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Audiences, Journalists, and Forms of Capital in the Online Journalistic Field

Abstract

This study found divergence in how online journalists and student-audiences rated articles with varying popularity, as measured by audience metrics, and quality, as operationalized by winning a journalistic award. The findings revealed that while metrics and awards did not matter for young online news audiences, they were important for online journalists. But even among journalists, the importance of metrics and awards varied depending on whether the journalists were evaluating stories or their peers. For online journalists, popular stories were more newsworthy than those that were not. Awards did not influence their judgment of newsworthiness. But when evaluating the authors of the articles, online journalists rated authors of articles that won awards more favorably than authors of articles without awards. The popularity of stories did not matter in their evaluation of the authors.

Keywords: audience, journalists, online news, web analytics, web metrics

Introduction

The internet has changed not only how audiences access information from journalists but also how journalists access information about their audiences (Napoli, 2011; Sullivan, 2013). Through web analytics, journalists get to know which stories are getting more traffic, which websites direct traffic to their news site, how much time readers spend on each story, and many others (Tandoc, 2014a). On one hand, this allows journalists to be more responsive to what audiences want. On the other, catering to what the audience wants is a form of intrusion on editorial autonomy. For the longest time journalists ignored, if not rejected, audience feedback (Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978). A convenient excuse before the onset of web analytics is that journalists did not really know exactly what the audience wanted, because at most readership surveys and television ratings were considered mere approximations of what really the audience wanted. But with the detailed metrics that journalists can now access about their news websites, knowing what the audience is clicking on is also only a few clicks away.

Newsrooms use web metrics not only to measure traffic but also to increase traffic. A straightforward example is how a list of most viewed articles has become a staple of news sites. These lists are usually automatically generated based on number of views an article gets. These function as shortcuts for other readers to decide what to read based on which articles other readers have already read (Tenore, 2011; Thorson, 2008). It becomes cyclical:

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popular stories tend to stay on the most read list because they are on the list to begin with (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2012; Thorson, 2008). What is interesting is that the most popular stories are usually not what journalists deem to be the most important (Boczkowski, 2010; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Walter, 2011). While journalists tend to prioritize public affairs stories, audiences click on non-public affairs pieces (Boczkowski et al., 2011; Thorson, 2008).

This study is interested in further exploring this divergence between journalists and their audiences particularly in the online news context (Boczkowski, 2010; Boczkowski et al., 2011). Studies have empirically demonstrated this divergence of news preferences through content analyses of news sites that compared journalists' preferences based on story placement with audiences' preferences based on lists of most popular stories (e.g. Boczkowski et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Thorson, 2008). A missing piece, however, is an explanation to account for this divergence. This current study turns to field theory to explore the concept of perceived capital as a mechanism to explain why journalist and audience preferences diverge.

Literature Review

Field Theory

Originally used in the physical sciences, specifically in electromagnetism (Martin, 2003), the concept of *field* as adapted in the social sciences, particularly by French scholar Pierre Bourdieu, refers to “the local social world in which actors are embedded and toward which they orient their actions” (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007, p. 24). These social actors, called *agents*, participate in the struggle to either conserve or transform the field (Bourdieu, 1998, 2005). An important assumption in field theory is the pursuit of autonomy, and the theory argues that the social world is generally caught between the opposing poles of economic and cultural power (Benson, 2006). The cultural power represents an autonomous pole, consisting of resources that differentiate a social space from other fields; on the other hand economic power is considered a heteronomous pole, consisting of external forces (Neveu, 2007). The concept of a *field* has been used in numerous studies, conceptualizing as fields concepts such as, among others, politics, the arts (Bourdieu, 2005), organizations (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008), sports (Stempel, 2005), and journalism (Benson, 2006; Bourdieu, 1998, 2005; Handley & Rutigliano, 2012). Field theory is particularly applicable to understanding the journalistic field, situated as it is between its own professional norms that privilege autonomy and its business model that makes it vulnerable to the market. For example, Champagne (2005, p. 50) observed: “The history of journalism could well be in large part the story of an impossible autonomy – or, to put it in the least pessimistic way, the unending story of an autonomy that must be re-won because it is always threatened.”

The field is considered a meso-level concept (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007) with its focus on both the field in relation to other fields, and the agents in relation to one another and to the field. For example, Bourdieu (1998) argued that the journalistic field, particularly television, had amassed enough meta-capital (see Couldry, 2003) to exert influences on other fields, such as the political field and even the field of the arts, thereby transforming the struggles within these fields. In the same vein, the journalistic field also finds itself situated between the economic and cultural poles, being influenced by other fields in the process. Within the journal-

istic field, agents engage in the struggle for either transformation or preservation by amassing different forms of *capital*, another central concept in Bourdieu's work.

