



Dealing with digital intermediaries: A case study of the relations between publishers and platforms

new media & society
2018, Vol. 20(4) 1600–1617
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1461444817701318
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms



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Abstract

The rise of digital intermediaries such as search engines and social media is profoundly changing our media environment. Here, we analyze how news media organizations handle their relations to these increasingly important intermediaries. Based on a strategic case study, we argue that relationships between publishers and platforms are characterized by a tension between (1) short-term, operational opportunities and (2) long-term strategic worries about becoming too dependent on intermediaries. We argue that these relationships are shaped by news media's fear of missing out, the difficulties of evaluating the risk/reward ratios, and a sense of asymmetry. The implication is that news media that developed into an increasingly independent institution in the 20th century—in part enabled by news media organizations' control over channels of communication—are becoming dependent upon new digital intermediaries that structure the media environment in ways that not only individual citizens but also large, resource-rich, powerful organizations have to adapt to.

Keywords

Digital intermediaries, Facebook, Google, journalism, news, news institutionalism, news media, platforms, publishers, sociology of news

The rise of digital intermediaries such as search engines and social media is profoundly changing our media environment. In this article, we analyze how news media handle their relations to these increasingly important intermediaries and work with large

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technology companies that are reshaping how news is distributed (and by extension produced and funded).

News media organizations have historically derived much of their power, profitability, and social significance from their control over channels of communication, whether print or broadcast, and the mass audiences they amassed around their content (Thompson, 1995). The growing importance of search engines and social media is changing this. Increasingly, people find news via digital intermediaries, in particular the dominant search engine Google and the dominant social networking site Facebook, and advertisers go to them for cheap, targeted, online advertising. A growing number of news organizations across the world report that only about half their online traffic comes direct to their website and app, with the rest coming from search and social referrals (Bell, 2014; Bell et al., 2016). The audience analytics company Parse.ly estimates that Google and Facebook in 2015 each accounted for about 40% of all referral traffic to publishers (with Yahoo and Twitter a distant third and fourth at less than 5% each).¹ Survey data support the idea that search and social is becoming increasingly important for how people get news online—in some countries, digital intermediaries are by now more widely used ways of accessing and finding news than the websites and apps of news organizations themselves (Newman et al., 2016).

The largest digital intermediaries not only have literally billions of users across the world but also account for a large part of the time people spend with digital media, and are integral to more and more of the things we do online (Pasquale, 2015; Plantin et al., 2017; Van Dijck, 2013). Their general rise also makes them ever more important for news specifically. Their role in driving traffic and referrals to sites is increasingly supplemented by new formats enabling off-site publishing, where news media organizations publish direct to formats such as Facebook's Instant Articles (launched in May 2015), Snapchat's Discover (launched in January 2015), or use products such as Google Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP; launched in October 2015). These products mean people can increasingly use news content without going to the website or app of the publisher who produced it. Search engines and social media thus not only drive traffic through referrals (the rise of distributed discovery). They also present snippets of news in search results and social feeds, and host content that can be consumed completely off-site on a third-party platform, whether as articles or videos (the rise of distributed content; Cornia et al., 2016).

Many media organizations have embraced the opportunities afforded by the rise of search and social media, and newsrooms increasingly work systematically with search engine optimization and social media optimization as part of wider audience engagement or growth teams (e.g. Dick, 2011). Search engines and social media empower news media organizations by offering them new opportunities for reaching people. But they also challenge the privileged position news media organizations have historically occupied (Ganter and Maurer, 2015) because working with them involves losing control over channels of communication and raise the risk of becoming dependent on new intermediaries. As one social media editor we spoke to as part of our research put it with remarkable clarity, "my job is to think about how we survive in a world dominated by Google and Facebook."

In this article, we analyze how news media organizations deal with digital intermediaries. We focus on a strategic case study of a large, digitally strong, European legacy

news media organization with a relatively solid revenue base and analyze how editorial and strategic leaders handle relationships with the two currently most important digital intermediaries, Google and Facebook. On the basis of interviews with 13 people with different roles within the case organization, most of them in senior positions, we provide an in-depth case study and show that the relationship in this case is characterized by a tension between (1) short-term, operational, often editorially led pursuit of the opportunities offered by both search and social to reach people and (2) more long-term strategic worries about whether the organization will become too dependent on these intermediaries, including worries over whether it will lose control over its editorial identity, access to user data, and central parts of its revenue model. We argue that the way the case organization handles the relationship is shaped by a fear of missing out, by the difficulties of evaluating the risk/reward ratio of engaging with different initiatives developed by the intermediaries, and by a sense of a profound asymmetry as a large news media organization finds itself dealing with far larger digital intermediaries. We suggest that when a strategic case study like ours—which is in a more privileged position than many other news media organizations—sees itself as losing control even as it actively pursues opportunities offered by digital intermediaries, less privileged news media organizations are even more likely to do so.

