Examining the Role of Information Quality, Personal/Social Relevance, Current Events Expertise in News Sharing on Social Media

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Abstract

Because of the growing popularity of the social media and built in features that allow people to share information across different social platforms, information sharing has become one of the top ten activities people perform when they are online. Sharing news on variety of social media platforms has become a phenomenon of paramount social, economic and political importance, demonstrating that social media platforms play pivotal roles in supporting news production and dissemination. Yet, knowledge about different sources of motivations and belief systems of the users who actively share news or information online have not been fully unraveled in the literature. In this study, we examine the motivations and beliefs of users towards sharing news on social media based on information quality dimensions pertaining on one hand and users' perception of credibility and reputation of the social networking sites on the other.

Keywords

Information Sharing, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Information Quality, Peripheral Cues.

Introduction

Recent events from the development in SpaceX Program to the hurricanes in the US and monsoon flooding disaster in South Asia have demonstrated that social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) are changing the way individuals consume and share news. Because of the growing popularity of the social media and built in features that allow people to share information across different social platforms, information sharing has become one of the top ten activities people perform when they are online. For instance, news Falcon 9 landing was spread through social media networks Twitter and Facebook all over the world. Similarly, during the Hurricane Irma and monsoon flooding in South Asia, instant updates were available and shared in many social media platforms. In both situations, thousands of stories, photos and videos were posted which immediately attracted world-wide attention, demonstrating that social media platforms play pivotal roles in supporting news production and dissemination. Social media are emerging as a powerful news referring source owing to the fact that 27% of the social media users frequently share information or news stories found online (Statista, 2017a). As of October 2017, 52% of active Facebook users in the US said that they not only read and watch news about the world online, but also share them on their accounts (Statista, 2017b). Thus, sharing news on variety of social media platforms has become a phenomenon of paramount social, economic and political importance. Yet, knowledge about factors that influence the information or news sharing behaviors in social media has not been fully unraveled in the literature.

While social media share traditional media’s functions of providing news stories to users, there are some differences between social media and traditional media in terms of the relationships between users and news. Firstly, in social media, users actively participate in producing news content by submitting links or news stories from various sources (Szabo & Huberman, 2010). In traditional media, news content that is broadcasted to people are mainly determined by content creators or editors who have control on daily circulation of the news. Here, people inactively receive news content delivered in the media channels such
as TV and radio. Secondly, although social media users are separated by physical distance, they are connected with each other through because of mutually shared interests, which allows them to spread news stories across such online communities and discussed by people around the world within minutes. In traditional media, sharing news is limited due to the absence of effective diffusion channels. Unlike the traditional mainstream sources of news such as CNN, BBC and Fox News, news sources based on social media platforms are all communities that draw millions of people into social networks and convinces them to spend significant time engaging in the social network at the tip of their fingers. However, information sharing on social media happens for reasons beyond the users’ feeling of community. The information sharing behavior on social media may take different routes depending upon the quality of such information or news, credibility of the social network sites together combined with different set of motivations and belief systems of users. Therefore, this study will try to illustrate such motivations and belief systems of the users who actively share news or information online.

In this study, we examine the motivations and beliefs of users towards sharing news on social media based on information quality dimensions pertaining to the information shared on one hand and users’ perception of credibility and reputation of the social networking sites, and provide new insights for social networking sites operators as to what factors they need to consider when they are enhancing and optimizing their online presence across different online platforms.

**Literature Review**

*Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)*

The ELM describes elaboration as the extent to which people think about the arguments contained in a message (news or information). Various factors are viewed by the ELM as being able to determine individuals’ motivation and ability to thoughtfully and carefully consider the true merits of a message (news or information). ELM suggests that argument quality and peripheral cues are directly related to the change in attitude and belief. The elaboration likelihood is at the high end when individuals are cultivated to have motivation and (or) ability to process arguments and information thoughtfully and carefully (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984; Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983). The central route to persuasion becomes prominent when elaboration anchors at the high end. In this case, change in individuals’ attitude is determined by their effortful cognitive activity about the true merits of arguments and information. The peripheral route to persuasion becomes salient when elaboration anchors at the low end. In this case, however, individuals’ attitude change is determined by simple cues, such as, source factors, relatively simple inferences or affective states which become essentially critical for the judgment of the validity of arguments and information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty, Heesacker, & Hughes, 1997). The ELM proposes that the change in attitude determined via the central route is more likely to resist counter-persuasion, persist, and further influence behavior. In contrast, the change in attitude determined by the peripheral route is more likely to be susceptible and temporary (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The ELM also outlines several sources of motivation such as need for cognition, personal relevance and personal responsibility as well as several ability factors such as prior knowledge, distraction, repetition and message comprehensibility (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Here, argument quality is analogous to information quality and refers to the persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message conveyed on a social media, while peripheral cues relate to meta-information about the message (e.g., news source) but not its embedded arguments. Several peripheral cues have been proposed and studied in the ELM literature, including the number of messages, number of message sources, source likeability, and source credibility. Of these, source credibility, source reputation and source familiarity appear to be more frequently referenced cues. Source credibility of SNS is defined as the extent to which an information source or provider is perceived to be believable, competent, and trustworthy by information recipients (Petty et al. 1981; Sussman and Siegal 2003). Reputation of social media is defined as the degree to which individuals believe in social media’ honesty towards their users and the degree to which people believe that social media are well known (Zha et al, 2017). Familiarity of social media is defined as the degree to which individuals are well acquainted with a social media or channel based on their observation and prior use. Presumably, there may be other peripheral cues potentially relevant to information sharing on social media that are not examined in this paper but may be the subject of future studies.
Information Quality, Personal/Social Relevance, Current Event Expertise and News Sharing Intentions

