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News organizations and online communities: The science of how to build effective social networks

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On Twitter alone, 750 million original pieces of content are created each year (Anderson et al., 2013). Consumers are drowning in content. As a result, a piece of news content posted at any given time may only be seen by a handful of people. Moreover, people rarely share or engage with the things they do see (Suh et al., 2010; Lerman and Galstyan, 2008; Anderson et al., 2013).

What is worse is that Facebook and Twitter have begun introducing content-filtering algorithms. In a nutshell, these programs are designed to only display content that has received high interaction rates (clicks, favorites, likes, retweets, etc.). For these reasons, it is important to have an active, engaged online community that seeks news. A successful media organization can no longer simulcast content across multiple channels (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, etc.) and hope that it becomes popular. Media organizations must now actively build communities of people that are likely to engage with their content. Communities of people are immensely important.

If no one follows a newspaper on Twitter, no one will see its tweets. Most organizations understand the value of having a large audience on online social media. Yet, the most followed Twitter users are musical artists, political figures, movie stars, and athletes, not news media (Vargo, 2013). Instead, news media

appear to create social media accounts with the “build it and they will come” attitude. The thinking here is that great content will build an audience and that audience will spread the content organically. This is a passive approach to online audience building. This thinking has worked well for brands with big names like the *New York Times* and the *Economist*. But for smaller media that do not benefit from international interest, followers are harder to find.

Social media services such as Twitter and Facebook no longer represent an equal playing field for distributing content. During the last five years, two forces have kept companies (the news being included here) from sharing messages from followers. First, now that Twitter and Facebook are publicly traded companies, the pressure to generate advertising revenue from the services is at an all-time high. As a result, Facebook has begun to suppress the “organic reach” of messages coming from brands and companies. This means that a mere fraction of a company’s followers will see any given message that company produces. This includes news. The thinking here is that if a company wants its message to be heard, it should be willing to pay for it. As we will later discuss, advertisements are not always a bad thing for news organizations. They can be tailored to reach the right people at the right time, but they must be done carefully. They can be irrelevant to consumers, and costs will balloon.

Secondly, these social media services have begun to tweak what content is displayed to its users. With the end goal of more consumer engagement, both Twitter and Facebook filter out content that seems unpopular. The thinking here is to only show the most engaging content. After all, if every day 2 million pieces of original content are generated, options exist. These algorithms are always changing, and the only way to “beat” them is to constantly produce content that is engaged with. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. New features of social media services not only pull in the content that a user follows, but the most popular content that close friends also follow. If content is engaging, organic reach may actually be boosted. Content aside, this chapter suggests that engagement can be boosted through more active community marketing strategies. The premise here is that the more engaged users a news media has, the more engagement it will receive.

Social media as networks of connected people

How do new audiences see news stories on social media? The answer is relatively simple. Audiences see content from the networks they are connected to. An individual can be connected to friends, celebrities,

organizations, businesses, and news media on social media. Everyone posts news stories that can be consumed by a user. A vibrant online community is a network of connected actors. Assume, however, that users do not live in vibrant networks (Goel et al., 2012). Instead, they are likely to be connected to a large number of other actors but only regularly interact with a few. The term community can be defined many ways. A vibrant online community exists for journalism professors that attend a certain conference. There is a vibrant online community for each sorority at each university. There is a vibrant community around sports teams, farmers' markets, and pick-up soccer leagues. These networks are primarily made up of consumers; everyday people. Most networks are not vibrant. The city of Atlanta, Georgia, has a million Twitter users, but it is not vibrant. Instead, small vibrant networks exist within it. As a media manager, it is important for you to discover your vibrant online communities.

News organizations need to use the relevant online communities that surround them. They need to find these communities and spread their content to them. How can this be done effectively? Newspapers must cultivate networks of people that are inclined to share those messages. Which types of people tend to pass on news stories the most? Answers are found in an old social science theory: two-step flow.

Two-step flow theory

Online news stories *are* shared millions of times a day (Anderson et al., 2013). The messages travel through complicated networks of people connected by relationships (i.e., a virtual friendship). These networks are configured differently for different people, sets of friends, and communities. As such, they play a major role in the diffusion process a news story goes through. Perhaps the most popular theory in the communications discipline that discusses this process is two-step flow.

