

Does Online News Consumption Encourage Social Inclusion or Exclusion?

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Discussing social inclusion and exclusion in information behavior research and practice would imply focusing on the social context of users. With regard to the theme of inclusion and exclusion in information behavior research and practice, we chose to focus on specific groups of people and contexts, such as immigrants, economically disadvantaged persons, and victims of disasters, among others. For example, by studying the information needs and information search behaviors of immigrants, who belong to a particular social context, their social exclusion, followed by their social inclusion, was clarified besides developing an understanding of how public libraries can contribute to their social inclusion. There have been several studies in Japan on inclusion and exclusion in information behavior from the viewpoint of the role of social media in emergency situations. For example, Miura et al. (2016) identified a few characteristics of people's information processing in emergencies by investigating their behavior on social media, such as their "retweets on Twitter" or similar information transfer behaviors.

The question then arises, "Do 'digital natives', who are recognized as informally advantaged persons, really demonstrate appropriate information behavior in information flow"? Today, the main feature that attracts users to the internet is its accessibility to information. "Digital natives" are aware of this accessibility. Therefore, it might be assumed that digital natives automatically consume limited information, that is, they do not engage in other behaviors that extend the information gained. Consequently, this kind of inaction constricts social diversity and causes new social exclusion.

This phenomenon can be currently witnessed in the research area of mass communication and journalism. Some typical research topics include the problem of "echo chamber" concerning political issues (Colleoni et al., 2014)

and "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011), as represented by Google Personalized Search. This "negative" characteristic of the internet is generally discussed from the viewpoint of media. In this study, however, we propose that this kind of information environment is one of the social contexts that affects human information behavior and discuss whether this information environment affects issues of inclusion and exclusion of information behavior. Reuters Digital News Report shares a similar focus and reported that echo chambers and filter bubbles are undoubtedly real for some; however, it was found that, on average, users of social media, aggregators, and search engines experience more diversity than non-users (Reuters Institute, 2017).

The Purpose of This Study

In this study, online news consumption is set as the target context to investigate the core issue of whether the information environment affects inclusion and exclusion in information behavior research. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the news consumption patterns of the younger generation and examine the systems from which they automatically receive "selective" information.

RELATED WORKS

The Features of Online News Consumption

There are many, large-scaled surveys on news consumption, reporting online news platforms are becoming more popular than before. For example, Pew Research Center (2016) reported that approximately 40% of Americans express a clear preferences for getting their news online, though TV is still dominant position among others. Focusing on the responses by the people in their 20s, compared with TV (27%), nearly twice as many people (50%) often get news online.

Several studies discussed the role of news platforms in readers (Yadamsuren & Erdelez, 2011; Williamson et al., 2012). Yadamsuren & Erdelez (2011) identified that online news reading mostly happens on a habitual basis without conscious decisions from news consumers, however incidental exposure to online news is becoming a typical way to get informed about the new events as well.

In recent years, there is a considerable increase of the researches on the credibility and the truthiness of news. For

example, Shariff et al. (2017) investigated the credibility perception of news on Twitter, and clarified that the search topic keywords and writing style of tweets affected to perceive tweet credibility. Cooke (2017) discussed the problems of the truthiness on information consumption.

Online News Consumption by the Younger Generation in Japan

Hashimoto et al. (2016) conducted the national survey of information behavior in Japan and highlighted that more than 80% of the respondents in their study watched TV for news consumption, that is, TV still retains its dominant position as a news platforms, regardless of the age group. However, nearly 70% of the respondents who were in their twenties or thirties use their smartphone as well; therefore, this age group tends to receive news online when compared to groups of other ages. According to the Reuters Institute survey (2017), among the many online news gateways in Japan, Yahoo Japan (53% weekly reach) remains by far the most popular news engine. In the study on the formulation of public opinion via Yahoo! Japan, Kimura (2016) reported that Yahoo! Japan tends to aggregate and republish content from traditional sources with a strong affinity for the political conservative, and that a few users give comments reflecting a far-right attitude and anti-foreignism on Yahoo! Japan. Therefore, it is regrettable that news aggregators in Japan do not necessarily play a role of providing serendipitous information rather than other news platforms.

METHOD

In May 2017, a web survey was conducted in Japan among male and females aged between 20 and 30 years. Respondents were allocated according to the social composition ratio. A total of 1030 people (515 males, 515 females), including 515 working people (309 males, 206 females), 412 students (206 males, 206 females), and 108 housewives (females only) participated in the survey. The survey questionnaire comprised 15 questions on the following three areas: (1) about news gathering media, (2) about using news aggregators, (3) about receiving news through social media.