The concept of *capital* refers to "the specific forms of agency and prestige within a given field" (Sterne, 2003, p. 375). They enable agents to participate in the struggle (Handley & Rutigliano, 2012), differentiating one agent from the other in terms of relative power. Thus, capital is also something that agents seek. Forms of capital are both "weapons" and "stakes" within a field (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 11). Field theory refers to two main forms of capital: economic capital refers to money or assets transformable into money (Benson, 2006) while cultural capital refers to possession of competence in a socially valued area (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). Within the journalistic field, economic capital has been operationalized in terms of metrics such as circulation rates, advertising revenues, or audience ratings while cultural capital has been operationalized as possession of journalistic excellence or quality as conferred by professional or academic groups, such as the Pulitzer Prize in the US (Benson, 2006; Benson & Neveu, 2005). I am adapting the same operationalization in this study.

Web Analytics

Most newsrooms in the US now use web analytics to monitor audience metrics (Anderson, 2011a, 2011b; Dick, 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Lowrey & Woo, 2010; MacGregor, 2007; McKenzie, Lowrey, Hays, Chung, & Woo, 2011; Tandoc, 2014b; Usher, 2013). An examination of most news sites will reveal some form of most viewed or most popular stories list (Lee et al., 2012; Thorson, 2008) while a survey three years ago found that 62.1% of editors track web analytics daily (Lowrey & Woo, 2010). Web metrics is traditionally defined as "any quantitative measure of passive viewing or consumption of content by internet users" (Krall, 2009, p. 387), although "passive viewing" might not be the theoretically appropriate description of an audience who can be engaged in conscious selection of content amid an oversupply of online information. Through web analytics, journalists get to know what stories are getting the most views, what search words or sites lead audiences to the news site, how much time audiences spend on each story or page, and many others (Kaushik, 2010; Napoli, 2011).

Of course, journalists have been getting information about their audiences long before web analytics. Newspapers turned to readership surveys and circulation figures while broadcast had rating systems. Audience feedback also came in the form of letters to the editor and even phone calls to the newsroom. These mechanisms, at best, could only provide approximations of what the actual audience did with news content. In the case of surveys, letters, and phone calls, audience feedback had to be volunteered (Schlesinger, 1978). Compared with these forms of audience monitoring systems, web metrics are usually automatically collected in real-time, and are therefore considered more accurate (Weischedel, Matear, & Deans, 2005). But aside from providing information about audience preferences to journalists, web analytics is also now being used to provide information about audience preferences to other audiences, a function served by lists of most viewed stories. This particular function, of web analytics serving as a heuristic for other audiences to decide which content to click on, merits more discussion, especially within the context of journalistic capital. Bourdieu is never extensively cited for any specific comments on technology, but as Sterne (2003) argued, Bourdieu conceptualized technology as "socially shaped," necessitating a focus beyond just the technology but on social meanings, functions and uses ascribed to the technology.

So how do we understand web analytics and its role within the journalistic field through this framework? On one hand, from the perspective of journalists, knowing more about audience preferences equips them with a better understanding of the community they serve, and this form of knowledge can be considered as a form of cultural capital (see for example Salaz & Zavisca, 2007 for more discussion of cultural capital). On the other hand, quantifying the audience has been considered a form of economic capital. This is consistent with conceptualizing the audience as a product that can be monetized and sold to advertisers (Baker, 2002; Ettema & Whitney, 1994). Thus, associating web metrics to stories is a form of attaching some sort of economic capital to an institutional product. A story that attracts a lot of traffic is considered doing well, for it drives traffic to the site, traffic that can be sold to advertisers. This is an example of how one form of capital can be converted into another. Indeed: "Organizations who dominate the field are those successful in converting one form of capital into the other" (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 4).

In the journalistic field, forms of capital serve as both currencies and goals. News organizations seek to increase their cultural and economic capital. But putting together excellent stories that increase an organization's cultural capital, such as investigative pieces that require months of legwork, requires resources in the form of some economic capital, such as salaries, transportation costs, and document costs, among others. In most instances, economic capital is used to further increase economic capital. This is a plausible theoretical explanation for the popularity of most viewed lists. News sites provide lists of most popular stories, which studies have found often do not include what journalists thought are the most important stories of the day (Boczkowski, 2010; Thorson, 2008), in the hopes that other audiences will be drawn to these already popular stories and keep them within the news site, maintaining traffic. This usage pattern, therefore, treats audience metrics as a form of economic capital.