Two-step flow theory has been studied immensely. As a result, many theories have been connected to it. It came in the early era of mass communication theory at a time when the mass media had previously been thought to have an all-powerful effect. This effect was thought to have a bearing on all types of decision making. The mass media was thought to control our opinions on everything from news to consumer behaviors (Weimann, 1994). From this view, two-step flow emerged as one of the leading new models that explained how consumers were influenced (Weimann, 1994; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1968). The theory

explained how the media and a select group of influential people worked within a network of communication to influence the masses.

Scholars soon realized that communication processes were not as straightforward. The mass media did not simply exert their influence over all. Two-step flow theory put people back in the equation. In fact, they were now thought to play a crucial role in public opinion leadership (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Now every individual was active in how information flowed from the mass media to the public. New power was given to special individuals outside of the media (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1968). Opinion leaders were now thought of as the ones that influenced “the masses.” Opinion leaders exist in every space, including social media. Vargo found that while the average user on Twitter had 1,876 followers (2013), only 0.1 percent of Twitter users had above 200,000 followers. These people could be considered opinion leaders according to two-step flow theory, given that so many people are tuned in to their messages and the news stories they share.

Taking Twitter as an example, two-step flow appears to exist. The most popular online content does not get spread from one Twitter account like a beacon of light (Goel et al., 2012). Instead, many popular members in smaller communities (e.g., those with many connections) act as foot soldiers. They spread the content.

This does not mean that the media are unimportant. Even opinion leaders only have two sources of information: other people and the news. Opinion leaders still take direction from the mass media. In fact, in many cases, opinion leaders can be popular journalists.

The two-step flow argument appeared in popular nonfiction with Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* (2002). Gladwell vividly described a group of people as being similar to Paul Revere for their ability to disseminate information quickly and efficiently. He claims that these people have a “set of social gifts” that separates them from everyday people. In using terminology such as “influentials,” “connectors,” “mavens,” and “salesmen,” these people have the ability to influence tons of people around them. Borrowing from the book title, these people can provide a certain advantage that tips the scale of public opinion. Gladwell provides examples of people throughout history who had exceptionally large social networks. When they chose to spread an idea, a product, or even a restaurant recommendation, their influence was exceptional. Gladwell argues that just one influential can start a momentous cascade of word of mouth. Just a few of these people combined can provide enough of a social cascade to spread an idea to the point of full adoption in a community.

Imagine the popular users on social media (i.e., music artists, political figures, movie stars, and athletes). Are these Gladwell’s influentials? Can

they tip the scales of public opinion? Can they drive traffic to news content? The inherent public notoriety they possess enables them to have exponential amounts of connections with the public. These people talk to large audiences and engage in a great deal of conversation. They could help messages catch on in society. However, we know that most celebrities do not engage in the sharing of news, especially regional news. They are scandal averse and are generally concerned with their own doings.

Other scholars have slightly different views of opinion leaders. The focus here is not on the special set of “social gifts” that some possess, but instead on an individual’s ability to be an expert in a particular area (Weimann, 1991; Weimann, 1994). Opinion leaders can also be those that ordinary people turn to for information and advice. Opinion leaders thus start to sound less like celebrities on Twitter and more like bloggers or active members of communities. In this way, the true “opinion leaders” or influentials that can help a news organization are not David Beckham or Paul Scholes. Instead, they could be the journalists that exist within news organizations. News organizations should not underestimate the power these people have to become experts: experts in the topic areas they cover or in the happenings of a community. These opinion leaders can ultimately drive traffic to that news organization.

Encouraging journalists not to act like a celebrity on Twitter but instead as a constant, reliable source of quality information makes them valuable. If a journalist writes about local entertainment, the local economy or even the local weather, people will seek their information. How should they behave?

- Of course, they should link to their own news content, but also curate local content from around the Web.
- They should respond and interact with relevant messages from concerned citizens.
- They should follow engaged citizens and the leaders of the community they serve.
- They should “follow back” concerned and active citizens.
- They should become an opinion leader in an area of consumer interest.
- They should seek engagement and encourage followers to contribute thoughts, opinions, and content.
- They should attend education on social media best practices (e.g., Hootsuite Academy or lectures at universities).

A third type of opinion leader?

Both definitions of opinion leaders make sense. Some are connected to many (i.e., celebrities), others are experts in particular domains (i.e., journalists). Moreover, two-step flow makes sense; people accept information from trusted opinion leaders. Regardless of the definition, does either type of opinion leader really make content go viral online? There is little doubt in the research on opinion leaders that some are more connected than others.

