**What Happens After Facebook?: The Process of Newsgathering on Social Media**

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How did you find out that Osama Bin-Laden was dead? What if the first place you saw this news was on Facebook.com? Would you trust that your friends were reporting an accurate fact, or would you be driven to investigate more thoroughly? Where would you continue to seek information after viewing Facebook, and why? The activity on social networking sites is currently a hot area of research, but the explanation to what happens after Facebook remains unanswered.

Social networking sites are exploding in popularity and use. According to a Pew Researcher center study, use of at least one social networking site (SNS) almost doubled from 26% of adults in 2008 to 47% of adults in 2011 (Hampton & Goulet, 2011). For millennials, SNS are crucial due to the fact that 80% of Internet users ages 18-35 are on social networking sites (Hampton & Goulet, 2011). The front-runner of all the SNS is Facebook.com, which claims profiles for 92% of social network users (Hampton & Goulet, 2011). Ninety four percent of a sample of U.S undergraduates studied by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) were users, spending on average 10 to 30 minutes on Facebook a day.

A surge of research has been done to try to figure out what users are attending to on Facebook. For example, a majority of young people encounter some news online, most of them come across it casually or accidentally in the midst of other pursuits (Patterson, 2007; as cited in Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011). Once a news item is casually seen on Facebook, some users decide to investigate the news item further, and then choose a channel to do so. The following research study explores a proposed process of searching beyond Facebook, as mediated by the needs for cognition and social interaction.

**The Process of Searching Beyond Facebook**

We propose that there is a general process that occurs when an individual encounters a news item on social Facebook. This process has several stages. The first stage is the individual’s discovery of the news item. This could be affected by the amount of time that they spend on Facebook, the number of their friends that are posting about the topic, or if they had encountered the news somewhere else. The person must then decide if they need to go to another source for further information about the news item. We believe that this stage would be influenced by the reliability of the source, and the individual’s needs for cognition and social interaction. Finally, if the individual decides that they want to pursue the news item, they must decide where to go to find it. This will be determined by the perceived reliability of the second source.

The initial step in our process is the discovery of the news item by the individual on

Facebook. Baumgartner and Morris (2009) consider Facebook a social network, and therefore a soft news source; however, the main reason that people use Facebook is for entertainment purposes, not necessarily for news-seeking. Facebook has a news feed that is a real-time update of what friends are doing on the site, such as who they are interacting with and what pages or articles they have been looking at. Users may choose to investigate their friends’ activity, or to ignore it. Therefore, the amount of time spent checking the news feed would increase the likelihood of an individual seeing a news item on their Facebook news feed. News feed allows individuals to share information passively by posting their actions to the feed at large, rather than to a specific person (Sun, Rosenn, Marlow, & Lento, 2009). This method also allows for multiple friends to post about the same topic independently of one another, increasing the chances of the news item to be seen by others. It is unclear, however, the number of posts that will lead to further research. If there are only a few posts, the user may choose to do research outside of Facebook to confirm its validity; if there are a lot of posts, the user may choose to go off Facebook to learn more about the news item, even if the user trusts the validity of the post. We believe that, while the number of posts about a news item is influential in whether or not a user will venture off of Facebook to continue their investigation of the subject, there are other, more influential, factors that help determine this. The relationship between the number of posts about a news item and the odds of further search is unclear. On the one hand, a small number of posts would lead to further search in order to check the validity of the information posted. On the other hand, a large number of posts could lead to the news item to be deemed important, which motivates a desire for more information on the topic.

Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, and Adamic (2012) cites three reasons for the diffusion of news on Facebook: exposure to a friend’s post on the news feed causes an individual to re-post the link; friends independently go to the same sites and post the link; or a link is shared within and outside of Facebook, and a friend sees the news item outside Facebook and shares the link. If the source is someone with whom the individual is very close, Gilbert and Karahalios (2009) would consider the news receiver as having a strong tie to them, and the source is seen as trustworthy; simple acquaintances provide a wider variety of news items, but the connection to them is weaker and the information less credible. Again, the association between closeness of the relationship and the odds of further search is uncertain. When a relationship is close, the information posted is credible on its face, either making further search unnecessary, or sparking further interest in the topic.