Information Quality Cues, Peripheral Cues, Attitude and Perceived Usefulness

Although previous ELM studies have focused on attitude as the dependent variable of interest (Lord et al. 1995; Petty et al. 1981), Sussman and Siegel (2003) and Zha, Yang, Yan & Huang (2017) demonstrated that perceived usefulness is also a relevant perception in the context of knowledge acceptance and information retrieval. Since message arguments in an online news are directed at users’ rational judgment rather than their affect, information quality is expected to influence perceived usefulness in the form social engagement, self-image enhancement and self-reputation, rather than attitude, by reinforcing or enhancing their extant beliefs about information sharing. Likewise, peripheral cues such as source credibility, source reputation and source familiarity of the social media are likely to influence attitude because such cues appeal to human affect rather than their rational judgment. These expectations lead us to propose:

H1. The information quality of informational messages provided by a social media channel has a positive effect on potential users’ perceived usefulness of information being shared.

H2. The source credibility, reputation and familiarity of informational messages provided by a social has a positive effect on potential users’ attitude towards information being shared.

It is possible that information quality may improve users’ attitude toward the news or information sharing. For instance, a well-enunciated, accurate and reliable message, communicating useful arguments about personally relevant or current events of interest, may make one feel better about sharing the news or information. However, the effect on attitude is likely to be moderated by perceived usefulness, since high quality information may not change affect without first changing the users’ belief about usefulness. In other words, users feel better because they view the information sharing as being more useful and not because the argument presented was strong enough. On the other hand, source credibility, reputation and familiarity of social media may sometimes directly influence users’ perceived usefulness of information sharing, particularly if the recommendation for reading and sharing a particular information comes from a well-recognized or trusted social media channel. In this instance, potential users may substitute their own effortful and rational thinking process with the expert's recommendation and employ a less effortful peripheral-route decision process to assess the potential usefulness derived from reading and sharing the online information. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3. The source credibility, reputation and familiarity of social media has a positive effect on potential users’ perceived usefulness derived from sharing an online information on social media.

Information Quality Cues, Peripheral Cues, Personal/Social Relevance and Current Event Expertise

ELM also suggests that the effects of information quality and source credibility, reputation and familiarity are moderated by users’ motivation and ability to elaborate on informational messages (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Drawing on prior ELM research, we operationalize the motivation dimension of elaboration as personal relevance of information, defined as the news readers’ perceived relevance of the current events on their lives, and the ability dimension as user expertise, defined as the readers’ proficiency and knowledge about the current events or any subject matter presented in the news. Potential users who view an information as being highly relevant to their daily lives, community and social engagement values are more motivated to engage in effortful scrutiny of all information available to them, thereby forming more informed and stable perceptions of usefulness of the news being shared. These users have less need for, and are therefore, less likely to consider peripheral cues. Conversely, users who perceive the same news as being less relevant to their personal lives, social and community values, are less motivated to engage in extensive elaboration, and may instead rely on peripheral cues such as source credibility, reputation and familiarity of the social media for shaping their personal attitudes and usefulness perceptions of information sharing. Hence, we propose

H4. Personal relevance has a positive moderating effect on the association between argument quality and perceived usefulness derived from information being shared.

H5. Personal relevance has a negative moderating effect on the association between social media source credibility, reputation and familiarity, and attitude toward information sharing.
**H6.** Personal relevance has a negative moderating effect on the association between social media source credibility, reputation and familiarity, and perceived usefulness of information being shared.

Likewise, experts or regular followers of current events are more inclined to carefully scrutinize new messages about any news or information that is being disseminated across social media to identify key arguments and form an informed judgment about the current events. These users will rely less on peripheral cues, because they tend to be more aware of the possibility of inaccuracy, bias, and lack of realism and reliability in such cues. For instance, most news on politics tend to portray one-sided and an overly positive and often unrealistic view of current politics because such news are intended to maximize the endorsements the news source receive from a certain affiliation. Hence, perceptions based on those cues are also likely to be biased. Further, users’ knowledge or expertise on current events removes their need to examine peripheral cues, since they can form more accurate perceptions by critically examining the content of the news. In contrast, novice or less expert users are forced to rely on peripheral cues such as source credibility, reputation and familiarity of the social media site rather than embedded message arguments, in framing their attitude and perceived usefulness perceptions. Hence, we propose

**H7.** User expertise has a positive moderating effect on the association between information quality and perceived usefulness of news information sharing.

**H8.** User expertise has a negative moderating effect on the association between social media source credibility, reputation and familiarity, and attitude toward news information sharing.

**H9.** User expertise has a negative moderating effect on the association between social media source credibility, reputation and familiarity, and perceived usefulness of information being shared.

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**Research Design**

This study will conduct an experiment and use a follow-up quantitative survey assessment to test the hypotheses. The survey will use previously-validated scales to measure the study constructs and will be pilot-tested before launch. Different age, education level, gender and income level will make the results more generalizable and allow us to compare different age groups in their information sharing behavior. Structural equation modeling will be used to analyze the relationships between the study constructs, and modification indices will be used to achieve a parsimonious model with an overall good fit.

**Conclusion**

This study will provide practical guidelines as to how social media operators can enhance their online presence by optimizing and enhancing one or combination of different central and peripheral cues that are
in line with users’ or followers’ motivation, ability and belief systems as well as theoretical contributions for audiences who are interested in this topic. We aim to build on Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to identify why people would share online news disseminated by one social media or channel across different online social platforms. This would help social media operators to identify influential factors associated with users’ motivation and ability. We suggest that social media operator providers not only consider enhancing the quality of information they disseminate, but also consider enhancing their credibility and reputation at various stages of use and promote the most appropriate benefit and behavioral attitude depending on the personal and social relevance and current events expertise assumed by the users.

REFERENCES