The implication is that news media, seen by media scholars and historians as having developed into an increasingly independent institution in the course of the 20th century (Thompson, 1995), are becoming dependent upon increasingly powerful digital intermediaries that structure the media environment in ways not only we as individual citizens (Van Dijck, 2013) but also large, resource-rich, powerful organizations have to adapt to. If this is the case for news media organizations, the implications for actors and organizations occupying a less privileged position in the media environment—such as political campaigns, social movements, and many other organizations—is likely to be at least as profound. If large media organizations are losing control over the most important channels of communication as these are increasingly shaped by digital intermediaries, others are likely to become even more dependent on these for their communications.

In the first part of the article, we outline the growing importance of digital intermediaries for news media organizations. In the second, we position our case study in relation to the two main academic fields of research we draw on, digital journalism studies and platform studies. In the third part, we lay out the rationale behind the strategic case study chosen and describe the data and methods our argument is based on. In the findings section, we first analyze the tension between short-term operational and long-term strategic considerations in how the case organization deals with intermediaries and then turn to the combination of a fear of missing out, difficulties of evaluating risk/reward, and sense of asymmetry that we argue shape the relationships analyzed. In the final, concluding part, we discuss the wider implications and identify questions for further research.

The rise of digital intermediaries

We use the term digital intermediaries to refer to companies such as Google and Facebook that have come to occupy central positions in the media environment in large part by intermediating between ordinary users and a wide variety of other parties—in

the case of Google by providing by far the most popular search engine for people navigating the open Web and selling advertising around search results and other services, in the case of Facebook by developing by far the most popular social networking site and selling advertising around users' newsfeed. By mid-2016, Google attracted more than 2 billion monthly users and accounted for an estimated 31% of digital advertising globally across its various activities, Facebook 1.6 billion monthly users and 12% of digital advertising.²

There are other important digital intermediaries, including companies such as Apple and Amazon and some regionally important players, but none rival Google and Facebook in terms of their importance for how people find and access news (see, for example, Newman et al., 2016). These companies are sometimes referred to, and sometimes refer to themselves, as "platforms," a term that suggests an element of openness and neutrality that captures aspects of how they enable action and transactions between different parties but rests awkwardly with their dominance and the fact that while they provide public services and constitute public spaces, they do so for private gain as for-profit companies (Gillespie, 2010). Digital intermediaries are different in important ways—Google deeply invested in the open Web and Facebook in building its own proprietary ecosystem—but share a similarly important position and ability to shape the overall media environment. They can exercise structural forms of what David Grewal (2008) has called "network power" because they can shape key parts of the environment by changing standards that many others rely on and because they bring together so many different users on one platform.

The degree to which people say they get news via search engines and social media versus directly via news websites and apps varies from country to country, but in many high-income democracies, search engines and social media are now more widely used ways of finding and accessing news online than going direct to news media (Newman et al., 2016). A growing number of scholars argue that we as a consequence are moving toward a more complex information environment where conventional forms of editorial gatekeeping are being supplemented in important ways by new forms of filtering (Nielsen, 2016; Singer, 2014; Thorson and Wells, 2015).

The development to a point where, according to Emily Bell (2014), "the public sphere is now operated by a small number of private companies, based in Silicon Valley" has been a rapid one, starting in the 2000s, but accelerating significantly since 2010. News media organizations have reacted in different ways. Details vary by country and by organization, and more research is needed to systematically map them, but three basic reactions can be identified at this stage. First, most simply *coexist* with platforms, and reactively adapt to the ways in which the dominant digital intermediaries develop new products and services that sometimes restructure and reconstitute how information is shared, accessed, and used. The basic position is, "They are huge. We are tiny. What do you expect us to do?" A few have *confronted* the digital intermediaries over what they perceive to be unfair or even illegitimate use of their content as aggregated, displayed in search results, or shown within social networking sites. One high-profile example is the US-based News Corp. Their Executive Chairman Rupert Murdoch has publicly warned that "[people's] ability to access information, independently and meaningfully, is put at risk by the overwhelming power" of the dominant digital intermediaries.³ Finally, some

news media organizations are offered opportunities to *collaborate* with the dominant digital intermediaries and have seized them. Given the American origins of companies such as Google and Facebook, this opportunity has been offered primarily to a limited number of prominent, English-language, primarily US-based media, that have been invited to discuss new features and products, offer feedback and suggestions, have had early/privileged access to features or products, and so on. But more and more news media elsewhere are invited to collaborate. Our case organization is one of them. As one senior social media editor told us, “We have good relationships with these companies, we talk to them regularly, they talk to us, we share products.”

