



Prosuming news in an unbounded media landscape

A study of young adults

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores acts of news prosumption in a landscape where traditional business models of media companies are challenged by new consumption patterns. It focuses on young adult consumers of the Internet generation, whose ways to relate to news media can be seen as symptomatic for the broader shift of news consumption from passively received, standardized news to increasingly individualised and socially shared content. This context illuminates nuances of prosumption and provides new theoretical and managerial insight into the activities that consumers engage in when consuming news. The paper draws on data from consumer diaries, followed up with in-depth interviews. A typology of six consumer profiles in news prosumption - metaphorically termed the bumblebee, the window peeker, the researcher, the sponge, the relayer and the megaphone - is presented, highlighting the variety in which consumers engage in personalized assembly, usage and spread of news content.

Introduction

Media consumption is currently undergoing major changes, fuelled by new, unbounded behavioural patterns related to increasing digitalization, implying blurred or even erased borders between producers and consumers of media content. Particularly the so called Internet generation's (Sirén, Leino & Nissinen, 2018) or generation C, as in content (Hardey, 2011) media consumption is characterised by a multichannel presence of several social and other web-based media, which are used in increasingly individualized and socially interactive ways (Sirén et al, 2018; Hermida, 2010). Young adults thus constitute an interesting target group, both from a conceptual point of view, and for the purpose of managerially responding to changes in media consumption, which is characterized by a shift from commercial news products by professional news agencies to so called participatory (Bowman & Wills, 2003; Goode 2009) or citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2004).

In our study, we approach this changing media landscape and its emerging forms of news consumption through the conceptual lens of prosumption, i.e. seeing production and consumption processes as interrelated (see Toffler, 1980; Ritzer &

Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2014). We take the perspective of young adult consumers and explore how their news consumption goes beyond passively consuming acts into forms of prosumption. Based on our findings, we propose a typology of six news prosumption profiles, labelled the Bumblebee, the Window Peeker, the Researcher, the Sponge, the Relayer, and the Megaphone. These profiles illuminate how and why consumers engage in personalized assembly, usage and spread of news content. The study contributes to the understanding of the concept of prosumption at a more fine-grained level and demonstrates the variation of prosumption behaviours from active to passive.

The reframed role of consumers in news processes

Boosted by the effects of the technological developments in the last decades, the interest in consumers' changed roles, productive activities, participation and value (co)creation has received considerable interest among consumer and service scholars (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Cova & Dall'i, 2009; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Arnould et al 2006; Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder 2011; Moeller, Ciuchita, Mahr, Odekerken-Schröder & Fassnacht, 2013, and Dong & Sivakumar, 2017). To provide a conceptual background for understanding how news consumption is in change, we will in this section discuss how prior literature has addressed the notion of active and participating consumers, thus making the acts of consumption extend to prosumption.

Consumer work can be seen as taking over productive tasks e.g. in the form of self-service, and participating in innovation or customization (Dujarier, 2016). This implies labour that consumers carry out for the company or for the benefit of its brand in a voluntary and often unpaid manner. Dong & Sivakumar (2017) suggest a categorization into mandatory, replaceable, and voluntary forms of customer participation. In the news context, the interesting dimensions are particularly the last two, i.e. how customers through their voluntary activities can enhance firm-provided services, and/or replace firm-provided parts of the service process or even whole services with their own and their peers' work; something that prior literature has referred to as self-production (Troye & Supphellen, 2012; Thi Xuan Mai & Otta Olsen (2016).

