Journalism Practice in a Digital Age: Utilization of Social Media in Online News

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ABSTRACT: Social media have become an indispensable part of modern journalism. Media organizations are increasingly using an abundance of content created on these platforms to report news, which is affecting gatekeeping operations in newsrooms. Acknowledging this development, the current study employed a gatekeeping perspective to examine what media practices 10 prominent U.S.-based news websites embrace when deriving content and sources from social media. A meticulous content analysis of 180 online articles shows that journalists primarily rely on institutional, official sources when utilizing social media in the news production process. Furthermore, written information is more likely to appear in online news in comparison to the information in the form of multimedia, such as photographs and videos. Based on the results, Twitter emerged as a cornerstone of modern journalism as it is the key platform embraced by news organizations that seek for content on social media. Finally, the results show that social media are most likely to be utilized by journalists who write stories on entertainment and politics.

Keywords: digital news; gatekeeping; news websites; online news; social media; Twitter

Introduction

The number of people who engage with social media is continuously growing, reaching more than 3 billion active users worldwide in 2020 (Clement, 2020). This trend is reinforcing the role that social media platforms play in sharing information and therefore, affecting journalism practice. With the adoption of digital technologies that empowered citizens to distribute information online, journalists made a shift in their daily routines that involved establishing and strengthening engagement with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms. They began using social media to promote their content, interact with readers, but also to observe and incorporate in their reports the information that Internet users publish through their accounts (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). This increased reliance on social media is changing gatekeeping practices, considering that in the news production process, reporters do not solely rely on content gathered in a traditional way, through the interviews, official reports, or press conferences. Nowadays, journalists include in their stories information that comes from an abundance of social media sources. Employing social media in delivering the news appears to be a necessity in a digitalized environment, considering that citizens worldwide actively engage with these platforms.

Evidently, in today's journalists' work environment, social media arise as one of the key symbols. Aside from using them as a tool to connect with users and thus, increase traffic to their websites, news organizations also pay close attention to what is being

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posted on social media because of a large amount of raw material they provide. Both institutional sources and ordinary citizens can supply the Internet with newsworthy information that promotes their position toward an international problem or depicts what is currently happening in the areas where they live. Journalists can find diverse content on social media that come from amateur content producers – anywhere from celebrity-related images to footage of violent protests or natural disaster aftermath. In addition to that, an increasing number of officials are using Twitter to make big announcements and promote their policy goals. Among them are the former and current U.S. presidents, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. In 2012 Obama was the first president to announce his second presidential mandate in a tweet, making that tweet the most retweeted one in the same year (McIntyre, 2012). On the other hand, President Trump is known for tweeting about high-policy issues even ahead of addressing the same problems before the media. Trump's activities on Twitter became regular and widely known, prompting Ingram (2017) to call him 'The 140-character president,' implying that he frequently uses tweets to post announcements and share his viewpoints on diverse societal and political matters.

Overall, this development has influenced the process of news production and information dissemination. Bearing in mind that journalism routine has changed to include engagement with social media and allow content from informal sources to enter the mainstream media sphere, this study employs the gatekeeping perspective to examine the use of social media sources in delivering news online by prominent U.S.-based news websites. To achieve this goal, the study focuses on the amount and nature of content derived from social media and published as part of an online news article. It does so by looking at the number of embedded social media posts, a number of sources derived from social media, types of sources (official vs. non-official), most frequently utilized social media, and the type of media items present in the story.

Literature Review

The 21st century media gave rise to a new perspective on gatekeepers. What journalism scholars perceived as a decision-making process regarding what information that media professionals have access to would be made available to the public (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) is taking a new form in the digitalized media ecosystem. Academics are rethinking the traditional gatekeeping role and analyzing it in relation to the impact that increased user participation has on news production

(Paulussen & Harder, 2014). More people receive news through their friends and family members via social media, "which have come to challenge editorial decisions about what to select and reject as news stories" (Bro & Wallberg, 2015, p. 446-447).