Individual needs are another factor that should be relevant to this process. Need for cognition (NFC), defined as an individual’s “need to structure relevant situations in meaningful, integrated ways” and “to understand and make reasonable the experiential world” (Cohen, Stotland & Wolfe, 1955), has been found to influence individuals’ Internet use (Kaynar & Amichai-Hamburger, 2007) and more specifically, their SNS use (Zhong, Hardin & Sun, 2011). Because people who are high in NFC have a greater tendency to “engage in and enjoy thinking” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), they may be more inclined to pursue a news story outside of the social media site in which they found it. In addition, those high in NFC would prefer hard news to soft news because it is more intellectually stimulating. NFC may also be a moderator of the relationship between the number of Facebook friends posting about the news item and information search, as those high in NFC would search for further information regardless of the number of people posting about the news item whereas those low in NFC would use that number as a heuristic cue suggesting the importance of the item. NFC may also be a moderator of the association between the closeness of the relationship of the viewer and the people posting about the news item, as those low in NFC would use that relationship as a suggestion of the credibility and relevance of the item to their life.

Another possible motive is the need for social interaction. Past research on the uses and gratifications of traditional media has recognized social interaction as one of the contributing motives to media consumption (Perse, 1994). Some studies have identified a desire for conversation topics as part of this social interaction motive (Potts, Dedmon & Halford, 1996). It is likely, then, that Facebook users high in need for social interaction seek out information about the news events they encounter on social media in an effort to find material for conversations both on- and offline.

In the final stage of the proposed process, if the individual has decided they want to pursue the news item further, they must determine which source to go to. Hargattai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino and Thomas (2010) found that students place a great deal of trust in search engines, often choosing the first site brought up by the search engine as the most reliable. This same study showed that there is a perception that brand-name search engines, such as Google or Yahoo, are most reliable, and that dot-edu and dot-org sites have more trustworthy content than dot-com sites. Baumgartener and Morris (2009) noted social network users to be skilled at both seeking out information in line with their own beliefs and avoiding what goes against their beliefs. Both trust in the secondary source and personal beliefs will have an effect on this step of the process. Beyond that, the type of news item determines the nature of the secondary source. A hard news item discovered on Facebook will lead to further research on hard news websites, and analogously for soft news and entertainment news items.

These considerations suggest the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1: The more time someone spends on Facebook the more likely they are to see news on Facebook.

RQ1: Assuming that news is found on Facebook rather than another source, is the likelihood of searching for further information dependent on the closeness of the relationship with the Facebook users who posted about the news item?

RQ2: Assuming that news is found on Facebook rather than another source, is the likelihood of searching for further information dependent on the number of Facebook users who posted about the news item?

H2: Those high in need for cognition (NFC) will seek further information outside of social media more often than those low in NFC.

H3: Those high in need for cognition will visit hard news sites (CNN, NYT) more often than tabloid and gossip sites (E! News, TMZ, People), whereas there will be no difference among those low in NFC.

RQ3a: Is the association between the number of Facebook users who posted about a news item and the viewer’s further searching behavior dependent on the viewer’s NFC level?

RQ3b: Is the association between the closeness of relationship with Facebook users who posted about a news item and the viewer’s further searching behavior dependent on the viewer’s NFC level?

H4: Those high in need for social interaction will seek further information outside of social media more often than those low in need for social interaction.

H5: Assuming that news is found on Facebook rather than another source and further information is sought online, the type of source used to find more information will depend on the type of news:

a. Tabloid websites and gossip websites are more likely destinations for entertainment news than for hard or soft news.

b. Hard news websites and traditional media are more likely destinations for hard news than for entertainment or soft news.

RQ4: Where do people continue to search, if the news item found on Facebook is soft news?

