News Quality in the Platform Era

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC), in collaboration with the NewsQ Initiative, invites proposals for research about the nature and quality of news. In particular, we invite theoretical, conceptual, empirical, or applied research that suggests new approaches to—and actionable critiques of—algorithmic news dissemination. The workshop is tentatively scheduled to be held in New York City on November 12-13, 2020, and will be chaired by Philip M. Napoli (Duke University) and Regina Lawrence (University of Oregon). Funding will be provided for participant travel and accommodations.

Workshop Themes — This research workshop will convene scholars to develop projects that reconsider how news is defined and measured, especially in light of shifting technological, political, and journalistic-institutional contexts. Substantive research themes may include but are not limited to the following topics [documented as goals and objectives in this StratML rendition]

Contents

Social Science Research Council (SSRC)

Stakeholder(s):

NewsQ Initiative :

Workshop Collaborator — This research development workshop is convened by the Social Science Research Council's Media & Democracy program and NewsQ, an initiative of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York in collaboration with Hacks/Hackers. The goal of the workshop is to catalyze and develop rigorous research and public-facing scholarship. The workshop will provide participants an opportunity to give and receive in-depth feedback from their peers on in-progress research projects and to connect with others who work on similar topics.

Philip M. Napoli :

Duke University — Workshop Co-Chair

Regina Lawrence :

University of Oregon — Workshop Co-Chair

Scholars :

The workshop is geared toward scholars currently engaged in empirical or theoretical work related to the topic of interest. We encourage applications from all relevant social science and humanities fields, including political science, journalism, communications, history, sociology, psychology, and others, as well as computing fields. We particularly encourage applications from emerging and underrepresented scholars. Creative proposals for research are welcome but should ground themselves

in the real-world problem of news algorithm results. Given the scope of the problem, interdisciplinary approaches are also welcome.

Participants :

All accepted participants will be expected to circulate a working draft of the manuscript by Monday, August 31, and to read and prepare comments for at least two colleagues' drafts by Monday, September 28. A revised second draft should be circulated by Monday, October 26 (two weeks in advance of the tentative in-person workshop)... To apply, please send the following materials to mdapplications@ssrc.org by Monday, June 15, 2020 with "Application for News Quality Research Development Workshop" in the subject line:

- *Current C.V. of the author who will participate in the workshop (maximum two pages).*
- *An abstract of up to 500 words. The abstract should clearly outline the main theoretical and/or empirical contribution of the proposed paper.*
- *A short statement (up to 300 words) detailing your interest in the workshop and how it will advance your research agenda. If you have publications or projects that are related to the research detailed in your abstract, please feel free to list up to three citations in this document.*

Vision

New approaches to—and actionable critiques of—algorithmic news dissemination.

Mission

To develop projects that reconsider how news is defined and measured.

Values

News: How do we define and measure news in the platform era?

Definition: Defining "the news" has never been a straightforward proposition, but in the era of platform media, a number of factors complicate this task further. Beyond legacy media, today's news is transmitted by mobile phones, tablets, smart home devices such as Amazon's Alexa, and algorithmically driven news feeds by many of the major platforms. In addition to the influence of the feeds, the content of news is increasingly produced by individuals without professional training, from dedicated bloggers monetizing content for niche audiences, to impromptu citizen journalists livestreaming to social media feeds. Mixed in is an ever-expanding cohort of websites that present themselves as traditional news organizations, but skirt journalistic norms, producing content ranging from opinion posing as fact to outright disinformation.

Technology: For better or worse, what has counted as news in the Western tradition—and what made its way to news consumers—has historically been determined by a professional elite: news editors. Today, however, the gatekeeping role of editors is increasingly appropriated by technology: the search and recommendation algorithms that suggest content to ever greater proportions of news consumers. The result is that we rely heavily on technology, but lack a precise understanding of how that technology operates.

Metrics: How have ubiquitous content production, rampant opinion and disinformation presented as fact, and plummeting trust in expertise complicated the task—imperative in a democracy—of defining the news and measuring its quality? What counts as "news quality," and can we imagine improvements or remedies to algorithmic or semi-automated recommendation and ranking systems?

1. Definition

Define news

1.1. Historical Contexts

Determine how historical contexts frame and inform contemporary news

What constitutes news and how might the changing historical contexts of defining news frame and inform the current moment?

1.2. Decision-Making

Determine how decision-making processes shape the definition of news

How do decision-making processes, whether human, algorithmic, or some combination, shape the definition of news in different cultural and organizational contexts?

1.3. Quality & Trust

Determine the relationship between trust in news and news quality

What is the relationship between trust in news and news quality? Does the relationship vary for different outlets and audiences?

2. Quality

Measure the quality of news

2.1. Metrics

Operationalize measurements in news rankings and recommendations

How should we measure news quality? How can we operationalize these measurements for use in news ranking or news recommendations algorithms?

2.2. Recommendations

Distinguish the definition versus the quality news and their interaction to inform recommendations

What is the difference between defining news and measuring news quality? How might these interact to shape recommendation results?

2.3. Knowledge

Measure the relationship between expert and crowd knowledge

How do we conceive, identify, and measure the relationship between expert and crowd knowledge for news algorithms?

Stakeholder(s):

Experts   **Crowds**

3. Professional Standards

Address professional standards

3.1. Norms

Update professional journalistic norms

Do theories about the role of professional journalistic norms need to be updated for a media ecosystem in which news is produced by both professional and amateur journalists?

Stakeholder(s):

Professional Journalists   **Amateur Journalists**

3.2. Objectivity & Balance

Reimagine the roles of objectivity and balance in news reporting

How must theories about the role of "objectivity" and "balance" in news reporting be reimagined for a context of rampant—and often deliberate and coordinated—mis- and disinformation?

3.3. Amplification

Consider how theories of amplification should be taken into account by news organizations and news algorithms

How should theories of amplification inform whether news organizations and news algorithms give oxygen to toxic or weaponized content?

Stakeholder(s):

News Organizations

4. Politics & Technology

Address the political and technological contexts

4.1. News Delivery

Consider how news-delivery algorithms play out in different cultural and geographic contexts

How do news-delivery algorithms play out in different cultural and geographic contexts?

4.2. Boundaries

Consider how news conveys across cultural, geographic, and linguistic boundaries

How do concepts of information quality, news quality, or even "news" travel conceptually across cultural, geographic, and linguistic boundaries? How do geo-specific platforms and technologies influence news consumption?

Administrative Information

Start Date: 2020-11-12
End Date: 2020-11-13

Publication Date: **2020-05-05**
Source: https://www.ssrc.org/programs/component/media-democracy/news-quality-in-the-platform-era/

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