

The influence of a mediating source – my friend – is now spreading the influence to others who may not have seen the news reports

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Wayne Wanta works as a professor and chair of the Department of Journalism at the University of Florida, and was also a professor at Oklahoma State University and University of Missouri. His research experience is focused on Mass Communication Theory and Public Opinion, especially on Agenda-Setting media effects. He is a past president of AEJMC, and twice represented AEJMC as a delegate to the World Journalism Education Congress. He is an author of more than 150 research articles and papers, many in the area of sports, politics and visual communication. During this interview, Wanta explains how social media are representing new spheres for civic engagement and democratisation of influence.

What's your opinion about the idea that social media are really encouraging civic engagement? Does social media represent democratisation for civic participation?

Social media are clearly encouraging civic engagement. People post news links on their Facebook pages or tweet links on Twitter. With the added sources of information, there is no reason for a social media user to be uninformed on any issue. However, this was also the predictions when television first became popular. Television would be hugely educational. Viewers are so much better informed than in the past. Well, there is research that suggests

that people who watch a lot of television are actually less informed than people who watch less television. This could eventually happen with social media. One important aspect in the favor of social media is the credibility of the source. If I see a tweet from a friend or a journalist, I know immediately whether I can trust the source of the information. Also, if enough of my friends tweet information about an issue, I may feel compelled to pass that information on to others. In other words, I may think that, since my friends are actively participating in society, that I too need to participate. If enough people feel this way, individuals in society would certainly be better informed.

What is the influence of interactivity and participatory communication on the agenda building process?

Social Media are bringing back the idea of the two-step flow of communication effects. In the 1940s and 1950s, researchers thought that media first influenced opinion leaders who then filtered news content down to opinion followers. One author called opinion leaders “influentials” because they played an important role in influencing society. Social media is allowing individuals to connect with hundreds/thousands of their friends. So one of my friends might see a news story on the website for CNN and put a link to the story on his/her Facebook page. I’ll see it, and think the issue must be important. A good example: Shortly after a major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico by BP Oil, a friend of mine “liked” a page called “Boycott BP”. I saw it and immediately thought the oil spill must be a pretty important issue. I had no personal involvement in the oil spill, and neither did my friend. The news media, however, set the agenda for my friend. He read about the oil spill and spread the information to others by liking the Boycott BP page. My friend was influenced by the media coverage and since I think my friend is a very credible source of information, I was influenced by them also.

Notice that the news coverage still had an agenda-setting effect, but the process of how the effect occurred is different. So it appears that the news media will continue to have an agenda-setting effect and are a credible source of information. However the influence of a mediating source, i.e. my friend, is now spreading the influence to others who may not have seen the news reports.

In your opinion, nowadays, social media play a better role as agenda setters than traditional media?

Traditional media have one huge advantage over social media, in that traditional media have access to important news sources. This access allows reporters to gather information with fewer barriers than a typical individual. For example, I happen to be a very big sports fan. I can read lots of information on the internet dealing with my favorite team, the Green Bay Packers. Some of the information is created on the internet by young kids who happen to have a computer. Some however, is created by reporters who have covered the team for

years and have access to the players and locker rooms. Who has the more credible information? Obviously, the traditional media does. Some social media though, have access to traditional media. I may see a friend who tweets a link on his Twitter account to a story dealing with the Packers. If I haven't seen the story, I may follow the link.

In this case, social media are providing me with additional information about a topic that I'm very interested in. So while the source of the story is a traditional medium, social media are helping me gain additional knowledge that I might not be aware of. There is a danger here however. If I use social media for additional information on one specific topic, I may have a great deal of knowledge about this topic, but I may have very little knowledge on other topics. In this example, I may know lots about the Green Bay Packers, but I may know very little about oil spills in the Gulf, or the unemployment rates. Plus, if I know a whole lot about one topic, I may become polarised on it.

For example, if I am politically conservative, and only follow social media for information about the conservative side of issues, I may become even more conservative because of this exposure. The constant exposure through social media of conservative opinions reinforces my previously held positions, making my position even more conservative.

How is the influence of audience fragmentation on public opinion shaping process in a cross-media landscape?

I think fragmentation in society is a result of information overload. We have so much information at our disposal that we can be extremely selective in what we process. We can selectively choose information that only agrees with our previously held positions. That wasn't the case pre-internet, when we had limited information choices. Selective exposure is causing disparities in our knowledge of important issues so much so that we are becoming polarised in our opinions. The abundance of information has caused another negative effect. Individuals can't possibly read and view all possible information on all issues so that we can make an informed decision about the issues. We just don't have the time. Instead, we are creating a society that wants to be "told" and not "shown".

A perfect example of this happened in the 2004 U.S. Presidential election. The Democratic candidate, John Kerry, was a hero in the Vietnam War. He had won medals for saving people's lives. This was a fact. However, Republicans ran a series of commercials claiming Senator Kerry had lied about his war record to get the medals. Kerry could have run commercials to counter these attacks by including some of the men he had saved during the war, but this strategy would not have worked. People just wanted to be told here, that Kerry had exaggerated his war heroism claims. Voters didn't want to see evidence because they were being bombarded with too much information.

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