These hypotheses and research questions will be examined in the following study.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were students in a basic mass communication course in a midsize eastern university. Participation was voluntary and students received extra credit towards their course grade for participating. Of the 177 people who participated, 175 (98.9%) use Facebook; the results include only those who are Facebook users. The participants were composed of 47 (26.9%) males and 128 (73.1%) females; 66 (37.9%) freshman, 38 (21.8%) sophomores, 32 (18.4%) juniors, and 38 (21.8%) seniors. Ninety eight (56%) participants were in the College of Arts and Sciences, 47 (26.8%) were in the College of Business and Economics, 16 (9.1%) were in the College of Health Sciences, and 15 (8.1%) were in other colleges.

**Measures**

Participants were asked to report on the following items: whether they were Facebook users, and if so, their amount of use and their number of Facebook friends; their Facebook proficiency, their likelihood of learning about news on Facebook and the relationship and trustworthiness of that source; the likelihood and destination of further search on the news items; and their general news consumption. Participants were also asked about three specific and salient examples for each of the three categories of news: bin Ladin’s death for hard news, the Kony 2012 campaign for soft news, and Whitney Houston’s death for entertainment news. For each of these cases we asked similar questions: if the new item was learned on Facebook, from whom, how many people posted about the news item, whether there was further search and where, and whether the participant posted about the item.

Next, participants were given a measure of need for social interaction that included eleven items, each on a five point scale, that were selected from various studies on the (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Papacharissi, & Rubin, 2000; Perse, 1994), with a Cronbach’s alpha of .87. Participants also filled out a measure of need for cognition that included 18 items, each again on five point scales, selected from Cacioppo & Petty (1982), also with a Cronbach’s alpha of .87.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Of the 175 Facebook users, 101 (57.7%) classified themselves as advanced, 70 (40.0%) as intermediate, and 4 (2.3%) as beginners. Three students (1.7%) had between 0 and 100 friends; 24 (13.7%) had 100-300 friends; 52 students (29.7%) had 300-600 friends; 52 students (29.7%) had 600-1000 friends; 44 (25.1%) had 1000 or more friends on Facebook. Daily use of Facebook was reported by 150 participants (85.7%), 12 (7.4%) participants reported using Facebook 3-4 times per week, 8 (4.6%) reported using the site 1-2 times per week, and 2 (1.1%) respondents reported going on the site every two weeks, which is the same number that reported using the site less than every two weeks. During the average week, the respondents do not spend much time on Facebook, with the greatest number, 61 respondents (34.9%), spending only 2-5 hours on the site every week. After this, 44 respondents (25.1%) spend 0-2 hours per week on Facebook; 35 respondents (20.0%) are using the site for 5-8 hours per week; 17 respondents (19.7%) use Facebook 8-11 hours per week; 10 respondents (5.7%) use the site for 14 or more hours weekly; and 8 individuals (4.6%) are using Facebook for 11-14 hours per week.

In general, 162 (92.5%) of the participants reported consuming news at least sometimes. One hundred forty six (83.4%) participants claimed they are at least somewhat likely to learn news on Facebook, usually (*n* = 135, 80.4%) from a combination of close friends, family and acquaintances. Upon

discovering a news item on Facebook, 125 (74.9%) participants stated that they search elsewhere for further information at least occasionally. The majority of participants reported continuing the search for further information on Google (*n* = 151, 93.2%), through face to face interaction (*n* = 115, 71.0%), information websites (Wikipedia, About.com, Google maps) (*n* = 106, 65.4%), other social media sites (Twitter, Google+) (*n* = 86, 53.1%), or hard news websites (*n* = 86, 53.1%).

In regards to the specific scenarios, less than half of the participants found out about the news on Facebook for both Osama bin Laden and Whitney Houston’s deaths (bin Laden: *n* = 84, 48.0%; Houston: *n* = 85, 48.6%), whereas the majority of participants found out about the Kony 2012 campaign on Facebook (*n* = 136, 77.7%). In each case, the majority of the participants who found the news on Facebook continued to search for more information (bin Laden: *n* = 71, 84.5%; Houston: *n* = 55, 64.7%; Kony: *n* = 90, 66.2%). In all scenarios, the majority of participants chose not to repost about the event; however, the instance of reposting was much higher for the Kony 2012 campaign (*n* = 30, 33.3%) than for either bin Laden or Houston’s deaths (bin Laden: *n* = 14, 18.7%; Houston: *n* = 3, 5.5%).