From a sociological perspective, Dujarier (2016) distinguishes between three types of consumer work: directed self-production, collaborative co-production, and organizational work. The first category refers to self-service activities where the supplier directs production and provides consumers with tools and support for it. Beyond traditional forms of self-service, such work may according to Dujarier (2016) involve enabling and prescribing personalization or dissemination, as well as co-operation with peers using one's social links. In the news context, this manifests itself in the range of social media sharing buttons that news texts are accompanied by, which encourage consumers to continue the work initiated by firm-provided content. The second category, collaborative coproduction, aligns with the notion of unpaid work, which generates profit for the provider e.g. in the form of user-

generated content. In the news context, this may take the form of e.g. eyewitness footage of events, or the interactive commentaries and discussions among consumers that constitute a supplement to editorial content. What Dujarier (2016) labels as organizational work, implies consumer activity in choosing the right products, services, and suppliers (Schwartz, 2004), or in the case of news, the best and most trustworthy sources of information. In a context where consumption is shifting from ready-packaged newspaper subscriptions and routinely followed broadcasts, this type of compiling activity becomes increasingly interesting to understand, as it like Dujarier (2016) puts it, reverses the traditional business transaction as consumers try to match their requests with the offers available, be they freely available, or services that the customer pays for.

While the emergence and spread of social media has raised the relevance of consumer participation to a completely new level, the theoretical roots of the notions of consumer work, participation and prosumption stretch further beyond these technological developments (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Drawing on Toffler (1980) who discussed the societal shift away from separated processes of production and consumption characteristic of the industrial era, Ritzer (2014, p. 132) posits that "we have always been prosumers", only in different forms today compared to the e.g. pre-industrial era. He even claims that pure production or pure consumption do not even exist without some of the other; that these processes always interpenetrate and thus, he proposes understanding them along a prosumption continuum, ranging from prosumption-as-production to prosumption-as-consumption. (Ibid, p. 10-12).

Indeed, while the present technologies and social media offer rich possibilities for production processes, there is also evidence that not all consumers automatically utilize the possibility to take on the active consumer roles the technologies enable (Heinonen, 2011). Rather, research into user-generated content has suggested a dichotomy of active posters versus passive lurkers (Schlosser, 2005), and identified different uses and motivations for different purposes in participation and content generation (Shao, 2008; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2010; Heinonen, 2011).

The activity of news sharing in social media (e.g. through reposting or retweeting) is a particularly interesting facet of productive activities. Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling (2015) offer a useful literature review of news sharing studies. In their "diagnosis" of current state of this research and suggestions for future focal areas, they highlight among other things the contradictory perceptions of sharing processes in being both democratized and enabling, and self-serving and status driven, thus raising an interesting paradox to be further studied. Moreover, they conclude that sharing behaviours cannot be explained only by personal traits and the content, but that the personal social networks at large should be more considered. Production activities in the form of sharing, should thus be examined against a broader consumer context, beyond individual acts. Moreover, Kümpel et al. (2015) recognise a lack of cultural context understanding in existing research, calling for more situation sensitive approaches.

The intertwining of the production and consumption processes and blurred roles between consumers, producers and distributors specifically in the news context has also been acknowledged and addressed within communications and journalism research, although under different terminological labels. The journalistic practices of ordinary people in creating, collecting, commenting on, and disseminating news has been termed citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2004), ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010) or participatory journalism (Bowman & Wills, 2003). These highlight horizontal participation in peer-to-peer interactions in interactive media ecosystems (Goode, 2009; Hermida, 2010). Dickens, Couldry & Fotopoulou (2015) also identify consumer roles beyond mere collection and dissemination of content produced by traditional news agencies.

Consumers acting as "community reporters" imply a structural shift of producer roles within news processes. Such news consumers have according to Dickens et al (2015) an ethos of production that is grounded in critical consumption of news and an evolving practice of skill-sharing and mutual recognition, which resonates with what has also been found within studies of brand communities and consumer empowerment within them (e.g. Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Bruns (2008; 2016) addresses this type of more quasi-professional production processes of consumers within a more communal, Web 2.0 context by suggesting produsage as an alternative term to prosumption, emphasising potential participants as (active) users rather than (passive) consumers of content and information. Bruns's (2016) idea of produsage includes openness to collaboratively develop informational content, multi-headed hierarchy based on contribution-based status, a continuously ongoing development of content and form, and intellectual property based on creative commons.