Digital journalism studies and platform studies

The rise of digital intermediaries, and the way in which they are restructuring the media environment in part by enabling and shaping new information flows, in part by capturing large shares of advertising, and in part through other organizations adapting to their growing importance, has largely escaped the focus of existing work on technological change and digital journalism. A rich vein of work has examined how the journalistic profession and existing news media organizations *appropriate* new technologies and develop them for their own purposes. Scholars have examined phenomena ranging from videotext and early Web pages in the 1990s (Boczkowski, 2004; Singer, 2005) to social and mobile media in the 2010s (Chadha and Wells, 2016; Westlund, 2013) and focused on how different organizational structures, work practices, conceptions of the audience, and structural contexts influence how “old” professions and organizations embrace “new” technologies (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2004; Usher, 2014). The focus has been on how professional values and organizational inertia led news media to “domesticate” or “normalize” new technologies and privilege defensive, reactionary, and pragmatic responses (e.g. Boczkowski, 2004; Singer, 2005). This line of work recognizes how technological developments can contribute to change but tends to highlight the importance of how journalists and news media themselves shape the technologies they use.

While full of insights when it comes to why journalists and news media develop websites and ways of using digital, social, and mobile media in specific ways, this line of research has less to say about how news media *adapt* to the wider, ongoing, transformation of the environment in which they operate. A growing number of researchers have recognized this and called for a broader approach to understanding how news media not only shape but are also shaped by broader technological developments (Braun, 2016; Domingo et al., 2015; Lewis and Westlund, 2015).

To capture this, we turn to inspiration from the diverse emerging field of “platform studies” in media and communication research (Gillespie, 2016; Just and Latzer, 2017; Montfort and Bogost, 2009; Plantin et al., 2017). Where the journalism studies scholars discussed above have tended to focus on individuals and organizations, and on contingent and incremental processes of change, researchers working in the broader field of platform studies have focused on how the affordances of digital technologies affect activities—ranging from game design (Montfort and Bogost, 2009) over video sharing (Gillespie, 2010) to socializing (Van Dijck, 2013)—that rely upon them.

The key idea we take from platforms studies is the shift from focusing, like digital journalism research has done, on the *appropriation* of digital technology through specific combinations of artifacts (websites, apps), practices (professional norms and routines), and arrangements (newsroom structures), to instead focusing on how news media organizations *adapt* to the rise of platforms that restructure the media environment by developing widely shared systems and services. We thus move beyond looking at how news media appropriate specific technologies as tools for their own purposes (Boczkowski, 2004) to examine how they adapt to the development of broader technological systems with infrastructural aspects (robust, widely accessible, used by many different actors, and increasingly integral to the media environment; Just and Latzer, 2017; Plantin et al., 2017). The difference is between an approach interested in how specific combinations of artifacts, practices, and arrangements shape the development of specific discrete technological *tools* (such as a website or app), to how a combination of artifacts, practices, and arrangements shape how actors engage with a widely shared technological *platforms* (such as those offered by Google and Facebook).

Platform studies researchers push back against earlier optimism around the supposedly inherently democratizing, decentralizing, and indeed emancipatory potentials of digital technologies. A range of scholars have begun to suggest we need to pay attention to the development of an environment of connected media with a few large and many small players and dominated by digital intermediaries that enable actions (and transactions between different third parties) at scale, but do so in self-interested ways (Gillespie, 2016). The platforms provided by companies such as Google and Facebook host, organize, and enable public expression in ways that, as José van Dijck (2013) suggests, not only shape social, political, and economic interactions by making some things much easier but also do so in ways that, while often claiming neutrality (as suggested by the term “platform”), are developed primarily by private companies with their own interests (see also Gillespie, 2010; Pasquale, 2015).

The point here is that search engines and social media can appear to simply be part of the *arena* in which other organizations act—and have been treated by digital journalism studies as such—but that platform studies remind us that these platform-builders are of course also *actors* with interests of their own, who engage directly with other actors. We draw on this line of work here in focusing our analysis on how our strategic case is adapting in a situation where even large, resourceful, and powerful news media that till recently occupied the commanding heights of our communication systems find themselves having to contend with far larger and potentially more powerful digital intermediaries with billions of users and billions in revenue continually restructuring the digital media environment (Gillespie, 2016; Just and Latzer, 2017; Plantin et al., 2017). What our study in turn brings to platform studies is a focus specifically on the relations between companies such as Google and Facebook and news media as an example of a previously dominant industry coming to terms with increasingly important digital intermediaries. Most research on digital platforms has focused on the platforms themselves and their relations with ordinary, individual users and examined what José van Dijck (2013: 20) describes as “the ongoing clash between user tactics and platform strategies.” We build on this and a longer tradition of work on how system-builders, ordinary users, and other developers together shape the development of infrastructures (Plantin et al, 2017) by

highlighting the importance of analyzing the tactics used by news media organizations as they face the rise of platforms, and provide a strategic case study examining this.

