use official applications. Nevertheless, what emerges from surveys is that people tend to transfer their behavior from a device to another; and the different platform does not affect in a strong way their behavior. If a reader prefers to look for news searching for key words, they will search key words no matter which device they

are using. Same thing for those who prefer to visit newspapers' websites directly.

As for monetization, the rise of tablet and smartphone has not solved anything yet. Mobile advertising is growing at a high rate, even though publishers receive only part of the money earned with ads, but readers are still not paying for the service. Actually, there is a positive certainty, which is that 27% of those who read news on newspapers' applications pay for the service. So, that is the target on which to focus.

In the meantime, computer industry is improving a lot. Recently, Apple filed a patent on a iPad with a hybrid LCD-eInk screen, which could allow readers to watch videos and pictures in high definition, and then switch to eink when they want to read a textual content, making it a much easier and relaxing experience - reading long articles in LCD can get quite tiring after a while.

Social networks and media. As Zuckerberg said, before social networks were created, there was no place on the web for people. Basically, what you are most interested in is the life of your closest friends and relatives, he stated. And before Facebook there was no chance you could get to know information about your friends' lives.

As for the news, Facebook has created a platform where people belonging to the same community can share articles, comment on them, debate.

In Facebook, news is what people share the most. Many journalists like Gina Chen reckon that newspapers should learn from Facebook that the act of sharing an article is part of the piece of news. Moreover, they should use the Facebook criteria of number of shares to hierarchically order the pieces of news.

Facebook friends have become news authorities, and news orgs have to take part to the communities where people share contents; online communities and social networks are becoming services that guide and affect the entire digital life of people. There is no way out of it: they are like the air online, sentenced the blogger Charlene Li.

As a consequence, publishers and journalists had to change their workflow, introducing new roles like the social media editor. A figure now present in all major newspapers, they have the task of monitoring the social media world and adapt the newspaper to what is new. But most of all, the social media editor and their team have the aim to create a community between the readers and a conversation about the news.

Facebook is actively cooperating in this process and recently launched some useful programs. One of them is Connect, a tool that allows users to logon to different websites with their Facebook account, without having to visit the social network homepage. This feature allows a not anonymous participation and a greater involvement. Google+ and Twitter launched similar applications. Twitter is the favorite social media among professionals. Journalists like to have a personal profile to keep in direct contact with readers. Facebook understood that and recently inaugurated a subscribe button very similar to the Twitter's.

Another relevant Facebook feature is OpenGraph, that allows newspapers to create so called social readers, pages in which people can read and share with friends the articles within the social network. OpenGraph was a huge success, especially among young people. And now almost every big news org has an OpenGraph application.

Huffington Post is at the moment the most social online newspaper. Huffington Post readers have a badge that collects points every time a user shares a content on a social network; they also have the opportunity to be updated on topics they choose within Facebook or Twitter.

Another issue raised by the rise of social media is the question of ethics. What's the journalism place in social media? Even though with social media everyone can give a news, the reporters' role remains crucial, at least from an ethical point of view. First of all, the journalist has to check the reliability of the sources. Then, they should keep an eye on the public interest and bring their values, accuracy, impartiality, equity and fairness, into the social media. But to make this possible, it is necessary for journalists to stop looking at social media as a threat and to accept that readers have obtained power in the process of creating and spreading news.

Many publishers still consider Twitter a competitor and force their journalists to inform first their staff before writing something on Twitter. More progressive publishers, instead, only ask their journalists to not write on Twitter anything that could spoil the newspaper's reputation.

Now, before getting to the conclusion, it is time to analyze some statistics about the use of social network and media. Contrary to what one might expect, despite all the attention devoted to social media, the number of people who get news on Facebook and Twitter is still low. Generally who owns more than one digital device tends to get news more frequently on social media and networks. But between Twitter and Facebook users there are some major differences. First, 39% of those who get news on Twitter say they would not have found them otherwise, a percentage that decreases for Facebook users. Plus, on Twitter

recommendations come to a greater extent from official sources. Then, Twitter users are more mobile, younger and more educated. Moving to the conclusions, it is undisputed that social media encourage the involvement of readers, but is this going to bring money to news orgs? Is it really worth it? Not all readers look with favor on social media. Moreover, there is a problem of allocation of revenue with the giants of social networking.

Conclusions. What most worries the world of journalism today is how to create value in a world where everyone is potentially a journalist. The first fact to face is that readers are nowadays divided into niches, small communities of people with common interests and purposes. Consequently, newspapers need to specialize on a topic or a locality. This way, newspapers would be closer to their readers and their needs, offering not only news but also a real service to citizens. Apart from this, it is important to renew the product, the work of journalists. A great way to create a valuable product would be to dedicate web pages to a specific topic, giving the reader not only breaking news but also the background and an overview of the story. Too often readers skip an article because they do not understand it since they lack the necessary knowledge about the topic. Of course, news orgs should not drop the breaking news activities, because they are fundamental to strengthen the brand. But there is no way they are going to get paid for it, so it is necessary to develop such more complex forms of journalism. In order to strengthen the brand, newspapers should as well be present in social networks, radios, on television, in app stores, they should organize special events to promote their product.

But to witness a similar revolution in journalism, it is first necessary that journalists themselves develop skills in technology, management, marketing, communication. Universities

around the world are engaging courses for this purpose. In Italy we are still behind in terms of digital culture. In addition, the journalistic class is extremely conservative. But evolution is indispensable and almost all major newspapers are becoming more and more social; independent online newspapers are growing and creating communities of loyal readers.