We conclude that extant research on the changing role of consumers, including attempts to understand how also the act consumption could be reframed, is vast. The term prosumption sets to infuse the act of production with consumption, referring to that consumers by various behaviours engage in the production of a good or a service, often within an ongoing relationship with a service provider. Considering the unboundedness of media consumption among young adults, we propose that in the news media context, the term prosumption implies nuances of combined consumption and production that present conceptualizations perhaps not cover to the full. Tentatively, and for the purpose of this study, we refer to news prosumption as a process where the consumer with varying levels of activity embeds themselves and engages in the news scape. We focus on three aspects of this process; the compilation, use and sharing of news.

Research approach

Methodologically, this article applies an inductive research approach where qualitative data was gathered from thirteen informants. Due to the explorative character of this study we departed from a convenience sample of university undergraduates, however with a certain degree of purposefulness (Silvermann

2001, p. 104). We sought the views of young adults with presumably more social and interactive types of media behaviour, but without wishing to impose too strict *à priori* categorisations. While the informants were fairly homogeneous regarding age and educational level, they exhibited slightly differing backgrounds and interests.

The data that the informants provided is twofold. We call the first part *photo-elicited touchpoint documentation*. The informants employed media diaries (as a form of consumption diaries, see Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003; Conrath, Higgins & McClean 1983) to record during a period of three days what type of news they encountered, in which situations and from which sources. Moreover, they were instructed to reflect upon potential retrieving and sharing activities related to news in their online/offline communities. In addition to the written diary notes, the informants took screenshots of specific news posts capturing their attention. In this, documentation adhered to the principles of event-contingent diary designs (Bolger et al. 2003; Heinonen 2011) where informants report occurrences of specific events rather than fixed or random interval assessments. Being focused on news, the diaries also had the character of activity diaries (Vermaas & Van de Wijngaert, 2004) which focus on specified activities only.

This kind of data offers an account of the mundane, practical activities of consumers in how they encounter and share news enabled an ethnographically inspired, emic view. It describes the empirical world through the perspective of the informants and without the researchers imposing their own frameworks early on (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 138). This documentation thus enabled windows into the informants' news-related behaviours as they unfolded, where the informants themselves made the analytic judgements of what constituted news and what was significant enough to be included.

In ethnographic research, initial observations from natural settings are often complemented with other data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 141). In this study we used the diaries as a springboard for generating the second part of data – the in-depth interviews. That is, the interviews enabled us to use the glimpses of practice documented in the diaries and screenshots as points of reference when deepening our understanding of news prosumption. Accordingly, all interviews followed an individually adapted schema, even if the grounds were similar. The contents of the individual diary entries were discussed in order to gain a more elaborated perception of the context of these photo-elicited touchpoints regarding the informants' news prosumption. In addition, general background questions relating for instance to media usage habits were also covered to further contextualise the individual informants' accounts.

The in-depth interviews lasted 30-90 minutes and they were recorded and transcribed. The analytical process in terms of identifying behavioural patterns, similarities and categories in the informant accounts, began already during the interview phase and continued throughout the transcribing, reading, processing and writing stages. Our interpretations of how the informants both actively and/or

passively engaged in news prosumption - the six prosumption profiles - emerged as a result of diving into the consumer cases individually, but also by comparing the similarities and differences between them, following the analytical logic of a combined within-case and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989). The script for the analysis was initially rather open-ended in line with our inductive research approach. As the theoretical framing of the study gradually became more precise, it enabled interpretation of the empirical accounts along more conceptually rooted dimensions.

News prosumption profiles among young adults

In this section we introduce six news prosumption profiles identified in the empirical data. As a starting point, we first briefly discuss what the informants consider to be news, i.e. what is the object of prosumption that informants describe.

In terms of **content**, the informants regarded news as information a person was not aware of from before. This included novelty and relevance for oneself, e.g. "...News for me is something that I didn't know before.... I mean...it can be an old piece of news for someone else, but still new to me.". The scope of relevance varied from the individual to local or global societal levels.

Another dimension of news concerns the **source** of the news – who provides it? As one of the informants concluded: "...the scope of news has become much broader...it is not only professional news agencies and their newspapers or broadcasts anymore...". Our informants consider peer-provided to be as valid as professional journalism, which corresponds with the notions of the participatory and collective media landscape discussed in communications and journalism research (Goode, 2009; Dickens et al 2015; Hermida, 2010).