Gatekeeping is being confronted in the age when any user with access to the Internet can publish information. Due to this development, "journalism no longer claim monopoly over public information" as those who produce information "outside the traditional news institutions increasingly challenge journalistic constructions through alternative forms of communication, not least through social media platform" (Ekman & Widholm, 2015, p. 80). Additionally, digitized media, with a high demand for interactivity, transform audience members as gatekeepers as they interact with news producers and other audience members to influence newsworthiness of information and events (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In gatekeeping reconceptualization, social media play a particularly important role. Not only that they multiply the number of senders and receivers in the process of news dissemination, but also diminish the role of traditional media by empowering politicians, different institutions, and citizens to act as a news source and share the news (Bastos, Raimundo, & Travitzki, 2013).

Social Media

Defined as the Internet-based platforms, social media enable users to create and share content with others within the networked community (Burns, 2017). They have gained popularity quickly after emerging, forcing both news organizations and journalists to adapt to the new multidirectional news diffusion, and to apply social media in the process of news production and dissemination. Therefore, social media took upon multiple roles in journalism. They are being used as a news gathering and dissemination tool as well as the platforms that news organizations employ to maintain, strengthen, and promote their global online presence. A Canadian print media expert, for instance, described social media as a modern version of what would be identified in the pre-press era as obtaining diverse information from friends and neighbors (Zeller & Hermida, 2015).

The overall impact of social media on journalism practice is indisputable. This is particularly the case in tech-savvy countries such as the United States, where about 40% of journalists identify social media as very important in their work (Weaver & Willnat, 2016). In today's media environment, many platforms serve as a tool for acquiring and sharing information. Some of the

most popular ones include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat. All of these media enable journalists to gather diverse news content, including both textual and visual elements, such as photographs, video clips, maps, and graphs.

This diversity of available tools and resources make social media especially appealing to journalists. Tandoc and Vos (2016) who examined practices in three online newsrooms in the United States, identified Facebook and Twitter as the most utilized social media in these organizations. According to them, online editors use social media for interaction with readers and the promotion of content but also to observe trending topics and information shared by both official and non-official sources. In addition to that, the editors would, for instance, use Twitter to check what other news organizations are posting on their accounts. A similar trend has been identified by several other studies that examined the utilization of social media in journalism. Weaver and Willnat (2016) interviewed 1080 American journalists to learn that some of the main reasons for reliance on social media included the search for breaking news and looking at what other news outlets share on social media. They also found that social media can inspire journalism stories, provide additional information to supplement a story, and keep media professionals connected with their audiences. Such information from social media can appear in news stories as a reference or in the form of embedded posts or screenshots. For instance, a study about live blogging utilized by the U.K.-based media *The Guardian* found that journalists frequently embed content from social media, such as tweets, so users can be reassured that the content provided is authentic (Pantic, Whiteside, & Cvetkovic, 2017). Embedding the content in news stories contributes to the story transparency, as users can see how the journalist who wrote the story obtained and delivered the information to the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Pantic et al., 2017).

Aside from Weaver and Willnat, other scholars also found that observing social media for world events is a common practice among journalists. For instance, Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins, and Følstad (2016) addressed that searching for breaking news on Twitter is a daily routine widely embraced by media practitioners in four European countries: Germany, Norway, France, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. In addition to Twitter, European journalists use Facebook as part of their routine. This social media presents a significant source for them and they utilize it "for authenticity assessment, for contacting eyewitnesses or for accessing profiles of people involved in crime cases" (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016, p. 329). With its real-

time information delivery, Twitter responds well to the need of online journalism for immediacy (Zeller & Hermida, 2015). The importance of Twitter is reflected in the fact that journalists who work for digital platforms are required to post the news on Twitter first before putting a breaking news story together for a website and one of the reasons for it is that the story will be better positioned on search engines, such as Google (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Journalists will then keep updating their readers about the story through new tweets – a practice that demonstrates the impact social media have on journalism practice.

Sources

Routine practices provide journalists with guidance on where to seek information, who are acceptable and reliable sources, and how to maintain relations with the main information suppliers (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Tuchman, 1978). Journalists have developed source-oriented routines as a way to apply the accepted professional norms and conform to institutional practices (Tuchman, 1978). Routinized gathering of information strengthened the relationship between a news organization and the state (Hallin, 1989) because journalists tend to rely on the authoritative, expert, and familiar sources, who would guarantee the validity of the information.