RESULTS

Results from questions about the media revealed that in the past one week, respondents most commonly received news (M.A., $n = 1030$) from TV (87.3%). The second largest group claimed they gathered news from news aggregators (68.2%), and the third was social media (41.6%). We then analyzed the 638 people who confirmed that they use news aggregators, based on two different questions.

What are the Characteristics of News Reading Using News Aggregators?

Figure 1 shows news reading behavior and the frequency of using news aggregators. By including the frequency of “sometimes,” the result shows that 95.2% of the respondents “read the headline list”; therefore, it can be

concluded that almost everyone does this when they use news aggregators. In addition, 86.1% of the respondents “read news summaries,” and 84.4% “read the body of the news (full text).” These findings show that most people read the body of the news from the headline list. “Reading the presented related news” (66.9%), which is unique to online news sources, is performed by almost 70% of the respondents; therefore, we may consider this a common practice when people use news aggregators.

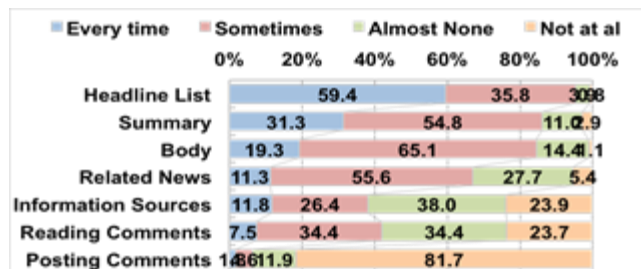


Figure 1. News reading behavior on news aggregator (n=638)

On the other hand, the behavior of “checking publishers that provide the news” (38.2% for “sometimes”) and “reading the comments of others on news aggregators” (41.8%) are not done very often. Additionally, it was found that “posting comments to news aggregator” (6%) was hardly ever done.

Figure 2 summarizes the results of questions about behaviors that are considered accompanying behaviors to the reading of news online: (1) posting news on social media and (2) searching for related news and detailed information on the web, among others. This revealed clearly that actions such as “posting comments on social media” or “quoting using social media (share, re-tweet)” are practically nil. Meanwhile, “searching for related news and information” was performed by 43.2% of the respondents, including those who responded “sometimes.” From these results, we observe their behavior of trying to gain more information on specific news items.

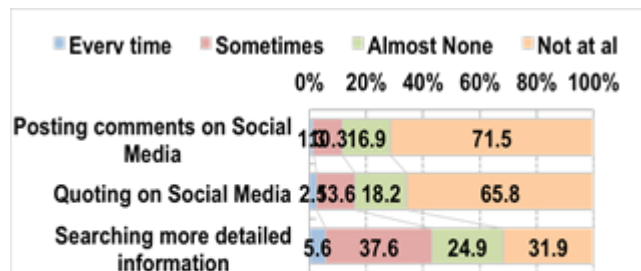


Figure 2. Behaviors after reading news on news aggregator (n=638)

Access Methods and News Reading Behavior

We then asked about the methods of accessing news aggregators using the following response options: “accessing directly,” “accessing when getting a push notification or delivery from an application,” and

“accessing through a link from social media.” We classified the respondents into four groups based on their answers to the question above: [G1] uses only direct access, [G2] combines direct access and inflows from social media, [G3] combines push notifications from applications, among others, and [G4] uses only passive cues. The relationship between the method of access and frequency of actions was compared using Fisher's exact probability test, and multiple comparisons were explained collectively by group.

First, [G2] group is active in not only reading the body of the news articles, but also demonstrating accompanying behaviors after news acquisition, such as posting comments and searching for more information. The second group, [G1], is the largest group (56.7% of the respondents). Although this group is reluctant to search for more detailed information or post comments, the respondents in this group tend to read the body of the news most actively after [G2]. [G3] showed a stronger tendency to search for more information compared to [G1] and [G4]. Finally, [G4] was found to be reluctant to receive news, in general, and seldom read the body of the news.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Our survey showed some characteristics of online news consumption. First, not many people were found to use only social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter among others for reading the news. Second, quite a large number of respondents use news aggregators, such as Yahoo! Japan and Google News, among others. However, not many respondents read the comments made by others to each news item. Therefore, the respondents do not necessarily face conditions such as the “echo chamber” or “filter bubbles.” In addition, the results show that some people tend to make additional searches related to the news they have read. It implies that people tend to look for serendipitous information from the news, make subjective searches, and experience diversity. However, a considerable number of respondents answered that they only gazed absently at the headlines of news aggregators and did not focus on the news sources; therefore, it is assumed that news aggregators that lack diversity rapidly encourage social exclusion. There is a need to focus on online news platforms as one of the social contexts in which users are embedded.

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