The third dimension of the news construct relates to **channels** for the distribution of news. Aligned with the above notion that professional journalists can no longer reserve the right to produce news, the channels where consumers search for news are no longer in the control of traditional professional news agencies – nor public, nor commercial. Many of the informants had clear strategies for where to search for different types of news, having a variety of news flows continuously running on their devices, e.g. applications, sites, social media etc. Interestingly, some informants contested the content in different channels to validate the trustworthiness and accuracy of interesting news topics. This resonates with Hermida's (2010) description of citizens producing small pieces of content which collectively add up to what can be considered as journalism, and moreover, illustrates the network-level understanding of sharing behaviour, called for by Kümpel et al (2015).

The labels for the six news prosumption profiles are: the Bumblebee, the Window peeker, the Researcher, the Sponge, the Relayer, and finally, the Megaphone. Each

profile is described below in terms of how the informant engages in the news prosumption process, ranging from passive to active prosumption behaviours. Some of the profiles are vibrant representations of the informants, whereas others are more ambiguous. One of the profiles, the Megaphone, was not represented among the informants themselves. Instead, the profiling of this type of prosumption behaviour is based on the informants' accounts of other persons in their social communities.

The Bumblebee

"I have notifications, from a few different media sources, and sometimes my whole screen is filled up with them... I follow a lot of social media platforms, but I am not intentionally looking for news there... I like to keep myself updated so I can show off with my knowledge"

The Bumblebee (BB) collects news and shares these as it was its job to do so, just like a bumblebee collecting nectar and pollinating flowers. A BB scans for news and monitors news flows throughout the day in a variety of media channels and sources. The BB enjoys discussing news with friends and family, but seldom shares news on social media to the wider audience. This person is often surrounded by other bumblebees who also distribute news and are willing to debate the content. The BB profile searches for information that helps them stay at the edge of news discourse. They engage in spreading news for a self-related cause, i.e. as a part of building and strengthening their own identity: *"...I want to share stuff that tells people around me who I am and what I am interested in..."*.

The Window Peeker

"I seldom visit specific websites for information /.../ Instead, I search for news on Google or if I hear something interesting I would probably google it before turning to other news channels /.../I'm not a big sharer of news, I guess."

The Window Peeker (WP) analyses what is going on in a certain situation by grazing around the internet, compiling news from a wide range of sources and channels to get a nuanced perspective. The WP often uses Google or even other search engines to search for appropriate news content. He/she doesn't want to be served with news but prefers to exercise control over from what channels the news flow. Accordingly, signing up for news notifications doesn't align with this consumer profile. Even though the WPs are active in assembling their own news' portfolio, they are rather passive when it comes to spreading and discussing news and tend to keep it within the closest circle of family and friends.

The Researcher

"I want to get an objective presentation of it [news], just because I think

people tend to exaggerate or see things from their own perspectives and therefore, I want to have a more nuanced and objective perspective.”

The Researcher (RES) has a critical outlook on most types of information, so also news, and strives to find the objective truth. The RES has no specific routines for reading news, other than turning to professional news agencies when some news topic attracts attention and calls for more in-depth information. The RES profile experiences that people tend to add their own subjective twists on news and events they report or discuss. The RES wants facts and not opinions and carefully selects what news channels to adhere to. Professional news agencies are perceived as reliable sources of trustworthy information.

The Sponge

“I do not want to spend too much effort keeping myself informed... If something big, big, big goes on – I’ll figure it out eventually./.../ I think I’m around a lot of people where I just listen. I just sit there and absorb”

The Sponge (S) gathers news rather unconsciously, “absorbing” relevant information, but without necessarily sharing or following up, unless it awakes special attention and interest. A sponge collects news and information through word-of-mouth and news flows, without actively looking for it and chooses carefully where to put his/her energy and input. The S usually waits for news to show up and feels no need to be up to date with everything. The sponge is also very passive when it comes to sharing news.