In the process of news gathering, journalists employ multiple source selection practices to report the news. Manninen (2017), who studied journalism routines in seven Finnish news organizations, identified five trust discourses pertaining to the source selection. They include: ideological or sources journalists employ by routine, without questioning the decision of utilizing them in their stories (e.g., police, public officials); pragmatic sources or sources journalists do not necessarily trust to obtain truthful information from, but those sources do have certain expertise, are accessible and recognized, which makes them useful in the production process (e.g., a government representative); cynically pragmatic sources or distrustful sources that journalists frequently employ because of their newsworthiness (e.g., politicians); consensual trust is reflected in a process that requires evaluating the sources and the information they provided and then determining if there is a consensus among sources regarding the information (e.g., witnesses of accidents); contextual trust where source's trustworthiness depends on the circumstances under which the information is being provided (e.g., experts). Mannien (2017) explains that while in the case of consensual trust the focus is on the trustworthiness of

the information being provided, contextual trust places value of the quality of sources themselves.

However, the advent of new technologies and the development of social media forced journalists to adapt their routines and include social media when gathering news and contextualizing events they report about (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Social media and sources available on social media, as Broersma (2013) argued, opened traditional media to a variety of voices and topics beyond traditional news sources. More than half of the U.S. journalists surveyed in 2013 said that they regularly use social media platforms for news gathering and source acquiring (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). The survey results support Broersma's and Graham's (2013) claim that journalists recognize social media, especially Twitter, as a useful tool for sourcing quotes.

Hence, to better understand how news organizations utilize content from Twitter and other social media as well as what kind of news elements from these platforms are they most likely to incorporate in news stories, the current study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the amount of social media posts and sources utilized in online news across sections and websites?

RQ2: What type of media items from social media are most often employed in online news (e.g., written information, still photographs, videos, etc.)

Official and non-official sources. Ideological, pragmatic, and cynically pragmatic sources identified by Mannien (2017) respond to the category of official or elite sources that, for instance, Thorsen and Jackson (2018) found to be frequently derived from social media and used in live blogs published by the UK-based news organizations. This implies that even though social media appear to have a strong impact on journalism, their utilization in news should still be examined with caution. Social media content is user-generated, which makes it difficult for a news organization to verify its accuracy (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). Hence, that might press journalists to employ gatekeeping practices and prevent them from utilizing social media sources in their reports or employing them in large amounts. When Thorsen and Jackson (2018) examined sources practices in online news and live blogs produced by the BBC, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph*, they found that less than 20% of information from social media came from non-elite sources. Social media were also more likely to be utilized in live blogs than in online news articles, as live

blogs are fluid. Similarly, when examining the way journalists in eight quality and popular newspapers in the UK and the Netherlands sourced tweets in their reports, Broersma and Graham (2013) found that journalists in both countries mostly used tweets posted by celebrities, athletes, and politicians. Tweets from celebrities were accounted for 34% in the UK and 12% of all tweets used in Dutch newspaper reports. Also, 21% of athletes' tweets were used in the UK reports, and 30% were sourced in the Dutch press.

One of the symbols of democracy is diversity which, when associated with news and news sources, can be described as 'the variety in offer' (van Hoof, Jacobi, Ruigrok, & van Atteveldt 2014, p. 669). In an age of digital media, "social media enable every citizen to participate in the communication process and share ideas and user-generated content publicly," thus helping "journalists broaden their spectrum of official sources with unknown and unexpected sources" (Paulussen & Harder 2014, p. 548). Even though journalists perceive social media as a platform that provides an abundance of sources, what they are most likely to rely on are those sources that are trusted and verifiable (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). Trusted, or official sources on social media could include politicians, police officers, and celebrities. Journalists also employ sources that are not official but they assess them critically and verify their authenticity through double-checking the information from the trusted sources (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). This study aims to investigate the types of sources and social media journalists use when creating news reports by addressing the following question:

RQ3: What social media do news organizations primarily rely on when looking for sources on these platforms and what is the nature of those sources?