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1 stated that the more time someone spends on Facebook the more likely they are to see news on Facebook. The data supported this hypothesis (*r*[175] = .19, *p* < .02).

Research Question 1 explored whether, assuming that news is found on Facebook rather than another source, the likelihood of searching for further information is dependent on the closeness of the relationship with the Facebook users who posted about the news item. There was no relationship between likelihood of further search and closeness of relationship in general (**χ**2[8] = 6.63, *p* = .58) or for the specific news items (bin Laden, **χ**2[2] = 1.47, *p* = .48; Whitney Houston, **χ**2[2] = 1.15, *p* = .56; Kony 2012 **χ**2[2] = 1.91 *p* = .38).

Research Question 2 examined whether, assuming that news is found on Facebook rather than another source, the likelihood of searching for further information is dependent on the number of Facebook users who posted about the news item. A strong relationship was present for Kony (**χ**2[4] = 20.26, *p* < .001) but not for the other news items (bin Laden, **χ**2[4] = 2.73, *p* = .60; Whitney Houston **χ**2[4] = 4.34, *p* = .36).

Hypothesis 2 posited that those high in need for cognition (NFC) will seek further information outside of social media more often than those low in NFC. Hypothesis 2 was supported in general (*r* = .19, *F*[1,166] = 6.58, *p* < .02), and in the instance of bin Laden (**χ**2[1] = 13.02, *p* < .01), but was not supported in the instance of Whitney Houston (**χ**2[1] = .005, *p* = .94) and Kony (**χ**2[1] = .13, *p* = .72).

Hypothesis 3 assumed that those high in need for cognition will visit hard news sites (CNN, NYT) rather than tabloid and gossip sites (E! News, TMZ, People), and that those low in NFC would have an equal likelihood of visiting either type of news source. In general, hard news sites were visited more often regardless of NFC level (high NFC: hard news *M* = 2.73, tabloid *M* = 1.99, gossip *M* = 1.58, *F*[2, 237] = 12.01, *p* < .001; low NFC: hard news *M* = 2.27, tabloid *M* = 2.05, gossip *M* = 1.75, *F*[2, 234] = 5.07, *p* < .01). This was also true in the cases of bin Laden (high NFC: hard news *n* = 29 of 88, tabloid *n* = 78 of 88, gossip *n* = 3 of 88, Χ2[2] = 35.38, *p* < .001; low NFC: hard news *n* = 18 of 89, tabloid *n* = 7 of 89, gossip *n* = 5 of 89, **χ**2[2] = 21.70, *p* < .001) and Kony (high NFC: hard news *n* = 17 of 88, tabloid *n* = 7 of 88, gossip *n* = 3 of 88, **χ**2[2] = 12.87, *p* < .01; low NFC: hard news *n* = 12 of 89, tabloid *n* = 4 of 89, gossip *n* = 2 of 89, **χ**2[2] = 10.01, *p* < .01), but not in the case of Whitney Houston. In the Houston scenario, the likelihood for using either hard or soft news sites was relatively equal (high in NFC: hard news *n* = 9 of 88, tabloid *n* =11 of 88, gossip *n* = 6 of 88, **χ**2[2] = 1.62, *p* =.44; low in NFC: hard news *n* = 12 of 89, tabloid *n* = 6 of 89, gossip *n* = 6 of 89, **χ**2[2] = 3.30, *p* =.19).

Research Question 3a asked whether the odds of further information search for those high and low NFC are differentially affected by the number of posters about the news item. For those high in NFC, there was no relationship between search and number of posters for bin Laden (**χ**2[2] = .08, *p* = .96), Houston (**χ**2[2] = 2.23, *p* = .33), or Kony (**χ**2[2] = .04, *p* = .98). For those low in NFC, there was an association for bin Laden (**χ**2[2] = 8.18, *p* < .02) but not for Houston (**χ**2[2] = .14, *p* = .93) or Kony (**χ**2[2] = 4.00, *p* = .14).