The Relayer

“I would never sit down and watch a news report. Instead, I collect my daily share of news through social media channels, Facebook, Twitter etc. I really do like to get the news 24/7. I am a person that want to know NOW and to know FIRST. I want to be the one that tells your buddy.”

A Relayer (REL) builds information bridges between the sources of news and their audiences. He/she picks up news posts and then passes them on to the community. The REL tends to be social and talkative, and shares information in face-to-face conversations as well as on social media. The REL follows several news flows and clicks posts that appear interesting. As this prosumption profile wants to be on the edge, and up-to-date with the latest news feeds, news is consumed throughout the day. The REL discusses what he/she heard with friends and sometimes shares opinions but does not necessarily share on a broader scale. This profile participates in the community by liking posts with the purpose of extending the social network. Therefore, the Relayer prefers news channels where news is easily accessible, and where the highlights of a news event are clear and easy to share.

The Megaphone

“Those who share a lot are often people who have a lot of opinions and like to talk and discuss also face-to-face. They get easily stamped with their opinions because they tend to share one type of news and one type of opinion.”

The Megaphone (MP) profile has a different status, as it is not represented by any of the informants themselves but identified as “otherness”. According to the informants, a MP purposefully searches for information with the intention to share it loudly, ensuring that everyone who can hear, listens. The MP thus want to reach also the wider audience, not only people in the near surroundings, by sharing or posting information and opinions in face-to-face conversations as well as in social media channels. The MPs tend to have strong personal opinions that they want to bring forward. In this endeavour, they actively search for information from a broad spectrum of channels and sources, to get a big, but still detailed picture. According to the informants, a MP can however also easily be trapped in a silo, having a narrow outlook on things on the news agenda due to algorithms that provide them a biased information base.

A framework for news prosumption

The profiles depicted above differ from one another to the extent the consumer assembles news updates through more routinized and passive behaviours, versus more actively seeking facets of information on-demand, corresponding to assembling (Canniford & Bajde, 2016) or producing (Bruns, 2008) news from the resources available. The profiles also exhibit differences in the extent and type of sharing behaviours related to the obtained news, ranging from the diligently monitoring and spreading bumblebees, the sociable and fast relayers, and the highly opinionated megaphones, to the less interactive window peekers and sponges.

We stress that the profiles are not mutually exclusive. Rather, a consumer slides between active and passive prosumption profiles depending on the level of involvement for a news topic as illustrated by the diagonal lines in Figure 1 below. The act of prosumption thus manifests in behaviours corresponding to different profiles. While Relayers and Megaphones are in themselves more active in assembling and sharing a broad array of news, the Researchers and Window Peekers engage in news sharing behaviours only when the personal relevance of a topic makes them reach the tipping point where a passive profile turns into an active one (compare also Ritzer (2014) prosumption continuum).

In this study, we have used the notion of prosumption in the meaning how the consumer a) compiles an individual board of news (production/assembly), b) reads news content (consumption/usage) and if considered relevant and interesting, shares it in the social network (distribution/spread). Correspondingly, the six prosumption profiles can be plotted in a map according to the fine-grained

dimensions of prosumption depicted in Figure 1.