Primary and non-primary sources. Social media has been utilized not only in online news but also in newspapers. As an example, Paulussen and Harder (2014) analyzed articles published from January 2006 to December 2013 in two Belgian newspapers, *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, to find that they used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as a source of information. These two authors looked at several elements regarding the utilization of social media in the news. One of them was employing social media as a primary source or the source around which the story was built, and non-primary source, or the source that appeared among many others in the story. When journalists use social media as a source, they appeared as a primary source in 45% of articles and non-primary source in 41% of newspapers' stories (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). According to the study, social media

sources were most likely to be employed for covering international events and soft news, such as show business, human-interest stories, and sports. Furthermore, the study showed that prominent sources occupied most of the social media content in news articles. Using social media as a primary source in a story is not staggering, considering that "political actors, previously positioned outside the realm of media institutions, have now incorporated social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs into their daily communication strategies" (Ekman & Widholm, 2015, p. 78). Hence, news media use the information they share to report the news. To examine the nature of sources that are likely to be employed in online news that utilize social media, the following research question was explicated:

RQ4: Are social media more likely to be employed as a primary or non-primary source in the story?

Method

The current research employed content analysis to examine the utilization of social media posts across diverse sections of 10 news websites. The first step was to determine which sections would be analyzed. After looking at multiple prominent online news websites (e.g., *The New York Times, The Washington Post,* CNN), the authors identified six basic sections that are common to the news websites. Those include politics, U.S. news, world, business/economy, sports, and entertainment. The second step was selecting 10 news websites for the analysis. As the goal was to target news websites with high traffic and prominence, the selection was made based on several rankings of most popular news websites in the United States (i.e., Kadaza, SimilarWeb, Statista, Pew Research Center). It should be noted that some of the websites that were among the most popular 10 were removed from the analysis as they were not a good fit. For instance, msnbc.com was not included as this website did not have a full set of sections that were selected for the analysis. Another one was Google News, which was removed as it is a news aggregator and thus, not suitable for the study. Once these websites were removed, the list of 10 most visited U.S.-based news websites included: three broadcast network television sites – ABC News, CBS, and Fox News; three hybrid online-only sites – AOL, Huffington Post, and Yahoo News; three newspaper websites – *The New York Times, USA Today,* and *The Washington Post*; and one cable television news site – CNN. This categorization of news websites was taken from earlier, substantive research on the news websites' popularity in the U.S. (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2011). The total number of online news that

was analyzed was 180. This sample was adequate to allow for gaining an understanding of the utilization of social media in online news.

Using a random number generator, the authors selected three days of three months in 2018 (October, November, and December) to collect online news stories that will be examined as part of the research. Those randomly selected dates included: October 31 (Wednesday), November 27 (Tuesday), and December 15 (Saturday). For each of these three dates, the authors selected one story in every website section that was established for the analysis (i.e., politics, U.S. news, world, business/economy, sports, and entertainment). The stories were selected randomly. In particular, one of the study authors would log onto a website between 4 and 6 p.m., open individual sections on the website and pick a story that would pop-up first on the list in that section. After that, the author would copy a link of the story to a Word document and prepare it for the analysis. This activity was performed for each of the 10 websites that were analyzed. As the authors were analyzing each story, they were inserting data into SPSS.

Another step was to create a codebook to analyze the data. For each news story, the authors would specify the date when it was published, the story URL, a media outlet that published it, and the section the story was published in. A detailed explanation of each concept that would be assessed in the study was provided. Two coders selected 20 online news stories to run an initial analysis and determine if the codebook needed improvement. They reached an agreement about a minor revision of the codebook, as they explained in more detail what multimedia elements should be identified as part of social media posts. After revising the codebook, two coders performed the analysis, each coding 90 stories. Finally, the coders selected 20 stories to test inter-coder reliability. The coders had a full agreement – 100% for all variables (e.g., social media posts, the nature of social media sources, media items, social media). This is not astonishing considering that such items were relatively easy to identify. For instance, a Facebook or an Instagram post would be embedded in the news or the news author would clearly state where specifically a politician or a celebrity said something (e. g., stated on Twitter). The only exception in terms of intercoder reliability was the number of all sources utilized in news, where the agreement was not full but it was still high, as Cohen's kappa was .942. This is due to an occasionally overwhelming number of sources in a single story as some of them incorporated more than 20 unique sources.