Case selection, data, and methods

The news media organization we focus on is a strategic case study selected to enable logical generalization (Luker, 2008). We arrived at the case inductively as part of a larger research project on relationships between different digital intermediaries and different news media organizations across four countries. Not only has the case organization been invited to collaborate with a range of digital intermediaries, and chosen to engage with them. It also enters into these relations from a more privileged position than most other news media, in the following four ways. First, it is a *large* organization with considerable editorial, technological, and strategic resources, as well as high audience reach and brand awareness. Second, it is recognized as a *digital leader*, and hence its engagement with intermediaries is less likely to be defined by conservatism, denial about the increasing centrality of digital media, or a reactionary rearguard action to defend established ways of doing things. Third, it is a *European* organization and hence operates in a political environment where, broadly speaking, news media have relatively more political clout, and (US-based) digital intermediaries relatively less. Fourth, it is an organization that has in recent years maintained a more *solid revenue base* with less dramatic declines than many other news media, and it thus has more autonomy in its strategic decision-making. The case is not *representative*, but it is *strategic*, and though we cannot generalize from a single case study in a statistical sense, our case study allows for logical generalization in that most news media organizations are likely to be less privileged in their dealings with digital intermediaries than the case organization we analyze here.

Our analysis is based on interviews with people working across editorial, product development, and strategic/management parts of the organization supplemented by off-the-record background conversations as well as primary and secondary sources. Most of the interviewees have senior roles in the organization, and our purposive sample is part of a limited number of people who are involved in high-level negotiations and day-to-day dealings with different platforms. Together with colleagues, we have conducted 13 formal interviews in the course of 2016. In addition, we have had off-the-record background conversations with several additional informants as part of newsroom visits, at industry events, and so on. Because the relationship with digital intermediaries is sensitive, sometimes fraught, and subject to some internal disagreement between different people within the organization, we have anonymized both the case organization itself as well as the interviewees, who we will simply identify with a broad description of their position. It has been difficult to get people to talk, let alone talk relatively openly, under these terms. It would have been even more so without individual and organizational anonymity. The interviews were semi-structured from 30 minutes to more than 1 hour. One interview was conducted over the phone, the rest in person. The interviews were transcribed and subject to an open coding guided by our analytical interest. We identified the features analyzed in the findings section below inductively on the basis of our primary interview data, secondary sources including industry publications, and discussed our preliminary interpretations with some of our later interviewees to test their reaction and improve our understanding

of their thinking. In the interests of validity and reliability, we combined investigator triangulation (the two authors read and coded the interviews separately before discussing them jointly and then re-read the material in an iterative process) and, where possible, data triangulation (checking our interviews and analysis with primary sources from the organization itself as well as secondary sources—these are not quoted, to maintain the anonymity of both case organization and interviewees).

Findings

Operational versus strategic considerations

At the most basic level, our case organization's relationship with digital intermediaries such as Google and Facebook is characterized by a tension between (1) short-term, *operational*, and often editorially led considerations and (2) more long-term *strategic* considerations focused on whether the organization will become too dependent on these intermediaries for reaching audiences and in the process will control over its editorial identity, access to user data, and central parts of its revenue model. The two ways of approaching the relationship do not map perfectly on to occupational groups within the organization, as both short-term operational and long-term strategic work involve journalists, technologists, and managers. But the editorial side generally drives the daily operations, whereas technologists and managers play a more prominent role in strategic thinking.

In *operational* terms, the case organization, led by the newsroom, has an eager and experimental approach to the opportunities offered by various digital intermediaries. The central motivation is the desire to reach a wider audience. One senior online editor says,

We generally have a “let’s try and see” approach. ... there are absolutely people in the newsroom and in the teams who just want to get on and make use of these, in some cases, great new tools, new platforms to get more of their journalism out. And they’re not really too fussy about how or where and the more the merrier really. And credit to them for spotting those opportunities and thinking creatively about how to get their material out.

Similarly, a senior strategy person from management underlines the importance of experimenting with the opportunities offered by digital intermediaries: “We start from the premise that we need to be on the platforms where our audiences are and that we need to be available in the ways that our audiences want our news to be available.” This very active and more aggressive pursuit of the opportunities offered by tools and services developed by digital intermediaries is very different from the defensive, reactionary, and pragmatic approach to digital media that characterized many news media organizations in the past (Boczkowski, 2004). It has not always been the primary approach. One senior editor says,

A few years ago, we were much more reticent and cautious. So it took a long time, and it was sort of, “Do we do this? Do we not do this? What’s the right strategic approach?” ... It could be quite late in the day before we really got the hang of it.

Several editorial and strategy people interviewed underline that the move toward a “let’s try and see” approach has involved a long period of cultural and organizational change. Editorial discussions around how the organization should respond to various initiatives from different digital intermediaries are no longer focused primarily on *whether* one should engage, but on *how* one should engage, and on the allocation of ultimately scarce editorial resources across many channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, etc.) and new forms of news work (search engine optimization, social media optimization, editorial analytics, etc.).