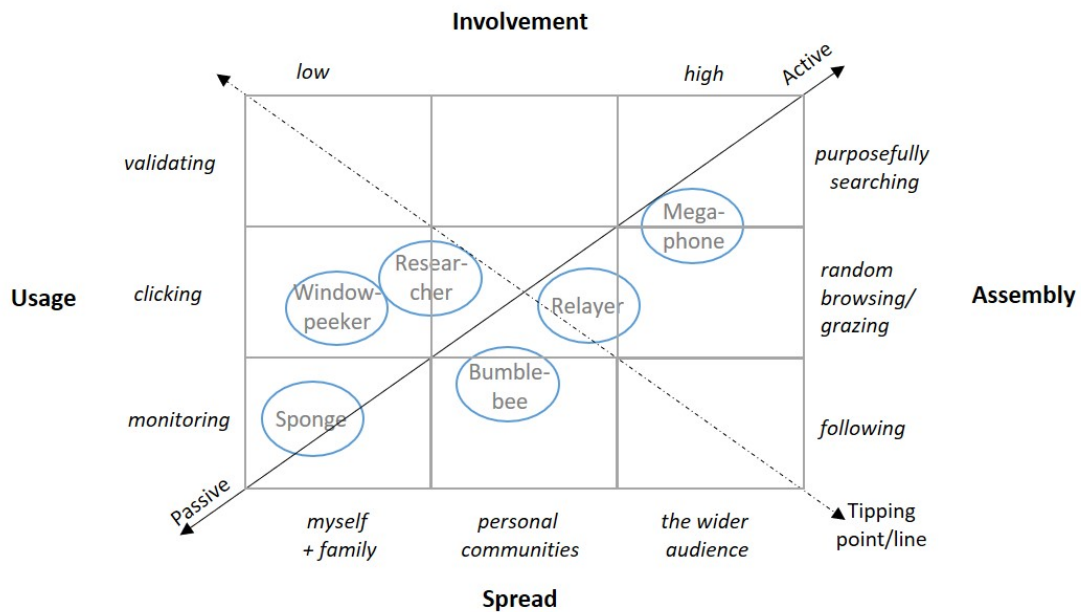


Figure 1. News prosumer profiles – a conceptualization

The dense illustrations from the empirical data, and the profiles and their respective descriptions provide a fine grained and micro level understanding of how prosumption of news unfolds. The proposed framework further conceptualises how and why young adults engage in news prosumption behaviours.

However, we suggest that extending this methodology to a more heterogeneous data set would add more depth and nuances to the description of the profiles and open the possibility to finding additional ones. A particularly interesting area of further research would be to delve more deeply into the most extreme of the roles, the megaphone, which emerges in our data set only through “otherness” rather than through personal accounts.

An interesting avenue for further research is also related to the challenge to better understand the distributed character of news journalism (Hermida, 2010) also in the more subtle prosumer roles. An assemblage perspective based on a flat ontology (Canniford & Bajde, 2016) could for instance be applicable in addressing what constitutes news in a world where - as our findings hint - consumers’ daily routines contain less and less specific “windows” for purposefully receiving news, but where news is hovering around the consumers constantly in their online and offline worlds. Such a more network level perspective would also answer the call for a better understanding of social media sharing behaviours proposed by Kümpel et al (2015).

Managerial implications for news service providers

The existing media landscape has, due to the ongoing digitalization, resulted in new types of networks, communities, blurred roles and new efficient tools for disseminating information. In this fast changing, uncertain and information-heavy media context it is crucial to quickly adapt to new technologies and stay trustworthy for the customers. One vital part of building successful business models is to understand the consumer behaviour in the new media context and capturing that behaviour was the goal with our research. Being aware of the existence different consumer roles in the current media context can help media distributors to understand and get better insights into the younger generation's consumer behaviour related to news. As our findings indicate, involvement is very important when it comes to the degree of activity in the continuum of prosumption. News that are perceived as interesting and relevant trigger online engagement. The big challenge that news distributors are facing is therefore to target all readers with interesting and relevant news in a fragmented market. If, and when, a news distributor manages to do this, it is co-creating value with the customer and the customer is then more likely to reuse this news distributor's offered product or service.

None of the informants in this study was loyal just one news flow or channel, but rather, information was collected from different sources such as search engines, shared posts or conversations. What is common for these three sources is that none of them has a price. For a news distributor this implies major marketing challenges in terms of weak customer loyalty and the (un)preparedness to pay. Therefore, it is important to solve the equation of how to justify the value of the provided news service, resulting in consumers using and paying for it. In our study we saw that the prosumption profiles are coupled with different behaviours. Ideally, the innovative news distributor invests in capabilities and analytical models that leverage consumer intelligence for sustainable equilibrium, or preferably, growth. At the same time as young adults are hard to attract, their traces over the media landscape constitute a rich source for insight. By "listening" to social media and online communities, users with promising prosumption profiles can be identified, targeted and engaged in the co-creation of platforms where the act of news prosumption can prosper, not opting out professional journalist services.

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