Measures

A number of sources. The authors of the study counted a number of sources that appeared in every news story. This number included both sources that posted information on social media and the sources that were employed as part of the traditional journalism routine. The latter included interviews with experts, statements from press conferences, references to other media, press releases, information from news agencies, etc.

Social media posts. Another element of the analysis was to investigate how many social media posts were present in each online story in the sample. This operation was performed by counting a number of posts from diverse social media that appeared in the story in the form of screenshots and embedded posts. Such posts were identifiable by the logo of social media they were derived from. An example of the social media post would be a tweet published by Donald Trump that was embedded in the story, so readers could click on it and automatically be directed to the Trump's Twitter account where the tweet in question was published.

The nature of social media sources. Social media sources were placed into two categories – official and non-official sources. Official sources primarily represent elites, organizations, and institutions. The authenticity of such sources can be recognized on social media by a blue tick that accompanies their account (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). Non-official sources are those that have not been verified this way. Hence, the current study coded as non-official those sources that represent anonymous individuals or people who are not widely known to the general public.

Primary and non-primary sources. Following the logic of Paulussen and Harder (2014) of the function of social media, the study looked at whether the sources employed from social media served as primary or non-primary sources. Hence, sources that were identified as primary were those around which the story was built. If the source from social media appeared among many other sources in the story, it was coded as a non-primary source.

Media items. Another component of the analysis was to look at the dominant media items that social media sources employed in the story have delivered. If the story contained no social media posts, it was coded as (0) N/A. Social media posts that illustrated only words with no multimedia items were coded as (1) information. An example of such a social media post would be an embedded tweet of a politician in which he delivered a statement. Social media posts that delivered information in the form of a still image was

coded as (2) photograph, while those that represented moving images were coded as (3) video. All other media items (e.g., graphs, illustrations, maps, screenshots) fell into the category (4) other. Following this logic, in instances where the story contained an embedded tweet with a photograph, it would be coded as (2), while when a video was the dominant element of a tweet it would be coded as (3).

Social media. The study also investigated what social media the sources present in the story were derived from. The following codes were used in the analysis: (0) N/A (no social media posts were present in the news); (1) Twitter; (2) Facebook; (3) YouTube; (4) Instagram; (5) Snapchat; (6) LinkedIn; (7) Other.

Results

The sample included 180 online news from 10 news websites or 18 articles per each website. According to the study results, 72 articles (40%) utilized social media sources in reporting news events. The study found that there were 1,040 unique sources in the entire sample out of which 13.17% or 137 sources came from social media.

First, the study examined the amount of social media posts and sources utilized in online news across sections and websites (RQ1). There was a total of 130 social media posts in 180 online news that were analyzed. The majority of online news (68.3%) had no social media posts. The maximum number of social media posts utilized in a single story was 10. According to the analysis, 26 online news (14.4%) had only one social media post, 12 news (6.7%) had two posts, while 9 stories (5%) incorporated three social media posts (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Number of social media posts in online news*

Stories containing N number of posts	Number of stories containing N number of posts	Percent (%)
N = 0	123	68.3
N = 1	26	14.4
N = 2	12	6.7

				The Washington Post	13
N = 3	9	5		ABC	12
N = 4	6	3.3		Yahoo	10
N = 5	1	.6		CBS	8
N = 6	1	.6		The New York Times	6
N = 8	1	.6		CNN	5
N = 10	1	.6			

The largest number of social media posts was utilized by four news organizations of different nature: two hybrid sites – Huffington Post and AOL, one newspaper website – *USA Today*, and Fox News, which represents a broadcast network television site (See Table 2). With respect to the news section, the greatest number of social media posts was detected in entertainment news ($N = 46$), while the lowest number of posts was present in the section dedicated to world news (Table 3).

Concerning the sources employed by news websites under study, 13.17% or 137 sources came from social media. *USA Today* took the lead with a total of 23 sources employed in the analyzed online stories, followed by *the Washington Post* that had 22 sources (Table 2). The section that was most likely to utilize sources from social media was entertainment (Table 3).

