The challenges of creating engaging content: Results from a focus group study of a popular news media organization

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ABSTRACT

The process of content creation for distribution via social media platforms is not a trivial one for social media editors as the goal of creating both serious and engaging content is challenging, with no clear or differing guidelines or rules across and between platforms. For creators of serious content, such as news organizations, advertisers, or educational institutions, engagement has a deeper meaning

KEYWORDS

User engagement; recommendation system; social media; news media

beyond likes, shares, etc. that is aimed at the audience actually processing the underlying content associated with a social media post. In this research, we report findings from a group study that aimed to understand the process and challenges of creating engaging content across three social media platforms in a major news organization. The findings from the study indicate that creating engaging content is effort- and time-consuming, and they highlight the need to support the process of creating engaging content across multiple social media platforms. Our longer-term goal is to develop a system design to support social media editors' creation of engaging content with which they can select engaging passages from news articles and select platforms on which to publish the content.

INTRODUCTION

In the US and other countries, social media is the top source for consumer news and is more popular than both TV and print [9]. Almost 67% of news seekers use at least one social media platform to get news, and 25% of US adults use two or more social media platforms to consume news [11]. This shift to digital distribution and consumption on multiple social media channels, such as Facebook and Instagram, necessitates the need for specialized content creators. However, distributing content via multiple social media platforms is challenging, especially in terms of creating and posting engaging content. In this digital news environment [4] where audience behaviors and interests change rapidly over time and differ across multiple social media platforms, creating engaging content becomes more challenging for social media content creators. Audience comments on social media content can be helpful for improving the process of content creation, but there is no time for intensive curating of these comments. This challenge indicates the need for social media content creators to implement various strategies by channel.

To this end, we conducted a focus group research with social media content creators of a major news organization who typically manage three different social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

RELATED WORK

The challenges with distributing content via social media platforms include creating engaging content and adopting platform differences. Along with semantics [1], there are a lot of existing research that study the effects of style features in the engagement of social media users. Some style features are emojis, sentiments, using question marks, exclamation marks, mentions (@), and hashtags (#). Different parts of these style features have been studied on an individual basis for each platform [3, 5]. Also, predicting the engagement of social media posts has been studied mostly for individual social media platforms separately (e.g., Twitter [8], Facebook [5], YouTube [2], and Instagram [3]). According to the literature, different platforms have different user topical preferences [6] and behavior [7]. Thus,

content creators should consider these differences while creating content for each social platform to satisfy user engagement.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Our research question is as follows: *What are the challenges faced by news organizations when using social media platforms for distributing content?* In the focus group study, we ask the general process of content creation and posting on the social media platforms as well as the challenges content creators are facing.

From the focus group study, we find the challenges are generally categorized into two areas: 1) *Platform Selection*-selecting on which platforms to post the given news article and 2) *Engaging Content Creation*-choosing better wordings and styles. In the Engaging Content Creation category, there are three sub-challenges, which are: a) extracting engaging sentences from the news articles; b) changing the style of the social media (e.g., by adding (?) or an emoji); and c) adding trending or more engaging keywords to the content.

FOCUS GROUP STUDY

We conducted a focus group study with four content creators from the social media team at a major international news organization. The participants were two males and two females, all in their early 30s. The news organization is an international content producer based in the Middle East. The study was held on December 4, 2018, at the news organization workplace. The four participants were recruited through direct communication with the news organization's social media manager. The study involved a deep discussion on understanding the actual process and challenges of creating engaging content in multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter).

Data was collected through unmoderated interviews that asked participants about their experiences as social media content creators. The questions used are shown in Table 1. We tested and refined our interview questions by consulting domain experts prior to the study. Once we had revised our protocol to address minor issues with question clarity, we launched the study with our four participants. The data collected in the interviews were transcribed, and then verbatim quotes from participants were prepared and used as the basis for the analysis.

Social Media Content Creation

The social media content creation begins with a news article or story, which will be published on the given day on the news organization's websites. Given the news articles, social media content creators decide how to post them. They do not usually repeat the headlines from the news articles. Rather, they select the sentences that are most likely to be attractive to their audiences on particular platforms based on their past experience. **(Participant 01) "I read the article and extract sentences which I think**

Table 1: Questions employed in the focus group study.

