
Social publishers: a new paradigm for online media

By Miklos Sarvary

Many of my recent readings of the business press give the impression that a consensus seems to emerge among professional content providers (also called “content mills”) - online newspapers (e.g. Huffington Post, The Business Insider), online tabloids (e.g. BuzzFeed) or blogs.

The consensus is: “the thing to maximize is Facebook Likes!”. This is interesting because it acknowledges a shift in the way people consume or “use” online media content. Under the previous paradigm, the idea was to build a portal where people spend time because the portal represents a large bundle of their online information needs. The bundle is designed to maximize the time spent or page views on the site, which then provides higher advertising revenues. Customer acquisition often meant search-engine optimization with the objective to become the “go to place” for a certain topic or fashionable buzz word.

The new paradigm sees the consumer as a social player on the Web rather than someone searching for news, entertainment or other information. People use social networks to promote themselves with an inherent need to build “relevance” in their community. Much more attention is given to the generation of content than to the consumption of content. In this context, the goal is to provide raw material for people to share. The content generated by online publishers – increasingly called social publishers – is an invaluable source for people to find material to share. If we manage to grab the attention of our peers and generate buzz around a piece of funny or touching content or news, we promote our relevance and eventually our social status. But, it is hard to do this with the pictures of our dog or cat or the random experiences that we report on our life. Breaking the news on a good story or a gossip just buys us so much more relevance.

Clearly, if this is the purpose of content search on the Web then the social publisher’s objective is to generate as many “Likes” or positive feedback as possible with the posted content pieces. This will make the content pieces viral in social media (mostly Facebook) with the potential to reach a huge crowd. Each visitor spends little time on the social publisher’s page but there will be many of them. Moreover, this viral phenomenon might also work for a new form of advertising where instead of showing banner ads to people, brand-specific content (that entertains) is shared between members of the community. There is evidence that ads seen in a social context (e.g. recommended by a friend) work much better than ads “on the periphery” of other content.

But, is it true that our social media use is essentially based on our ‘narcissism’ with the goal of promoting ourselves? Aren’t we just trying to stay in touch and interact with our friends? Research indicates that our inherent tendency to compete for relevance is in many ways the essence of our humanity. The newest theory (by Jean-Louis Dessales) on the origins of human language – arguably one of the top candidates to define our uniqueness as humans – convincingly suggest that speech has evolved to improve individuals’ capacity to build coalitions. Speech is a medium to advertise the person in an eternal competition for relevance with other members of the community. More relevance provides us with more capabilities to build useful coalitions. In this sense, similarly to our jokes at a party, our Facebook posts are ‘performances’ with the aim to build social capital (and at the risk of losing it). Social publishers pretend to help us by providing the raw material....

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