Table 2: *Number of social media posts and sources published by diverse news websites (N=130)*

Table 3: *Number of social media posts and sources across sections (N=130)*

News section	Number of social media posts ($N = 130$)
Entertainment	46
Politics	30
Sports	19
U.S. News/National News	13
Business/Economy	13
World/Globe	9

News Website	Number of social media posts ($N = 130$)	Number of sources from social media ($N = 137$)
AOL	19	15
Huffington Post	19	18
Fox News	19	14
USA Today	19	23

RQ2 asked about the information from social media that were most often used in online news (e.g., written information, still photographs, videos, etc.). According to the analysis, news websites were most likely to derive written information from social media. Specifically, there were 86 social media sources that were employed due to the information they shared. Photographs were second on the list of media items from social media utilized in online news ($N = 39$), followed by videos ($N = 24$).

RQ3 examined social media that news organizations primarily relied on when looking for sources on these

platforms and the nature of sources employed from social media. The majority of sources – 103 (75.18%) came from Twitter, while 14 (10.22%) were derived from YouTube, 10 (7.3%) from Facebook and 10 (7.3%) from Instagram. In terms of the nature of sources, 107 (78.1%) were official/formal while 30 (21.9%) represented informal sources.

RQ4 asked if social media were more likely to be employed as a primary or non-primary source in the story. The study found that 72 news stories employed sources from social media. Social media served as a primary source in 25 cases, which is 13.9% out of the total number of online stories, while in 47 cases (26.1%) social media served as a non-primary source. Looking at the total number of stories that utilized social media, it can be said that 34.72% of the stories were built around social media posts, while in 65.28% of stories that employed social media these sources were among other sources employed out of the social media spectrum. The entertainment section took the lead once again with 8 stories that employed social media as a primary source followed by politics that had 7 such stories (See Table 4). While analyzing the data, the authors noticed that a large amount of information from social media that appeared in the section devoted to politics was derived from U.S. President Donald Trump's Twitter account.

Table 4: *Number of stories in which social media appeared as primary and non-primary sources across sections (N=72)*

	Entertainment	Politics	Business	U.S. News	World/Globe	Sports	Total
Primary source	8	7	4	3	2	1	25
Non-primary	9	13	6	6	5	8	47

Discussion

In the social media-dominated world, news organizations aiming to preserve and increase user engagement need to keep an eye on what is trending on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other platforms. The content circulating on social media could be a supplement to an already created story or could serve as the initial information around which the story will be created. When looking at this type of content, journalists engage with the screening process, carefully selecting what information published on the networking platforms will be distributed to their readers, via the news websites they work for.

Looking at the results of the current study, five major conclusions can be drawn. First, news websites utilize social media in their reports due to the abundance of information they provide. Second, the sources employed in online news from social media primarily represent elite, official sources, meaning that journalists remain cautious in selecting information from these platforms. Third, social media are most likely to be present in stories that appear in politics and entertainment news. Fourth, the most important element that media professionals look for when searching for posts online is written information, mostly employed as a source's quote, not multimedia elements such as videos or photographs. Finally, the analysis further emphasizes the significant role that Twitter plays in newsrooms, considering that this platform emerged as the key social media tool that news outlets under study relied on for information.

Social media were utilized in 40% of the stories and it was predominantly in the form of information derived from Twitter. On one hand, this implies that almost half of the stories had at least one source from social media, which makes these platforms significant in the contemporary news environment. This finding supports the claim that using social media for news-gathering and source acquiring have been normalized as a standard journalistic routine. On the other hand, the amount of social media sources utilized in online news was small (13.17%) in comparison to the total number of sources that were present in the sample. This week utilization of social media sources aligns with the study on participatory journalism on major global news websites that found that news organizations were most likely to engage users in participation in those areas that would help them promote news content, such as enabling social media share button that suggests users to further disseminate the content (Pantic, 2018).