Research Question 3b queried whether the probability of further search for those high and low in NFC are contrastingly impacted by the closeness of posters about the news item. For those high in NFC, there was such a relationship for Kony (**χ**2[4] = 15.25, *p* < .01) but not bin Laden (**χ**2[4] = 2.53, *p* = .64) or Houston (**χ**2[4] = 1.59, *p* = .81). For those low in NFC, there was no association for any of the news items (bin Laden, **χ**2[4] = 2.04, *p* = .73; Houston, **χ**2[4] = 8.41, *p* = .08; Kony, **χ**2[4] = 7.85, *p* = .10).

Hypothesis 4 postulated that those high in need for social interaction will seek further information outside of social media more often than those low in need for social interaction. This hypothesis was not supported in general (*r* = .04, *F*[1,166] = .23, *p* = .63) or in any of the scenarios (bin Laden, **χ**2[1] = .76, *p* = .38), Whitney Houston, **χ**2[1] = .24, *p* = .63; Kony, **χ**2[1] = 2.47, *p* =.12)

Hypothesis 5 presumed that, assuming news is found on Facebook rather than another source and further information is sought online, the type of source used to find more information will depend on the type of news. Percentages indicate likelihood of search on specific types of media given the type of news learned on Facebook. Percentages across media types sum to more than 100 due to searches on multiple media types for each event. Part a of this hypothesis stated that if the news item found on Facebook is entertainment news, people are more likely to search on entertainment and gossip websites than if the news item found on Facebook is hard or soft news. Results confirmed that entertainment news more likely results in search on gossip websites (21.8%) than hard news (11.3%) or soft news (5.6%; **χ**2[2] = 8.83, *p <* .02). In addition, the entertainment news more likely results in search on tabloid news websites (People, E!) (30.9%) than soft news (12.2%) or hard news (11.3%; **χ**2[2] = 10.80, *p* < .01). Part b conjectured that if the news item found on Facebook is hard news, people are more likely to search on hard news websites and traditional media than if the news item found on Facebook is entertainment or soft news. Results supported this claim that hard news more likely results in search on hard news websites (63.4%) than entertainment news (38.2%) or soft news (32.2%; **χ**2[2] = 16.65, *p* < .001). In addition, the results confirmed hard news more likely results in search on traditional media (52.1%) than entertainment news (34.5%) or soft news (20.0%; **χ**2[2] = 18.17, *p* <.001).

Research Question 4 is a follow-up to Hypothesis 5, examining where the people continued the search, if the news item found on Facebook is soft news rather than hard or entertainment news. Soft news had a non-significant tendency to be more likely to result in search on blogs (13.3%) than hard news (5.6%) and entertainment news (3.6%; **χ**2[2] = 5.21, *p* = .07). Soft news (45.6%) and hard news (39.4%) also had a non-significant tendency to more likely to result in search on other social media than entertainment news (27.3%; **χ**2[2] = 5.82, *p* = .09).

In addition, Google searches were equally likely for hard news (90.1%), entertainment news (89.1%), and soft news (93.3%; **χ**2[2] = .92, *p* = .63) and face-to-face interaction was equally likely for hard news (57.7%), entertainment news (50.9%), and soft news (49.5%; **χ**2[2] = 3.88, *p* = .14).

**Discussion**

We designed this study as a means to investigate individuals’ news gathering behavior on Facebook. We wanted to examine the process which occurs after a news item is discovered via Facebook, and what factors influence subsequent actions. We proposed that when a news item is discovered on Facebook, individuals goes through a psychological process to decide if they are interested in learning more about the news item. If not, the process will end here, but if so, each individual must decide where to seek out further information. We also hypothesized that the need for cognition and social interaction would influence the psychological process so that those high in need for cognition and social interaction would seek out more information, while the individuals low in these needs would not. We also investigated whether the closeness of the relationship to the poster or the number of Facebook friends posting about a news item would influence individuals’ decision to seek more information.

We found that news is indeed found on Facebook, and that the likelihood of seeing news on Facebook is directly related to the amount of time spent on Facebook. Once news is discovered in Facebook, we noted that most people continue to search for more information at least occasionally. Our findings demonstrate that the closeness of the relationship between the viewer and those posting about the news item does not affect the likelihood of further search. This could be due to the fact that Facebook users may not take into account who the poster is, but rather scan the news feed, focusing on the content rather than who is contributing.