We all have friends who seem to know everyone. We can observe that celebrities on Twitter have millions of followers, while many noncelebrity users have less than 500 (Vargo, 2013). However, researchers have begun to refute Gladwell's claims that connectors, or mavens, have the great amount of social influence that they claim. More specifically, they refute the claim that simply because a person is connected to many others in a social network, that person must exert a great influence on his or her connections.

Weimann acknowledges that two-step flow does not do a good job of explaining the complex relationships opinion leaders have with others (Weimann, 1994). To better explain how opinion leaders are influenced, Weimann suggests a multistep flow model. This model would allow information to flow in multiple directions, to and from different actors in the two-step model (i.e., mass media, opinion leaders, and the public). While he still believes that opinion leaders are more influential than others, he recognizes that everyone must play some role in the diffusion of information, whether large or small. Rosen offers a similar critique of two-step flow in his comparison of information to water.

When a French sociologist Gabriel Tarde described how fashion spread in France at the turn of the last century, he used the metaphor of a water tower. Fashion . . . originated in the highest social class and flowed downward through a "waterfall of imitation. . . ." Others who have studied this over the years have used terms such as "trickle-down" and the "two-step flow" model to describe the process. These concepts are not necessarily wrong – in fact, I believe that they are important components of the process – but these terms immediately suggest that the source is in some way more important than the receiving end of the information. . . . The water metaphor also assumes that information flows in only one direction, ignoring the fact that there's often a dialogue between people who spread the word about a product and those who are on the receiving end of the information. While I recognize that some hierarchy always exists in the way information spread, there is not as much as some people may think.

If I were forced to use a water metaphor, I would say that buzz is more like underground water, it may trickle any which way: down, sideways, or even up." (Rosen, 2009: 129)

This metaphor of underground water flowing in many directions closely resembles a network of individuals. They all have the ability to communicate and influence each other. This multidirectional approach can, once again, be thought of as a network. Combining the disciplines of word of mouth, opinion leaders, and network analysis, recent research better shows how people interact with others in social networks.

Rosen points out that one of the primary problems two-step flow has in explaining how things become popular is its implied hierarchy. Opinion leaders are at the top. He notes that in two-step flow, "a publisher is somehow more important than the bookstore, which is somehow above the reader" (Rosen, 2009: 129). We can readily notice in everyday life that information does not solely flow in a vertical fashion (i.e., from the powerful to the masses) but in every which way.

Moreover, Gladwell asserts that influentials bring people together. While this may be true in off-line relationships, the influence and connective power of "mavens" on online social networking services does not appear to be especially great. Anderson et al. showed that the connective power of average users, not mavens, drives social cascades on Twitter. In a study of 1 billion tweets, four types of messages were tracked: petitions, news, pictures, and videos (Goel et al., 2012). The researchers attempted to define two types of diffusion: (1) viral diffusion, which results from extremely large amounts of friend-to-friend sharing; and (2) broadcast diffusion, in which a single user or small handful of users generates a large amount of diffusion. Viral diffusion follows the thinking of Watts and Dodds (2007). Broadcast diffusion more closely follows the thinking of two-step flow theory (Weimann, 1994). The study, while still in review, shows that the majority of the largest cascades occurred virally (i.e., from person-to-person sharing). In the newly derived measurement *structural virality*, the authors measure the number of people contributing to a social cascade. Their evidence shows that across all four domains, as cascades grow, so does the structural virality, or the number of people involved in the diffusion process. The authors note that large cascades can occur from broadcasts. While those cascades could be rather large on average, they were not as large as viral cascades.

Instead, it appears that popularity comes from person-to-person sharing. In this model of diffusion, messages catch on if many "easily influenced" people share information with each other (Watts and Dodds, 2007). Each person spreads the message a little bit. Very few people exhibit viral behavior.

Watts and Dodds refute the idea that “influentials” (i.e., a minority of individuals who influence an exceptional number of their peers) drive the formation of public opinion (2007).