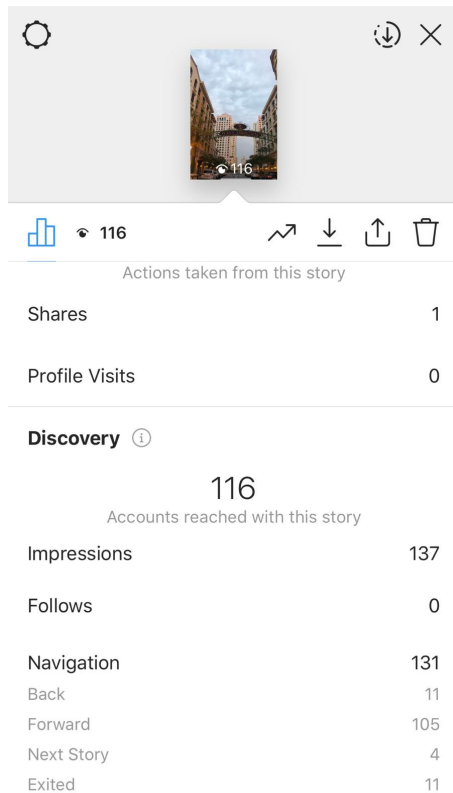| |
|---|
| Q1: What is the general process used when creating social media posts? |
| Q2: How do you decide which news articles to post on which platforms? |
| Q3: What guidelines and policies do you follow when posting to social media? |
| Q4: How do you deal with different social media platforms? |
| Q5: Do users' comments help you to make engaging content? |
| Q6: What are the most pressing challenges you are facing? |

Figure 1: Screen shot from Instagram stories engagement metrics.

suite Facebook's audience." After selecting the sentences, they reformulate the extracted sentences to suit each platform better (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). The reformulation includes changing the style and tone and adding related and trending keywords based on each platform. Selecting trending keywords for each platform is done manually by checking each platform's dashboard.

We then asked the content editors whether they follow existing guidelines and policies for publishing social media content. No guidelines are followed. All decisions are based on training and experience. The news organization provides lots of training for new content editors, and they shadow experienced workers for two weeks to learn the organizational norms.

We also asked the following question: "How do you deal with different social media platforms?" A content editor's experience plays a major role in terms of text styling and linguistic choices. Linguistic choices change daily based on trending keywords and topics in each platform.

Platform Selection Strategy

Information overload is one of the issues in social media, and the audience base might also be different across different social media platforms. Thus, social media content creators may also be selective about which news articles to post on which platforms. If so, what is the selection process? We asked participants how they select which social media platform to post a given news article on. For two platforms (Facebook and Twitter), there was no selection. They post all news articles of the day to both platforms. However, for Instagram, they change their strategy; they post one or two stories per day. More recently, using the introduced poll questions feature in Instagram stories, they ask their audience's opinion on which story to post.

User Comments

When asking the content editors about their usage of user comments for better engagement, they answered that only for a few selected comments they can reply and collaborate with their audience. This is because they spend more time in content creation and have limited time to reply to every comment. Plus, there are not enough content creators to reply and engage more with users.

Understanding Audience

Understanding audience interests and preferences through social media seems to be the most important issue for social media content creators. They use analytical tools provided by each social media platform for this task. While Instagram's analytical tool provides details of engagement metrics for posts, what Instagram provides for stories is limited, and, thus, it is challenging for the content creators to know their engagement metrics (see Figure 1) after 2-weeks of posting a news story. The nature of Instagram stories is different from Instagram posts as they are available only for up to 24-hours after being posted online. Hence, story insights disappear from the reporting analytics at
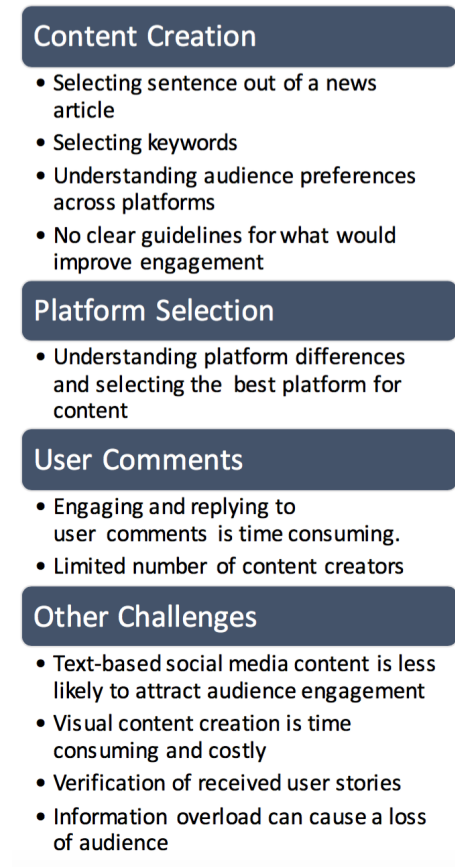
Content Creation