With respect to the nature of sources, the finding that less than a quarter derived from social media were unofficial is similar to the results of the study on live blogs which found that less than 20% of sources published in news content online came from non-elite sources (Thorsen & Jackson, 2018). It is also in line with the study which suggested that social media sources appeared in a small number of articles in Belgian newspapers (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). In the era when social media is becoming a platform for the news itself, journalists, as Brandtzaeg et al. (2016) suggested, primarily rely on those sources they can trust and verify. Verification of information is an important tenet of journalism (Kovac & Rosenstiel, 2014) that calls media professionals to employ gatekeeping practices and to be cautious when selecting and publishing information, especially when it comes from a hardly verifiable source.

Utilizing primarily official sources in news stories is not a surprising finding, considering that journalists' routines and professional standards drive them to those sources they perceive as credible (Paulussen & Harder 2014). This further implies that the journalistic routine in the digital era still incorporates gatekeeping practices. Even though social media supply the public and news organizations with a large amount of information, media still remain in power over the information that will be distributed to their audience. What this continuous stream of information that comes from social media does is making these practices more flexible, as journalists observe social media to see what topics are trending and what their sources are posting on these platforms.

Entertainment stories and reports on politics were most likely to utilize social media content, which suggests that celebrities and politicians understand the impact of social media for sharing news and opinions. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms allow them to circumscribe mass media and reach out to the wider public directly. Being aware of this, news organizations use social media to observe elites and their activities. Social media especially have been proven useful as immediate access to celebrities' private lives (Broersma & Graham, 2013). This aligns with the argument that "celebrities seem particularly likely to benefit from their social media presence, at least in terms of media attention" (Paulussen & Harder 2014, p. 549).

As reported in the results section, the authors noticed a large number of tweets that came from President Trump. In particular, his presence in many politics-related stories can also explain why, after entertainment news, politics was the section that utilized the largest number of tweets. The fact that news outlets feed on social media for political information is an important finding, considering that people rely on mass media to obtain information that will help them make decisions about their lives (Kovacs & Rosenstiel, 2014). For most citizens, "news media are the prime provider of political information" (van Hoof et al., 2014, p. 669) and in today's media ecology it appears as necessary for journalists to look at what is being published on social media. This is particularly important considering that the original information for a news report could be found on Twitter or Facebook, which was the case with seven out of 20 news stories on politics in the sample that utilized social media content. It is evident that politicians use social media as platforms for communication with a wider public and news media, which made their interconnections with journalists more complex (Ekman & Widholm, 2015).

As they are available to anyone who has access to the Internet, social media represent a rich source of multimedia items. Interestingly, even though social media are loaded with photographs, videos, and other elements, this was not a primary reason for news organizations to turn to them for content. The most important news element that journalists would look for on social media was pure, written information. Looking at the sections in which social media posts were published most often, the conclusion is that they were primarily searching for what politicians or celebrities had to say on Twitter. This trend could be explained from the mediatized interdependency perspective which perceives journalists and politicians as both actors and sources on social media and the internet, who rely on one another "to get their work done properly" (Ekman & Widholm, 2015, p. 81). Such interdependence is especially evident on Twitter, which has once again proven to be a tool that is essential to contemporary journalism.

Conclusion

Evidently, gatekeeping practices still represent part of the daily routine in mainstream news organizations in the United States. Even though they utilize the information they find on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms in their reports, journalists are still cautious when selecting what content will be available to the readers who access news on the websites they work for. To be up to date with major social media trends and topics, journalists, as this study suggests, rely on social media for information. Simultaneously, they try to adhere to the professional standards which suggest them to employ in their reports the information that comes from authentic, verifiable sources that

disseminate such information on social media. Hence, their gatekeeping role in a digital news environment has not vanished. Rather, the role has transformed to respond to the current trends in the media industry.

The findings of this study should, however, be evaluated within the limits of the sample. Even though online news is complex to analyze due to their length and a large number of multimedia elements they incorporate, the sample could be expanded to include more news stories that come from a greater number of news organizations. Aside from utilizing a larger sample, future studies could also consider employing ethnographic methods to examine from the inside the gatekeeping practices that journalists embrace when selecting content from various social media platforms. Observing and interviewing journalists would also provide data for the inclusion of journalists' traits, and the ways individual traits affect the utilization of social media in the news reporting and source acquiring processes. Therefore, this angle would address the role of individual journalists who react to change in routines and conventions caused by further media digitization.

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