At a *strategic* level, people are less eager, and more worried. Strategic considerations include internal deliberations in terms of the relative emphasis that should be put on various communication channels (legacy/digital, onsite/offsite) but most importantly the longer-term implications of investing in channels—and socializing users into accessing content via these channels—that are controlled by digital intermediaries with their own interests and objectives. The strategic discussions in the case organization involve senior editorial people, product people, and people from management. They play out between the desire to reach people where they are (and the recognition that this increasingly involves working with intermediaries, both search engines and social media) and worries over long-term dependence and loss of control. These worries are expressed by people from different groups in the organization. The same senior online editor who spoke of the newsroom’s “let’s try and see” approach (quoted above) added, “I think at a more strategic level, yes, there is a lot more deliberation about how much effort should we expend on that kind of activity.” Technologists and managers too spell out these worries in interviews. One senior product manager says,

I think [the rise of digital intermediaries is] a massive risk for us. We have to fish where the users are [and] take full advantage of using the platforms, these platform capabilities that are being offered to us, for free, at the moment, to reach audiences that we currently under-serve. Our goal, however, should not be just reach but converting those users into having an engaged relationship with us as a publisher.

A senior strategy person from management expresses the same sentiment:

You are being asked to sign up to a platform potentially not only as a short term additional route to market, but in the long term as a competitor to what you’re doing yourself. And equally, again it’s an obvious point to make, but you are signing up with a competitor who has control over their own road map.

There is thus a clear tension between the operational side, where, as one senior social media editor says, “there is always a reason to engage” and the strategic side, where, as a senior strategy person points out, engagement “creates this sort of existential question for any large organization, that isn’t just about getting involved with trials. It’s fundamentally about your long-term routes to market strategy over the next five to 10 years.” This difference is in part about the case organization dealing with a development that is not about developing discrete technological tools (what kind of website do we build?), but about reacting to the rise of technological platforms (how do we handle the challenges and

opportunities that come with trying to reach people where they already are, on terms set by others?). It represents an organization-to-organization, publisher-to-platform parallel to what Gillespie (2014) has called “entanglement with practice” (p. 168), the way actors reshape their practices to suit the algorithms they depend on (even as they in our case also worry over that very dependence).

The fear of missing out

Despite the tension and the longer-term strategic worries, our case organization has generally engaged with digital intermediaries and their news-related initiatives at every given opportunity. Consider this exchange, which is significant especially because it comes from an interview with one of the senior strategy people who expressed the most reservations about the long-term implications of engaging with digital intermediaries:

Interviewer: Have any of the major platforms come to you with suggestions or proposals of where you have said no? Thanks, but no thanks.

Interviewee: That’s a good question. Um. [Pause.] I don’t think so. [Pause.] Not major ones.

At a very basic level, editorial, product, and strategy people in the case organization start from the basic premises that (1) digital intermediaries, especially Google and Facebook, have grown popular with very large numbers of people because they offer attractive products and are increasingly integral to our daily digital habits; (2) that news is among the things people search for and that they come across on social media, as shown by the significant amounts of traffic driven by Google and Facebook; and that (3) even a large, resourceful, and prominent news organization will be working against some central evolving trends in how people use digital media and how the digital media environment is structured by powerful, centrally placed technology companies if it does not recognize this and act accordingly. As one senior product person says, “Facebook is the big beast in the social media jungle and we recognize that a large proportion of our audience will want to read news on Facebook. ... There are opportunities for us within that space.” Similarly, a senior social media editor says that leveraging search engines is the biggest driver of traffic from outside the case organization’s core, loyal audience and hence a major priority.

The central opportunity digital intermediaries offer is *reach*, especially to younger audiences and casual users that many news organizations struggle to connect with. All the major digital intermediaries feed this perception. Fear of missing out is an important part of not only the business-to-consumer side of digital media but also of the business-to-business side. Importantly, this fear is not only fanned through the kinds of self-promotion oriented toward individual users, analyzed by, for example, Gillespie (2010) or Van Dijck (2013), but also by platforms aggressively promoting their products and services specifically toward other organized actors, including news media. When new initiatives are launched around news, they are promoted both publicly and in private conversations with those publishers that the digital intermediaries want to get on board from the outset, often playing very explicitly on the idea that news media have in the past

missed out on opportunities like this. (The past failures such as Google Living Stories or Facebook's Social Reader are rarely brought up on these occasions.) Take this exchange from one of our interviews with a senior strategy person in the case organization:

Interviewer: One sense I have from our interviews is that the way the platforms approach major publishers is that they come and say we have this thing, it's gonna be amazing, we can't tell you exactly how or why. You want to be part of it and it would be very bad for you to not be part of it. Is this broadly ...

Interviewee: Yeah it is exactly that. But if I was there that's what I'd do too. It's exactly that push.

While there is no clear evidence that this is the case, several interviewees also express the view that *not* embracing new initiatives championed by the dominant digital intermediaries may undermine the benefit derived from existing services, for example, the fear that *not* using Google AMP will reduce search traffic, that *not* using Facebook Instant Articles will reduce reach and referrals from Facebook, and so on. Whether or not this fear is justified, the fact that people act on it means it has real consequences.

