Taking the public in public broadcasting seriously: BBC and news sharing during the Covid-19 crisis

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Abstract

We propose a text-as-data approach to linking large-scale media data with ethnographic fieldwork data to study people's media practices. Under current pandemic conditions, we find that the public turns to the BBC for information and that the act of news sharing may reflect a range of critical attitudes towards the source.

Introduction

The Covid-19 information environment has been described as a process of "information diffusion in a disintermediated news cycle" (Cinelli 2020, 1). While a lot of recent research explores the problem of misinformation, there is little evidence to suggest that inaccurate or misleading information has "crowded out consumption of other hard news" in practice (Guess 2020, 472). In this extended abstract, we ask which news sources the public relies on to access information on Covid-19, and explore some of the mechanisms underlying individual media practices.

Drawing on diverse observational data relating to two news-saturated crisis moments in the UK, Brexit and Covid-19, we propose a mixed method approach to explore how citizens navigate the overwhelming quantity of information in their everyday lives. First, we look at aggregate data on news sharing on social media and find that, when it comes to information about the coronavirus, traditional media sources, in particular the BBC, dominate. Second, we use a sample of interview transcripts from an ethnographic project to extract the news sources interviewees referred to when discussing their use of media during the Brexit process. We do this to demonstrate a novel linkage between digital trace data on information flows and rich ethnographic data. We suggest our method can be applied to current research initiatives involving participant observation and interviews in relation to Covid-19 in the future.

Theory

The increasing availability and range of media choices in the "post-broadcast" era has driven many away from regular consumption of public affairs news towards alternatives such as entertainment programming (Prior 2007). According to one view, this coupled with the growth of social media has further contributed to the fragmentation of citizens' information environment, potentially removing or altering the gate keeping role of traditional media (Singer 2014). During times of crisis, this fragmentation poses a risk of under-exposure to guidance on public health measures. On the other hand, comparative work has found that "the populations of countries with public service broad- and narrowcasting are better informed about government and politics, are more trusting of other people, have more positive civic attitudes" (Newton 2015, 31). Importantly, recent survey work shows the majority of UK citizens report usage of the UK's public service broadcaster to gather information about the coronavirus pandemic (Ofcom 2020). In addition, social media also broadens the ways in which people interact with news information. Going beyond exposure, *news sharing* on social media can thus be a more meaningful indicator of a number of motivations including trust in source (American Press Institute 2017), social validation (Waruwu 2020) or subjective norms (Karnowski 2017).

Methods

We used Webhose's News API to extract data on information flows on social media. Webhose crawls news content published online with a potentially complete coverage unless a particular source requests their content not to be collected[1]. This data comprise the full text of 215,952 news stories that feature the keywords "coronavirus" and "covid"

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[1] In our case, a known major source missing is The Daily Mail, a high circulation British tabloid.

published between 1 December 2019 and 28 March 2020 across news and information websites in the UK.

The qualitative data comprises 180 interviews conducted in the South West, North East, and Midlands areas of England. The fieldwork began in October 2018. The project investigates identity, belonging, and importantly the role of media in "Brexit Britain." Our focus is on the diverse types of knowledge that individuals mobilise to engage with the media. This means that people's views on the media are contextualised within a broader understanding of their wider social and political worldviews including their sense of local, national, and European belonging. For the text as data approach combining the fieldwork transcripts with media data, we use a subsample of 15 transcripts for the purposes of demonstrating the method. The qualitative analysis draws on the full set of 180 transcripts.

We proceeded with the analysis as follows. From the media data, we extracted the domain of all Covid-19 stories (4,397 domains), along with information on whether and how many times they were circulated on social media. We focused on the number of Facebook shares, and summed the total number of shares across all stories within each news domains. We then used this list news and information domains to search through the transcript text, and counted the frequency fieldwork participants mentioned each source.

First results and future work

In terms of the sheer volume of stories, we find that traditional sources of news such as broadcast news (BBC, Sky), and the more trusted partisan broadsheets are not able to keep up with the excess volume of news stories generated by their online competitors including the tabloid. Story count is however only weakly predictive of news sharing. We find that over time starting mid-March 2020, people were much more likely to share news originating from the BBC.
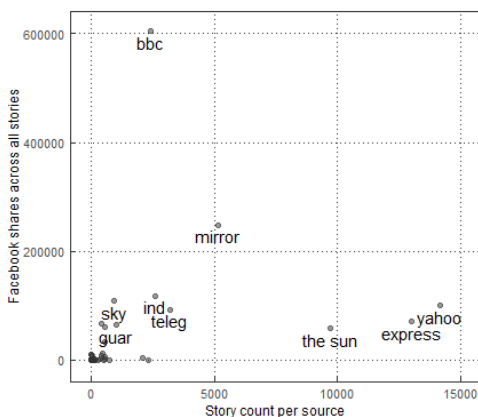

Figure 1: Covid-19 news coverage by source

We do, however, find that the frequency of mentions in the fieldwork transcripts predicted news sharing better.

We suggest the BBC represents an opportunity for a shared news experience by the public countering any polarisation
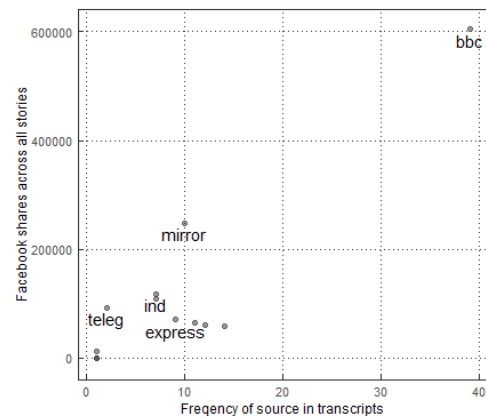

Figure 2: Linkage between ethnography and media mapping

of news viewing and reading that might have been aggravated by social media. In addition, linkage with qualitative data, once results from Covid-19 fieldwork are available, can help us to better understand people's critical relationship with the media they share. Many citizens need to resolve the tensions between the BBC seen as problematic or "biased" during Brexit, and continued use and trust during times of crisis. Rich ethnographic data can reveal these strategies.

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