However, journalists still tend to reject audience feedback even in the era of web analytics (MacGregor, 2007; Singer, 2011; Usher, 2013). This is a continuation of the pattern observed in newsrooms long before the onset of online news: journalists had ignored, if not rejected, audience feedback (Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978). The reason remains the same: MacGregor (2007) found that journalists were protective of journalism's fragile autonomy, one that is constantly challenged in the field of fields (Champagne, 2005). Journalists did not want audience metrics to influence their news selection, which is supposed to be based on news values (MacGregor, 2007), a reasoning reminiscent of what Beam (1995) found among newspaper journalists who were wary of readership survey results eroding editorial autonomy and journalistic quality. They already know a lot about audience preferences, but "journalists resist reshaping their news values in response to user content choices" (Singer, 2011, p. 636). This is strikingly consistent with what Gans (1979, p. 233) had said decades ago: "The conflict between researchers and journalists is over the priority of commercial versus professional considerations in story selection."

In summary, how journalists resist the influence of audience metrics is consistent with the assumption that the journalistic field will try to gravitate toward the autonomous cultural pole instead of the heteronomous economic pole. Thus, journalists are assumed to normatively prioritize their cultural capital over their economic capital, although of course theoretical work and empirical studies have shown the enormous influence of the economic pole on the journalistic field (Tandoc, 2014a, 2014b). That is, while journalists are cognizant about stories that attract traffic, they still prefer stories that represent the journalistic values they embrace.

But how about their audiences?

Divergent Preferences

The differences between the news preferences of journalists and their audiences have long been documented in numerous empirical studies. For example, a survey of television journalists and 250 of their viewers found that while the former were interested in consumerism, education, and economy, the latter were interested in crime, sex, and violence (Wulfemeyer, 1984). Another comparison of survey responses of news editors and audiences found that what audiences thought were the top events of the previous year were not related to actual media coverage of that year (Tai & Chang, 2002). A study of how journalists and audiences across 10 countries perceived newsworthiness also found that “people disagree with their newspapers about what should be covered most prominently” (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006, p. 337).

This pattern of divergence in audience and journalistic preferences persists even with the onset of online news which allows a more accurate monitoring of audience metrics. In general, while journalists usually put more importance on public affairs stories, online audiences are usually more interested in soft news, such as entertainment and sports (Boczkowski, 2010; Boczkowski et al., 2011; Singer, 2011; Thorson, 2008). This divergence also manifests itself in how audiences regard lists of most viewed stories. Using these lists, which rank stories based on popularity, is to some extent equating newsworthiness based on number of clicks. From the perspective of journalists confronted with audience metrics, a high number of clicks represents a form of economic capital. However, this is not as straightforward as it seems especially for audiences. It is possible that from the perspective of audiences, a story attracting a lot of clicks represent a form of public endorsement, a form of cultural capital. This is a conceptualization that can be teased out more thoroughly, however, in a future study. In this current study, I will examine audience metrics through the perspective of journalists and therefore I will consider audience metrics as a form of economic capital.

Hypotheses

This current study examines the opposing forces of economic and cultural capital within the journalistic field in a period when new forms of audience measurement highlight the tension of balancing journalistic standards with the increasing pressure of knowing and catering to audience preferences. From the perspective of journalists, I will operationalize economic capital as drawing heavy online traffic and cultural capital as forms of journalistic recognition. In order to further examine the divergence in the preferences of journalists and their audiences, and possibly offer the concept of capital as a mechanism to explain this divergence, I will compare how online journalists and online news audiences navigate between online traffic and journalistic recognition, between economic and cultural capital, when assessing news content. Thus:

H1. A story with high economic capital will be perceived more favorably than a story with low economic capital in terms of:

- a. newsworthiness
- b. evaluations of its author

H2. A story with high cultural capital will be perceived more favorably than a story with low cultural capital in terms of:

- a. newsworthiness
- b. evaluations of its author

H3. Online news audiences will perceive economic capital as important more than will journalists in their perception of the story's:

- a. newsworthiness
- b. author

H4. Journalists will perceive cultural capital as important more than will journalists in their perception of the story's:

- a. newsworthiness
- b. the author

Method

This study is based on a 2 (group: journalist vs. audience) x 2 (economic capital: high vs. low) x 2 (cultural capital: high vs. low) x 4 (message repetition) mixed experimental design, with the economic and cultural conditions being within-subjects factors. Online journalists were sampled from the News Media Yellow Book which includes a list of online journalists in the US while college students were recruited from a large Midwestern university to represent online news audiences. This is consistent with recent findings that young people, such as college students, primarily get their news from online sources (Beaujon, 2012; Sonderman, 2012).

