

Social media engagement in U.S. newspapers: Exploring relationships between content niches, circulation size, and social media engagement

Abstract

As U.S. newspapers continue to struggle, audience engagement on social media has drawn increasing attention (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Calder and Malthouse (2008) define engagement as “a sense of involvement, of being connected to something” (p. 2). They emphasize engagement results from meeting audiences’ motivations for consuming media products. Schiviski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski (2016) identify three social media engagement constructs – consumption, connection, and creation – that can be measured using web analytics (followers, likes, comments, shares).

News firms are diversifying their product portfolios, often around content niches, to reach new audiences and build revenue streams (Picard, 2011, 2014). Newspapers create multiple social media niche content sites to enhance engagement with digital audiences (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017; Gramlich, 2019).

To explore U.S. newspaper social media sites and audience engagement, the following questions are posed:

RQ1: Are there significant differences between the type of niche accounts and audience engagement?

RQ2: Is there relationship between (a) number of niche accounts, (b) number of followers, (c) circulation size and audience engagement on social media platforms?

Methods. Engagement activity of posts on 15 of the largest 100 U.S. daily newspapers on three social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) was analyzed in a randomly drawn constructed-week sample from the final four months of 2019. The number of followers of each site were recorded. Engagement was defined by audience use of social functionalities: likes, shares/retweets, and comments for each post. Thirty-three social media niche accounts were identified and reduced to 10 similar content themes (e.g., main, local, sports, world/politics).

Results. The 15 newspapers averaged 17.6 niche content accounts across three social media (n = 265). The accounts had 13,891 posts (92 Facebook accounts, 4,917 posts; 114 Twitter accounts, 8,333 posts; 59 Instagram accounts, 641 posts).

RQ1: There was a significant difference between the type of niche accounts and audience engagement on Likes [$F(9, 13881)=2.371, p<.05$], Shares [$F(9, 13881)=13.410, p<.001$], and Comments [$F(9, 13881)=26.472, p<.001$]. Regarding likes, a Tukey post hoc test indicated significantly more Likes on the Main account than World/Politics account. There was significantly more Shares on posts on the Main account than on the Sports, World/politics, Economy/business, Local, Feature, and internal accounts. And there was significantly more Comments on the Main

account than the Sports, World/politics, Economy/business, Local, Feature, Visual and internal accounts.

RQ2: There was a significant correlation between the number of niche accounts, followers and circulation on Twitter ($r=.696$, $p<.01$; $r=0.713$, $p<0.01$; $r=.811$, $p<.01$). On Instagram, significant relationships were also found between number of accounts, followers, and circulation ($r=.695$, $p<.01$; $r=.835$, $p<.01$; $r=.902$, $p<0.01$). However, there were no significant relationships between number of niche accounts, followers or circulation and engagement on Facebook.

Discussion. *Broadly, this study finds engagement occurs more often on Main social media accounts than most niche accounts (e.g., sports, world/politics, feature, etc.). The findings reveal how the different social media platforms perform differently on audience engagement; Facebook postings produce least engagement. Overall, the study begins to reveal how social media platforms and various content niche accounts produce different levels of engagement.*

Keywords: Media engagement, online media outlets, audience engagement, newspaper business model innovation

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