However, we discovered that NFC does impact the likelihood of further search. Those high in NFC will search for more information outside of Facebook more often than those low in NFC. This finding is consistent with what is already known about NFC; those high in NFC tend to dig deeper into issues. However, viewers are generally more likely to continue their search on hard news websites as opposed to soft news or gossip sites no matter their NFC level. It appears that viewers as a group find hard news more intellectually stimulating.

Social interaction, however, proved not to be influential in seeking further information. This finding may not be completely accurate because of the fact that television measures were adopted to examine internet behavior. These measures may not truly portray the way that people use Facebook due to the inherent differences between the two media, Facebook being a medium that facilitates interaction. When searching occurs, the most common sources for further information are Google, face-to-face interaction, information websites, social media, and hard news websites. This trend may be due to the convenience of these methods.

While many of our hypotheses were upheld in general, support for the various elements of the process varied among the specific scenarios used in the survey. In our hard news example, less than half of the participants found out about the news on Facebook, which contradicted our assumptions. This may be partially due to the fact that this event took place almost a full year ago, and it was well represented on other forms of media. Number of posts did not impact further search directly due to the nature of the event. The hard news item‘s major details could be easily contained in one post. It is possible that this trend is the result of a familiarity threshold: if a viewer is familiar with a subject, it would require fewer posts for them to decide that the news item is important, but if a viewer is unfamiliar with a subject, it would require more posts to convince the viewer the news item warrants further search. Unlike in the other cases, for the hard news event those low in NFC were affected by the number of people posting about the news item. This may be owed to the fact that they would not typically be interested in hard news, and they may already tend to go to entertainment and soft news sites because it caters to their preference for less in-depth thought. However, when a heuristic cue, such as a large number of posts, is present, they would be inclined to search further about a hard news item.

In our entertainment news example, less than half of the participants found out about the news on Facebook, which contradicted our assumptions; similar to the hard news item, it was well covered by other media which would have increased the likelihood of not encountering the news item on Facebook. Contrary to our predictions, the number of people posting about this news item did not have an effect on the probability that the viewer would search for further information. This could also be a result of the familiarity threshold. Furthermore, this was the only case in which no preference was found for hard news over soft news sources. This could possibly be because of the nature of the news item. Since it was entertainment news, it would be equally likely to find reliable information about the news item on soft as hard news sources.

In our soft news example, the majority of participants found out about the news on Facebook, which met our expectations. The Kony 2012 campaign was intended to be an online social media campaign, so it is not surprising that the majority of people discovered this news through this avenue. The number of people posting about the Kony campaign may have deemed the news item as important, or have created curiosity for the Facebook users and compelled them to search further. A lack of prior knowledge about Kony may have caused people to rely more heavily on the heuristic cue of number of others posting. However, NFC was not associated with this relationship. A relationship between closeness to the poster and further search only existed for those with high NFC for the soft news example. This may be because this news item is soft news, which a person with high NFC would not normally look into. Because their close friends and family were posting about it they continued to search. Typically, people tend to be close to people with similar interests and tastes to their own. Seeing people they are close to posting about the soft news item may have made it seem relevant and worthy of further search.

**Limitations and further research**

During the course of our study, we encountered a few factors that limited our research. The most impactful of these limitations was the self report method in which our study was conducted. It is well known that self report measures relying on memories of past events are not as reliable as non-recall-based methods. Furthermore, our study included only one example of each type of news item, therefore we cannot generalize the results to all hard, entertainment, or soft news. Our sample may have also limited our ability to generalize because we only surveyed college students.

Further research could explore this process across different age groups and settings where one might interact with Facebook such as through a mobile device, at home, or at work. This study could be modified through a design in which participants’ Facebook and searching behaviors are tracked through website tracking software. Such a study would provide a more accurate description of the process an individual goes through when they encounter a news item on Facebook. This process could also be applied to the discovery of a news item on Twitter and other social media, allowing for replications with other examples.

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