Procedure

The participants were divided into two groups: 40 journalists ($M = 44.27$ years, $SD = 10.84$) of which 88.5% were males; and 47 students ($M = 19.77$ years, $SD = .67$) of which 68.1% were females. The participants were provided a link to a web-based questionnaire. They were exposed to all four conditions: high economic, high cultural; high economic, low cultural; low economic, high cultural; and low economic and low cultural. The participants saw the order of the conditions in random. They each read the first two paragraphs of four news articles. A third paragraph, a short blurb, provided the manipulation (see below). These paragraphs were taken from actual news stories published in an English newspaper in Asia so that the stimuli would read like how an online news story should read. This also ensured that the participants were unfamiliar with any of the personalities and events described in the stories as such familiarity might bias their responses. The participants also had to answer several questions, arranged randomly, after each of the conditions. Finally, they reported their demographic information. The entire process of reading stories and answering questions lasted for about 10-12 minutes.

Manipulations

Economic capital. This was operationalized by adding a short blurb referring to audience metrics, consistent with the examples of economic capital as discussed in the literature (Benson, 2006; Benson & Neveu, 2005). For example, in the high condition, a story was described as having attracted "more than 5,500 unique page views on the first day of publication, a record-high for the website." In the low condition, the blurb did not refer to any report of web metrics.

Cultural capital. This was operationalized by adding a short blurb referring to the article having received a professional award, again consistent with the examples of cultural capital found in the literature of field theory (Benson, 2006; Benson & Neveu, 2005). For example, in the high condition, a story was described to have “won a regional award for ‘Best Online Feature’ last year.” In the low condition, the blurb did not refer to any report of any award.

Dependent Variables

Newsworthiness. I adapted the items from the “publishability” scale that an earlier experiment involving health journalists used and found to be reliable (Hinnant et al. 2011). I selected only five items that were also applicable to news audiences gauging the newsworthiness of a story. Thus, I used the following items rated on a 6-point Likert scale: readers would care about this story; this story is important to cover; this story would have an impact; this story is newsworthy; I think this story ought to be published. The scale is indeed reliable when I tested it using my sample, *Cronbach's alpha* = .92.

Assessment of the Journalist. This scale was measured using two items rated in a 6-point Likert scale that describe the author of the article that the participants read. The participants rated their agreement with each of the following description of the journalist: the author is productive; and the author is news savvy. The scale is reliable, as the two items are strongly correlated, $r(70) = .70, p < .001$.

Results

I ran repeated measures ANOVA, with group (journalist vs. student) as between-subjects factor, to test each of the four hypotheses. Since the journalist group and the student group significantly differed in terms of age and gender, I also controlled for these variables in the analysis.

H1 predicted a main effect of economic capital on the a) perceived newsworthiness of a story and b) the evaluations of its author. H1a is not supported, $F(1, 69) = 1.45, p > .10$. H1b is also not supported, $F(1, 69) = 1.65, p > .10$.

H2 predicted a main effect of cultural capital on the a) perceived newsworthiness of a story and b) the evaluations of its author. H2a is not supported, $F(1, 69) = .246, p > .10$. Likewise, H2b is also not supported, $F(1, 69) = .372, p > .10$.

H3 predicted an interaction effect between group and economic capital, so that students will perceive economical capital as more important in evaluating the a) story's newsworthiness and b) its author than will journalists. H3a is rejected. There was an interaction effect between group and economic capital on perceived story newsworthiness, $F(1, 69) = 3.17, p = .08, r = .21$. However, while newsworthiness in the high economic ($\chi = 4.60$ years, $SD = .84$) and low economic ($\chi = 4.44$ years, $SD = .77$) conditions did not vary for students, it mattered for journalists who rated stories with high economic capital ($\chi = 4.65$ years, $SD = .68$) more newsworthy than stories with low economic capital ($\chi = 4.24$ years, $SD = .96$). H3b, however, is not supported, $F(1, 69) = 2.111, p > .10$.