Watts and Dodds modeled the patterns of cascades (2007). They define cascades as the process whereby something, typically information or knowledge, is successively passed on to others. Cascades vary in how widely they are spread (i.e., the amount of diffusion they receive). Watts and Dodds argue that cascades are more complicated than is understood by the opinion leader research. They refute the idea that influentials are vital to the formation of public opinion (2007). The researchers supply evidence in the form of computerized social networks. In simulated models, Watts and Dodds built a network of 10,000 individuals. Each individual was given an influence threshold (i.e., a tolerance level that must be satisfied before that individual would pass along a message). The researchers tested the “influential” hypothesis by setting different levels of connectedness for certain actors in the network. Some were central to the network and were well connected. Others were isolated in the network and had few connections. Inspired by Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point*, a small percent of the total actors had many connections, and the rest had relatively few. After the networks were configured, one person was picked at random as a starting point. Then, based on the acceptance thresholds, people either did or did not pass on the message. If they did pass on the information, the people they were connected to then received that information. Those people then decided whether or not to pass on the information based on their threshold, and so on. After repeating the experiment a thousand different ways, the researchers found that the largest cascades began with average actors. Under most of the social conditions that the researchers considered, they found that large cascades were not started by influentials. Instead, the drivers of widespread diffusion were easily influenced individuals. The researchers note that, under the majority of all scenarios, influentials were only modestly more important than average individuals.

Anderson has also shown that the largest social cascades do not occur when a single person introduces content, but when many people introduce content (2013). Anderson, too, observed the viral diffusion method on Twitter. He shows that for a viral video, typically each person that introduces the content garners a few additional adoptions. While some adoptions are greater than others, no one adoption can account for a large amount of diffusion (2013).

This thinking is not new in marketing. In evaluating word-of-mouth (WOM) campaigns, Rosen concludes that volume does not matter as

much as dispersion (2009). He cites that the most effective campaigns have “buzz” that spreads across as many groups of a network as possible. In what he calls “seeding,” he recommends that marketers strategically reach across the entire population of people they intend to reach, not just to a few popular people. He cites the tendency that popular people have to be connected with each other as a reason why this strategy could be ineffective. Overlap can occur, while other areas of a given network may be missed completely.

Another study finds the number of “followers” (i.e., the number of people subscribed to a person’s Twitter feed) is not a great predictor of how influential a user is on Twitter (Quercia et al., 2011). While the study did find that the largest cascades came from users with a large amount of followers, the researchers could not predict which users would generate diffusion. Using evidence available to them through the Twitter application program interface (API), the researchers could not reliably predict when large cascades would occur. They therefore suggested that marketers target a large number of potential influencers, thereby capturing average effects. They suggest that targeting a small number of influentials would likely be ineffective.

Cha et al. echo these findings in the study aptly named “million follower fallacy” (2010). The researchers found that users with large amounts of followers were not consistently influential (Cha et al., 2010). The most followed users were observed as being particularly unsuccessful at spawning large amounts of retweets. Instead, the authors suggest that retweets are driven by the content value of a tweet.

Even more complexities exist that could confound approaches to identify influentials. Researchers have found that popularity on Twitter may be based on moods, not more traditional measurements of influence (Quercia et al., 2011). In an analysis of the most influential users on Twitter, researchers found that popularity and influence cannot be reliably traced back to “the graph properties of the network.” Measurements of such graph properties (e.g., who replies to whom, which relationships are mutual) are indicative of opinion leadership as conceived in WOM and two-step flow models (Weimann, 1994; Godes and Mayzlin, 2009). However, Quercia et al. found that these properties fail to predict whether a person will be influential. Through simple measurements of personality, the researchers note that language differences exist among people on Twitter. More specifically, they note that the most influential users on Twitter tend to express negative sentiment. While the researchers admit the language analysis was exploratory, they conclude that personality plays a larger role in influence.

Conclusions

Go for everyday readers, not celebrities

The findings here suggest that news media should pay little attention to celebrities and the like. When a celebrity posts a news story, it does garner a little more attention than when an average user shares it. But the difference is nowhere near proportional to the millions of followers celebrities have. Celebrities do have a lot of followers on social media platforms. Regardless of their apparent fame, they fail to garner attention relative to the number of users that follow them. The most popular users on Twitter are not necessarily significantly better at passing on news stories.

Everyday people pass on stories to their friends, and while they are not quite as effective as celebrities, they do it much more often. With this thought in mind, media managers need to find their everyday audiences on social media platforms. This can be done through very calculated advertising campaigns on the social media service in question. Media managers should target users that

- Live in the correct geographic area
- Are active (post 3+ messages a week)
- Are engaged (have liked or shared content from news media)
- Have a certain threshold of followers (Vargo, 2013 suggests 500)
- Posts about topics your news outlet covers

In running calculated, mini campaigns with budgets of less than \$100, followers can be gained. This can be done two ways. First, news stories can be “injected” into a user’s news feed. Here, relevance is key. The idea is that if the news story is relevant to the user, they may click on it, engage with it, and ultimately follow the brand. This may appear invasive, but if the story is topically and geographically relevant, the user will likely find the story interesting. After all, a relevant news story would surely be more interesting than an advertisement for a company. By serving them a relevant story and then asking them to like a Facebook page in the process, a news media can grow its base in a smart way. If the story is not relevant, the advertisement may be found annoying. Secondly, Twitter and Facebook offer promoted “who to follow” spaces where a company can promote its Twitter account. Here, a news media can target relevant customers

and encourage them to follow the media based solely on the brand name. Relevance here plays a role, in that a user should be reached when they are viewing content similar to what the sponsored media in question also produces.