The fear of missing out on the opportunities presented by digital intermediaries is accentuated by the fact that some other news media organizations—both digitally born ones such as BuzzFeed and the Huffington Post and legacy ones such as CNN and the Mail Online—are seen as having delivered proof of the concept that search and social media can help reach very large audiences. The same product manager quoted above continues, “People have demonstrated successfully, new entrants have demonstrated it is a way to build very rapidly, very large scalable engaged audiences with your brand.” The underlying logic is clear. If they can do it, so can we. And the case organization fears missing out on the opportunities offered (and actively promoted) by digital intermediaries, especially given the risk that other competitors seize them successfully.

Difficulties in evaluating the relationship

Evaluating whether engagement with the various opportunities offered by digital intermediaries is working out is, however, difficult, in part because of limited data on performance, lack of benchmarks, and problems of comparing various metrics across channels. At a basic level, there is no question both search and social help our case organization increase its online reach. But how much, to whom, and with what further potential is very hard to ascertain due to the dearth of detailed data. The opacity of many of the opportunities offered by digital intermediaries is in stark contrast to the general impression in journalism studies that digital media provides detailed and accurate audience data (Anderson, 2012). It shows how the very same digital technologies, which some early commentators associated with transparency, also produce a series of opaque black boxes controlled by individual, self-interested actors (Pasquale, 2015). Specifically, it demonstrates how the divide between those who have and those who do not have access to detailed data goes not only between individual users and large technology companies but also between, for example, platforms and publishers. People from all parts of the case

organization express great frustration with the data provided by most digital intermediaries, especially because the assumption is that the intermediaries themselves have far better data. A senior social media editor says,

You might see a very large number and you might think this is extraordinary, but when you actually look at it and break it down, what you're actually seeing is what the social media company might want you to see rather than what is actually a value to you as a publisher.

A senior strategy person expresses the same concern: "As an absolute minimal position we expect to be getting sufficient amounts of data back to be able to inform our business decisions. I think it's fair to say we're not getting that today."

This means that the "see" part of the "let's try and see" operational approach adopted by the newsroom can be difficult in practice. A senior social media editor lays out the problem:

Measuring is one thing, but how much do you trust in the measure that you have taken? Well that's a good question. I think there is a lot of smoke and mirrors. ... I think all news or all social media organizations and other media, digital media organization will reveal what they want to reveal and there will be some analytics that are publically available and some that are not.

A senior audience engagement editor echoes the point saying it is "virtually impossible" to get a consistent overview across channels due to incompatible metrics, lack of individual-level data, and the absence of third-party validation of numbers. A senior product person reinforces the point and elaborates on the issues involved:

We don't have at present, an aggregated view of engagement across those platforms in terms of what content works on which platforms. ... [The issue] is we have measurement at content level but we don't have any user data. For example, Facebook will give us aggregate demographic data, but we get no data at an individual level. So one of the things we're trying to create is a single customer view that allows us to see what every individual user, what they consume across out various channels. We're interested to develop personal relationships with users where we have personalized recommendations, where a user is able to follow topics, express favorites, receive personalized notifications. But we can't.

The limited data, lack of benchmarks, and problems of comparing various metrics across channels make it very hard to evaluate whether relationships that in the short run may help deliver reach but in the long run are seen by senior editors, product people, and managers as risky are actually working out. As long as there are opportunities, and the editorial side favors a "let's try and see" approach, spurred on in part by the fear of missing out, news media organizations can engage. But evaluating the results is difficult. We are, as individual, ordinary users, increasingly transparent to and monitored by large technology companies that we rely on (Van Dijck, 2013). Importantly, these platforms are in turn opaque not only to us as individual users (Pasquale, 2015) but also to other powerful institutions, like publishers, that increasingly depend upon them. It is, says one senior strategy person, "incredibly hard to evaluate. ... [We are] punching in the dark from a strategy point of view."

Asymmetrical relationships

Fundamentally, the relationship between our case organization—a large, digitally developed, European news media organization with a relatively solid revenue base—and digital intermediaries such as Google and Facebook is seen as very asymmetrical. This is a central difference between dealing with technological tools (the development of a new website or app) and technological platforms (dealing with digital intermediaries) that platform studies help us capture. How precisely news media respond is then an empirical question and dependent on the kinds of specific combinations of artifacts, practices, and arrangements digital journalism studies have focused on (e.g. Boczkowski, 2004). As noted from the outset, our case organization is very engaged with all the digital intermediaries and most interviewees generally describe the relationships as relatively good, contacts as frequent, and discussions are open. Google and Facebook are both very important, and the case organization has close relations with both. But relations with different digital intermediaries are different. One senior product person who has worked with both Google and Facebook describes the relation with Facebook as follows:

The engagement has been pretty arms-length. It's been through business development people rather than technical architects and product managers talking to one another. ... They've been very inflexible. It's been difficult to get direct access to the people actually building their products directly. And they have tended to engage with publishers on a bilateral basis rather than a multilateral basis. So they engage in direct one-to-one discussions with publishers rather than bringing groups of publishers together at the same time. And there doesn't seem to be much flexibility in the approach, right? But having said that, the product clearly seems to work for people and I think it will become a very major force in driving online journalism in the next few years.