- Selecting sentence out of a news article
- Selecting keywords
- Understanding audience preferences across platforms
- No clear guidelines for what would improve engagement

Platform Selection

- Understanding platform differences and selecting the best platform for content

User Comments

- Engaging and replying to user comments is time consuming.
- Limited number of content creators

Other Challenges

- Text-based social media content is less likely to attract audience engagement
- Visual content creation is time consuming and costly
- Verification of received user stories
- Information overload can cause a loss of audience

Figure 2: Summary of the challenges of creating engaging content

the end of their lifespan. To overcome this, they take screen-shots from the mobile app to save the number of views of stories and manually analyze them. Also, they use Google Analytics to understand the audience visiting their website through social media channels. However, the audience data from Google Analytics is not as insightful as they would like given that the majority of their audience is US-based. For example, they would like to know whether the audience members are Arabs living in the US or originally US citizens.

Other Challenges

Lastly, we identify the challenges social media content editors are facing. Text-based social media content is less likely to attract audience engagement [10]. Thus, all text articles need to be transferred to a video, which will increase engagement in social media. Video creation is time-consuming and costly; however, it is the most engaging type of content. **(Participant 02) "Most people are not reading articles anymore, they need visual content."**

The verification of stories they receive from social media users through private messages is very challenging for them. They used to contact other media outlets (e.g., Reuters) for verification of interesting stories to publish. Also, they are now using a start-up service for verifying the geolocation of a piece of content to authenticate its originality.

Social media content creators were cautious about "publishing too many posts" as they believe that information overload can cause the loss of the audience. To achieve the best engagement with the minimum number of posts, they are using SocialFlow, a social media optimization platform, to decide which content to promote when and to whom. We summarize all the identified challenges in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION

From our group study with the social media team members, we identify four different problems that need further research investigations. First, selecting the best sentence out of a news article that will engage users requires experienced content editors and, even then, it is not guaranteed. Second, the process of selecting keywords for social media posts is still done manually, which is time- and effort-consuming. Third, content editors do not consider differences in user interests across platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). They ask users for their preferences on Instagram, which means that they are not aware of their individual platform users' preferences beforehand. Fourth, there are no clear guidelines regarding what will improve the engagement of social media posts: it is all based on individual experience.

Based on the findings of the group study, we propose a system that will address the four main challenges that content editors face. The system consists of two stages: platform selection and engaging content creation. Figure 3 shows an overview of our proposed system.
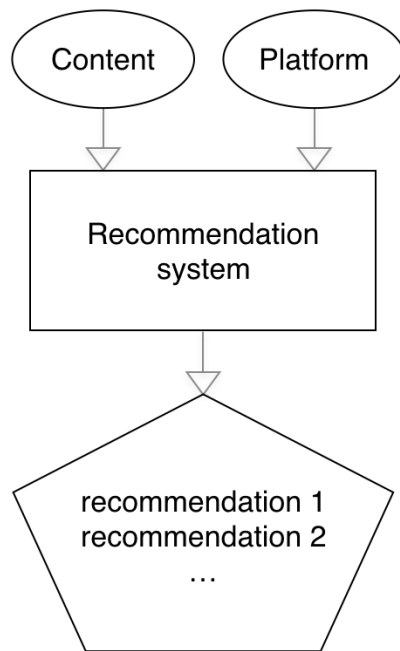
Figure 3: System overview.

Stage 1: Platform Selection

The system will select the best social media platform for a given piece of content based on the engagement prediction for each platform, which depends on the topic and other aspects of the content.

Stage 2: Engaging Content Creation

The Engaging Content Creation stage includes three functions: a) extracting engaging sentences out of news articles, b) changing the style of social media posts, and c) adding trending or more engaging keywords. The selection of engaging sentences can be done by predicting the level of engagement of each sentence, ranking them, and only recommending the ones with higher engagement. In terms of recommending stylistic changes, the literature contains different features that can be studied in relation to user engagement for individual platforms within other domains (e.g., brands' pages) that can apply to news media. These features include emojis and sentiment as well as the use of question marks (?), exclamation marks (!), mentions (@), and hashtags (#). Linguistic features can also be studied in relation to engagement; keywords with high engagement can be recommended to the content editors.

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