H4 predicted an interaction effect between group and cultural capital, so that journalists will perceive cultural capital as more important in evaluating the a) story's newsworthiness and b) its author than will students. H4a is not supported, $F(1, 69) = .385, p > .10$. Howev-

er, H4b is supported, $F(1, 69) = 6.149$, $p < .05$, $r = .29$. Students' evaluations of the author did not vary between the high ($\chi = 4.59$ years, $SD = .77$) and low ($\chi = 4.55$ years, $SD = .75$) cultural capital conditions. In contrast, cultural capital mattered a lot for journalists who rated an author more favorably when cultural capital was high ($\chi = 4.32$ years, $SD = .52$) than when it was low ($\chi = 4.11$ years, $SD = .62$).

Discussion

This study was interested in examining the divergence in the news preferences of journalists and their audiences as established by previous studies (Boczkowski, 2010; Boczkowski et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Thorson, 2008). A missing piece in this growing body of work is an explanation for this divergence. In this current study I also found divergence in how online journalists and student-audiences rated articles with varying popularity (as measured by audience metrics) and quality (as operationalized by winning a journalistic award). In summary, the findings revealed that while metrics and awards did not matter for young online news audiences, they were important for online journalists. But even among journalists, the importance of metrics and awards varied depending on whether the journalists were evaluating stories or their peers. For online journalists, popular stories were more newsworthy than those that were not. Awards did not influence their judgment of newsworthiness. But when evaluating the authors of the articles, online journalists rated authors of articles that won awards more favorably than authors of articles without awards. The popularity of stories did not matter in their evaluation of the authors.

These findings demonstrate the tension between how journalists balance the journalistic values they live by and the demands of a quantified audience, the eternal tension between economic and cultural capital. Online journalists remain protective of the professional norms of the journalistic field, and clearly put value on professional recognition, plausibly as a measure of journalistic quality that is closely tied to those who practice journalism. And yet the findings also demonstrate how online journalists are starting to realign their news judgment, putting value on audience metrics in their judgment of which stories are newsworthy. Indeed, impact on the audience and human interest have long been among the core elements of what makes something newsworthy (e.g. Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), but they have been traditionally viewed as something determined by a journalist. Thus, celebrity news for example has not been considered high in impact but it is well accepted as usually oozing with human interest. But with audience metrics constantly hovering around online editors, journalists no longer have to second-guess audience preferences. Therefore, the findings also support what previous studies have found about the increasing influence of metrics on the news construction process (Lee et al., 2012; MacGregor, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2011).

But what about the online audience who, it appears based on this experiment, does not navigate between metrics and journalistic awards the same way? It is plausible that audiences do not see metrics and journalistic awards the same way that journalists do. For audiences, it is plausible that a list of popular news stories function as heuristic for them to decide what to read not because they consider metrics as a form of economic capital for the news website, but most likely because these lists serve as a form of recommendation from their fellow audiences. Hypothesized this way, the conceptualization of most viewed lists becomes a question of credibility and trust, which lends itself to a future study: In this period of a constantly

evolving journalistic field, where traditional journalists no longer hold a monopoly over the information supply, do audiences trust their fellow audiences more in deciding what matters, in deciding the media agenda?

Field theory also offers an important framework to understand the divergence between journalists and their audiences – that of the concept of *habitus*, which refers to “the relatively durable principles of judgment and practice generated by an actor’s early life experiences and modified (to a greater or a lesser degree) later in life” (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 4). The concept of *habitus* provides a conceptual link between macro-structural contexts of a field and the actions of individual agents (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Therefore, future studies can also examine the *habitus* of journalists as well as that of their audiences as a plausible explanation for the divergence in news preferences. An equally important question is how the journalistic field will continue to evolve as agents navigate tensions between forms of capital and between the demands of their otherwise static professional norms and that of their continuously evolving audiences.

This study’s findings should be examined within the context of its limitations. First, college students participated in the study as online news audiences, and while it is correct that this demographic sources its news mostly online, college students’ news consumption patterns and news preferences might be different from other online news audiences. Second, while this study was mostly interested in comparing the impact of audience metrics and journalism quality on news preferences, these are not the only main factors that affect news judgment. In maintaining internal control for experimental purposes, the study design also did not include other important contexts in understanding the news judgment of journalists and young online audiences. Finally, the framework of field theory is only partly applied in this study. In exchange of efficiency and parsimony for the focused goal of comparing news preferences of journalists and online audiences through the discourse of journalistic capital that is examined here only from the perspective of journalists, the study did not measure an equally important concept in Bourdieu’s field theory, which is the concept of *habitus* that might provide the needed context to interpret the study’s current findings. Still, despite these limitations, I hope this study has contributed to our current understanding of the divergent news preferences of journalists and their audiences and how new forms of audience measurement, such as web analytics, are highlighting this tension even more.

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