The same interviewee describes the relationship with Google in very different terms:

It has been truly collaborative in terms of the way in which Google have worked with the industry. They opened up the discussions early around the aims of the [AMP] project, and they got publishers involved defining how it would work before they had actually built the mechanism and before they had defined the solution. And so I don't think it was just lip-service, I think that they genuinely invested significant amounts of resource and effort and time to bring publishers together to talk about the problem space they were trying to address. ... And they then said, "If we want to achieve that, how does this process need to work for you as publishers?" And, as a result, I think what's come out is pretty sophisticated process.

The senior product person talks about a "fairly stark contrast" between working with Facebook and working with Google but also underlines that these things change over time as digital intermediaries evolve and rethink their relationship with outside partners:

If you look at how Google behaved with Google Newsstand when it first came out [in 2013], they were operating in the same way as Apple and Facebook are now. It was not open. They were very much concerned around revenue shares and around service-level agreements and around complying to certain standards. I think it's a very fascinating fundamental shift.

The case organization's relationship with Google is particularly revealing because it is seen as more collaborative and open than the relationship with Facebook but is still seen as very asymmetrical. A senior strategy person explains, "What we have found is that the bigger the organization that you're dealing with the harder obviously it is to influence those terms." After going through a range of the past and current examples of engagements with a range of different digital intermediaries, the interview continued:

Interviewer: What kind of hand do you feel you have to play with these people?

Interviewee: Honestly very limited is the absolute truth of it. ... It feels to me they have sufficient money, scale, scope and a global reach that if they're gonna do this, they're gonna do this, and then the question becomes more of at what point and on what terms do we engage. So it's wonderful to have a window where we feel we can influence things a bit more but I wouldn't want to overstate what sort of hand we have. And more broadly, and this speaks to some of the existential threats and concerns that people have about the success of their own destinations, their own websites, their own apps.

At a basic level, the relationship between the case organization and the biggest digital intermediaries does contain an element of what a senior social media editor calls "symbiosis"—ultimately both search engines and social media benefit from the fact that publishers produce news—but the relationship is very asymmetrical, with even large, digitally developed news media organizations feeling they have very little leverage with digital intermediaries, even those they have a good relationship with. Digital intermediaries may need news in a broad sense, or at least benefit from it. But it is not at all clear that they need any one individual news media organization, even large ones. Thus, our analysis goes beyond the usual focus in platform studies, the relation between ordinary users and large technology companies (e.g. Van Dijck, 2013; Gillespie, 2014), to identify comparable relations between companies such as Google and Facebook and large, digitally, strong, and historically powerful news media like our case organization.

The asymmetry is not simply about leverage in negotiations but also about who acts and who reacts. Major recent news-related initiatives such as Facebook's Instant Articles or Google's AMP Project have involved collaboration with select, invited partners before being opened up to other news media. But it is important to keep in mind that even in the most open and collaborative cases, it is still the case that digital intermediaries act, leaving news media organizations to react.

Conclusion

The rise of digital intermediaries such as search engines and social media is in the process of changing our media environment. This development offers new challenges and opportunities for media users and media organizations alike. In this article, we have focused on how news media organizations handle their relationships with increasingly important players such as Google and Facebook, analyzing a strategic case study—a large, digitally strong, European legacy news media organization with a relatively solid revenue base and a collaborative approach to the dominant intermediaries. On the basis

of interviews with editors, product developers, and senior strategy and management people, we have shown how the relationship is characterized by a tension between short-term operational considerations and longer-term strategic worries, and argued that it is shaped by the combination of a fear of missing out, the difficulties of evaluating risks and rewards, and a deep sense of asymmetry. Driven by a “let’s try and see” approach, championed especially by parts of the editorial staff, the case organization has engaged very actively with a range of new opportunities offered by digital intermediaries, increasing its current digital reach even as many in the organization worry about the longer-term strategic risk of becoming dependent on digital intermediaries. Here, the defensive, reactionary, and pragmatic approach to digital technologies that characterized many news media organizations in the past (Boczkowski, 2004) has been superseded by an approach that is still reactive and pragmatic, but far more aggressive in terms of seizing opportunities as they present themselves. This is very different from our established understanding of how legacy media engage with digital media.