Drawing from the beginning of this chapter, the end goal is not to find as many users as possible. The goal is to find active and engaged ones. There is no need to solely advertise to influentials (i.e., celebrities and users with millions of followers), but adding users with few friends is not likely to push the needle either. Remember what the literature says about virality. The most popular content on the Internet comes from tons of easily influenced individuals sharing content with their friends. As such, the value of adding one more “like” on Facebook or “follower” on Twitter is not just in that person. The value added is in fact that entire network to which that person is connected. When a user starts following your content, they are much more likely to share it. When they share it, it is likely that a handful of their friends will visit it as well. This is how content spreads across the Internet.

Do not be afraid of advertising marketplaces

All social media platforms have advertising *marketplaces* that can reach a media's readers in more straightforward ways. On Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat, the marketplace allows for user targeting along several dimensions, including demographics, geographics, interests, and more. The list of targeting options is always growing.

The initial investment of a paid advertisement for a campaign sounds expensive and perhaps counterintuitive. Media marketing budgets are razor thin. Media also are also . . . media. Surely they are the ones that should benefit from advertising, not vice versa. While these points are indeed valid, advertising on social media is done in the format of a marketplace. This means that advertising prices are determined on a supply and demand basis. The negative aspect to this is that at certain times, and for certain users (i.e., people with certain likes and interests), advertising may be expensive. The positive side to this is that at other times, when demand is low, the advertising will be very affordable. Moreover, different pricing models for marketplaces exist. For instance, instead of paying for each time a news story is injected into a consumer's news feed, there are options to pay only when people click or perform a specific action (i.e., like a Facebook page, install an application, or enroll in a digital newspaper subscription). These types of payment options for advertising are called cost per click (CPC) and cost per action (CPA),

respectively. While they can come with a premium price tag, media managers can have complete control over whom they are reaching and what they want to pay for.

Let journalists dedicate time to “Own” specific topics on social media

Discussion in the opinion leader literature reveals an opportunity. Journalists do not need to recruit celebrities on Twitter to have a successful, faithful following. They do not have to blog every facet of their everyday lives, either. Instead, journalists can become opinion leaders through the quality and focus of information they share. Creating separate accounts for journalists turns them from organizations into individuals with specific interests. Individual journalists can own a beat or niche topic area on a social media platform. In that space, the journalist can offer temporal updates on stories and events that fit a specific focus.

Two-step flow suggests that journalists and bloggers alike can become opinion leaders by posting on these topics consistently and reliably. Again, this type of reporting can (and likely should) be more time sensitive in focus but professional in nature. Journalists wary of posting what they ate for lunch can rest easy. Rather, journalists can cover topics in which they are invested. These topics can be as specific as the journalist’s expertise, such as the local weather. Or they can be as broad as health and wellness or the national economy. However, the broader the topic is, the more competition exists. The more “niche” or specific a topic, the less competition and thus the increased likelihood that said journalist can own a part of that discussion. Successful examples include topics such as airline safety, big data marketing, or even the England and Wales Cricket Board. For local journalism, topic focuses can include community events in Leeds, organic food in Sussex, or healthcare in Bristol. By owning a topic, journalists can garner attention beyond the media they represent. This adds value not only in the additional traffic they drive, but also in the reputation they bring to the media organization they represent.

The power of one

The overall takeaway of this chapter is to not underestimate the power of the average consumer. Each consumer comes with an additional network of connected users. While any one network may not be particularly powerful,

many small networks combined make things go viral. Again, remember that the most viral stories on the Internet come from mass cascades of easily influenced individuals (Watts and Dodds, 2007; Goel et al., 2012). Your media organization must have enough “seeds” (i.e., followers or friends) across the entire network you want to reach. Only then can you be assured that your message is reaching that entire network. To reach an entire population, many average consumers must be listening to you across that entire population. When developing a social media marketing strategy, make sure you are reaching for people that are not only interested in your stories but also individuals that cover the complete spectrum of your target audience. Reach across all relevant geographies and demographics.

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