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Schaferm, S., Sulflow, M., & Muller, P. (2017). The special taste of snack news: an application of niche theory to understand the appeal of Facebook as a source for political news. *First Monday*, 22(4-3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i4.7431>

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Evidence Summary

A Study of a Sample of Facebook Users Finds They Do Not Seek Political News through Facebook But Are Exposed to Political News through This Medium

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate Facebook as a source of exposure to political news stories and to compare the reasons for using Facebook as a news source and the gratifications obtained, compared with other news sources.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – Facebook.

Subjects – 422 German Facebook users.

Methods – An online survey was developed to investigate the use of Facebook as a news

source compared with other sources. Specific research questions were informed by the 'theory of niche' (Dimmick, 2003) which examines the coexistence and competition between different media outlets by examining the breadth, overlap and superiority of one platform over another. The survey was distributed using a 'snowball' technique between July and August 2015. The survey was shared by 52 student research assistants on their Facebook profiles. They asked their friends to complete the survey and share it with their own networks.

Main results – The mean (M) age of the 422 respondents was 23.5 years (SD=8.25). The

majority were female (61%) with a high school degree (89%). TV news and news websites were the most frequently used sources of political news. Facebook ranked third, ahead of newspapers, search engines, magazines, email provider websites, and Twitter. The mean score for the importance of Facebook as a news sources was 2.46 (SD=1.13) on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high. This fell in the middle of the range when compared with the top ranked source assessed by importance (TV news, M 4.40, SD=0.88) and the lowest (email providers, M 1.92, SD=0.97). Users rarely visited Facebook with the purpose of finding news (M 1.59, SD=0.73). However, they estimated around 24% of the posts they see were concerned with political news, and when encountered, these stories are frequently read (M 3.53, SD=1.18). However, the level of interaction as measured by liking, commenting, sharing or status updates was low (M 1.94 SD=1.09; M 1.37, SD=0.79; M 1.51, SD=0.85 and M 1.4, SD=0.78 respectively).

The 'gratification' categories where Facebook as a news source scored the highest were for killing time (M 2.97, SD=1.29), entertainment (M 2.92, SD=1.05), and surveillance (M 2.77, SD=1.01). When compared to newspapers and TV news, it was found that Facebook has a lower score for niche breadth, meaning that it serves a specific rather than general news function. Facebook also had a lower overlap score when compared with the other media, thereby performing a complementary function, while TV news and newspapers perform similarly. TV news scored better for providing balanced information, surveillance and social utility while Facebook scored highest for killing time. There was no difference in the category of entertainment. There was a similar picture when comparing Facebook with newspapers.

Conclusion – The authors conclude that while users do not actively seek political news through Facebook, they are exposed to political news through this medium. Respondents did not consider the news to be well balanced, and that currently Facebooks' niche is restricted to entertainment and killing time. The authors note that this may be

disappointing for news organisations, but there is potential to expose large audiences to political news when they are not actively seeking it. The findings represent a specific time point in a changing landscape and future research will need to take these changes into account. Comparisons with other online news sources and the use of objective measures to validate self-reported data would be valuable areas for future research.

Commentary

The first part of the study reviews research around the notion of 'snack news', where news is presented in a compact form containing only essential headlines and passively consumed rather than actively sought and read in depth. The authors then discuss the 'theory of niche' as applied to media outlets, and provide a good overview of the research in both these areas. The authors developed their research questions in the context of the 'theory of niche' which allowed them to compare the perceived gratifications users derive from traditional news media with Facebook.

The study was evaluated with the Glynn (2006) critical appraisal tool and was found to be valid, with an overall score of 75% for validity. The survey questions were described in the text as part of the reported results. This enabled the authors to show how the specific questions related to the research objectives, however it would have been helpful to have the survey presented in its entirety to help readers wishing to replicate the study. The results are described in detail and there is a thorough discussion and interpretation of the findings, together with a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Where the study lost points was for the population sample. This is very small sample as a proportion of all Facebook users, and represents a very young demographic. Because of this, it is not clear how generalizable the findings of this study are, particularly in other age brackets. The authors acknowledge this limitation, as well as their reliance on self-

reported data, which is open to bias and both under- or over-estimations by the respondents.

What the study of this sample of Facebook users shows is that this small group still regards traditional media such as newspapers and TV news programs as reliable sources of news. However they do not consider that Facebook provides balanced information. This is encouraging for library and information professionals who seek to educate their patrons to evaluate and critically appraise their information sources. The study focused on the motivations behind using Facebook as a news source and the perceived gratifications of using this platform. It did not examine the origins of the news stories, or which news sites

and other Facebook pages the respondents followed and if this has any impact on users' perceptions. This would be an interesting avenue for future research, together with the author's recommendations.

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