Our analysis shows how digital intermediaries offer news media organizations important new opportunities for reaching wider audiences. But it remains unclear how the self-interest of digital intermediaries and news media organizations are aligned longer-term. Interviewees in our strategically selected case organization see their collaboration with platforms such as Google and Facebook as accompanied by significant strategic risk of losing control over editorial identity (as the ways in which people come across content is increasingly shaped by search and social media algorithms and interests), access to data (as far more detailed individual-level data is available on direct traffic and on-site audiences than referrals and off-site audiences), and revenue (as digital intermediaries account for larger and larger parts of the online advertising market). Interviewees frequently mention examples of how the intermediaries are in control and can and will change their product and strategy in line with what serves their own interests—as when Google’s “Panda” updates from 2011 drastically reduced traffic to sites operated by Demand Media (while benefiting other publishers) and when changes to the algorithms behind Facebook’s NewsFeed allegedly cut Upworthy’s audience reach in half in just 2 months in 2014.

These examples illustrate how decisions made by dominant digital intermediaries can restructure the environment in which other media organizations operate, and our analysis shows how even a large and resourceful news media organization struggles to adapt to its growing dependence on players such as Google and Facebook. To capture this, we have gone beyond digital journalism studies and its focus on the appropriation and development of specific, discrete technological *tools* and drawn on theoretical inspiration from platform studies and its interest in how various actors engage with the development of more widely shared and used technological *platforms*, owned and operated by individual companies such as Google and Facebook. Developing a discrete website or app is one thing. Dealing with the products and services developed and disseminated by large technology companies already used by billions of people is something else. Our case shows how even large, digitally strong news media who aggressively try to engage with these companies frequently find themselves reacting to moves made by far larger actors and drawn in by the fear of missing out on the reach that they offer.

Given the privileged position occupied by our strategically chosen case organization, the issue is even more acute for most other news media organizations, which do not have the same size, digital reach, political clout, or resources. The continuation of this development, with a small number of dominant digital intermediaries increasingly restructuring the media environment in part through their product development, in part through their popularity with audiences and advertisers, in part through the entrenched advantages that come with the accumulation of data, money, and technology talent, and in part through other actors growing increasingly reliant upon them, represents a fundamental change in the position occupied by news media organizations. This is an important extension of the empirical research done in platform studies, and contribution to how we understand the “network power” of entities that define standards others in turn rely on and connect large numbers of different users (Grewal, 2008). It is important, as previous research has shown (e.g. Gillespie, 2016; Just and Latzer, 2017; Pasquale, 2015; Van Dijck, 2013), that companies such as Google and Facebook define standards that (billions of) individual ordinary users in turn more or less have to simply accept. It is also important to go beyond that, as we have done here, and show that they have similar forms of network power over otherwise independent and powerful institutions such as the news media.

In the course of the 20th century, news media increased their institutional independence in part because of their control over the most important means of mass communication (Thompson, 1995). Today, they have far less control over the distribution of news than they had in the past. They may reach wider audiences than they can through their own websites and apps, but they do it by publishing to platforms defined by coding technologies, business models, and cultural conventions over which they have little influence and are increasingly dependent (Bell, 2014; Bell et al., 2016). They used to control both content and channels. Increasingly, they control only their own content and rely more and more on others’ channels.

This development is important for understanding how journalism and news media evolve in our changing media environment, but also beyond. It shows how not only ordinary users but also previously powerful and relatively independent institutions such as the news media are becoming simultaneously increasingly empowered by and dependent upon a small number of centrally placed and powerful digital intermediaries beyond their control. This is an extension of a broader set of trends variously characterized as the rise of “platformed sociality” (Van Dijck, 2013), a “black box society” (Pasquale, 2015), and the “infrastructuralization” of the most important platforms (even as they remain private, for-profit companies; Just and Latzer, 2017; Plantin et al., 2017). It is a development that raises fundamental questions that go beyond how individual citizens and important institutions such as news media, political campaigns, and social movements *use* digital technologies. It concerns how they handle their increasing *dependence on* these technologies and the few, large, and powerful technology companies that by empowering large numbers of other actors also develop and shape key parts of our media environment. We therefore hope further research will analyze how other news organizations—as well as other organizations deeply dependent on their ability to communicate publicly, such as, for example, political campaigns and social movements—handle their relationships with digital intermediaries, how these relationships operate in different national and institutional contexts, and examine how the different intermediaries themselves handle these

relations with those who are increasingly dependent upon them, and think about the responsibilities that come with the power they have.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank colleagues at the 2016 APSA Political Communication Preconference, the 2016 ECREA conference in Prague, ASCoR Amsterdam, and the PSA Media and Politics Group Meeting at the LSE for their comments on parts of this argument, and the research team at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford for their input.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This project was funded by the Tietgen Award grant given to the lead author by the Danish Society for Education and Business (DSEB).

Notes

1. <http://blog.parsely.com/post/2296/facebook-dominates-referral-traffic-a-coverage-overview/> (accessed 25 November 2016).
2. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-revenue-soars-on-ad-growth-1461787856> (accessed 25 November 2016).
3. <http://newscorp.com/2014/09/17/news-corp-opposed-googles-european-commission-settlement-offer-welcomed-competition-commission-reconsideration/> (accessed 25 November 2016).

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