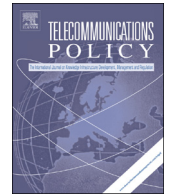




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Social media and the public interest: Governance of news platforms in the realm of individual and algorithmic gatekeepers

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to identify the basic contours of how the notion of the public interest is taking shape in the realm of social media. Drawing upon social media governance discourse and research on the dynamics of how social media platforms are being used in the dissemination and consumption of news and information, this article argues that a *restrictive* and *individualist* model of the public interest characterizes the social media space. This article then considers the broader implications of this emergent model of the public interest in social media governance.

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms have evolved to become significant means by which news of social, political, and economic significance is produced, disseminated, and consumed (see, e.g., [Copeland, 2011](#); [Rubel, 2012](#); [Weeks & Holbert, 2013](#)). News outlets have established a powerful presence within social media platforms, utilizing these platforms to enhance the distribution of their content through the online media ecosystem. Recent research has found, for instance, that every U.S. newspaper with a daily circulation of more than 100,000 readers utilized social media platforms to distribute their content online ([Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014](#)); and that over 95% of news sites allow users to share, like, or recommend content via social media platforms ([Stroud, Scacco, & Curry, 2014](#)).

These efforts appear to be achieving results. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have emerged as amongst the most important drivers of traffic to news sites, particularly amongst younger Internet users ([Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Christian, 2013](#); [Pew Research Center, 2014](#)), with an upward trajectory clearly in evidence. Recent data from online traffic researcher Parse.ly indicate that Facebook went from accounting for 16% of referrals to online news sites in October of 2013 to accounting for 26% in January of 2014, dramatically cutting into Google's lead as the top referral source for news sites ([McGee, 2014](#)).

Such patterns suggest that social media are becoming an increasingly important means via which individuals are made aware of and access news stories. According to the most recent survey by the Pew Journalism Project, 50% of Facebook and Twitter users, and 62% of Reddit users, regularly obtain news through these social media platforms. A recent eight country study by Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that roughly a quarter of the respondents in each of the countries identified social media as a regular source of news ([Nielsen & Schröder, in press](#)). While these numbers still pale alongside those found for news sources such as television, newspapers, and web sites (see [Nielsen & Schröder, in press](#)),

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given the relative newness of social media platforms in the news ecosystem, these findings are significant, with an upward trajectory over time seeming likely.

Social media platforms also can serve as important mechanisms via which news is initially generated and disseminated into the broader media ecosystem (see, e.g., MacKinnon, 2012; Newman, 2009). That is, social media need not only serve to relay news from other news outlets; these platforms can serve as the originating source as well. The examples here are numerous (see MacKinnon, 2012), with recent examples including individuals living in Israel and Gaza disseminating via social media first-hand accounts of the conflict there, including photos and videos of property damage, and of victims injured and killed in the conflict; as well as immediate reports of rocket attacks (Gallop, 2014). Similarly, in Ferguson, Missouri, where police shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, social media platforms such as Twitter and Vine have been widely used by protesters to not only express their views, but to report on subsequent protest and police activities (Deutch & Lee, 2014).

However, like so many media technologies and platforms throughout history – these are not the kinds of functionalities that motivated the development of these platforms. In this case, a social media platform (Facebook) originally designed to help college students identify attractive classmates; and one (Twitter) that, by definition, was intended to facilitate the dissemination of a “short burst of *inconsequential* information” (Johnson, 2013, p. 1; emphasis added), have grown into globally significant outlets for the dissemination of news and information (see, e.g., Rubel, 2012; Youmans & York, 2012). Now these and other social media platforms help inform and coordinate revolutions, disseminate traditional and new forms of journalism, and serve as a point of origin for a variety of types of information that are important to individuals and communities (see, e.g., Braun & Gillespie, 2011; MacKinnon, 2012; Rahimi, 2011).

Ironically, as social media platforms have emerged as some of the most significant new media organizations of the 21st century, they often – in part through their own conscious efforts – are not perceived or treated as media companies, but rather as something fundamentally different – technology companies. Facebook, for instance, has steadfastly resisted being characterized as a media company (see, e.g., McMains, 2012; Ulanoff, 2014), as has BuzzFeed (Thompson, 2014), with both following in Google’s footsteps in this regard (Carr, 2011). To the extent that this (mis)perception resonates with different stakeholder groups, it creates a potentially problematic gulf between the role and function that these platforms are performing in the contemporary media ecosystem and the way in which they are perceived and governed.

This contrast between the origins and self-perceptions of social media platforms and the increasingly important role they are playing in the flow of news and information in contemporary media ecosystems (and are likely to play in the future) raises the question of if or how the normative dimensions of their governance frameworks reflect the realities of their function and significance. As social media platforms emerge and evolve to function both independently of, and in conjunction with, both new and legacy news outlets as vital sources and distributors of the news and information that are essential to well-functioning democracies, it is important that we consider the normative frameworks by which their performance in this regard can be assessed and their governance debated and implemented.

Traditionally, such assessments of media performance and media governance have been grounded in the concept of the public interest (McQuail, 1992; Napoli, 2001). The concept of the public interest has a long, well-established tradition in the realm of the governance of traditional media, serving not only as a guidepost for policymakers in their formulation and assessment of policies; but also as a professional norm for certain categories of media professionals (e.g., journalists); as well as an evaluative and rhetorical tool for civil society organizations in their assessments of media performance and their advocacy efforts on behalf of the broader public (McQuail, 1992).

This evaluative orientation has continued relevance in the realm of social media. As Gillespie (2010) notes, “like the television networks and trade publishers before them,” new media platforms such as social media are “increasingly facing questions about their responsibilities: to their users, to key constituencies who depend on the public discourse they host, and to broader notions of the public interest” (p. 348, emphasis added).

Consequently, the goal of this article is to try to identify the basic contours of how the notion of the public interest is taking shape in the realm of social media governance. This analysis focuses on the specific context of the production and dissemination of news, as it is this informational function of the media that has traditionally been most explicitly intertwined with the notion of the public interest (Napoli, 2001). As this article will illustrate, in the case of social media, the notion of the public interest is at this point more implied than explicit.

Toward these ends, the first section of this article provides a foundation in the concept of the public interest, with a particular emphasis on understanding this concept from a media governance perspective; and again, primarily in relation to the provision of news and information. The second section applies this media governance perspective on the public interest to social media platforms, and the evolving role they are playing in the production, dissemination, and consumption of news and information. This section argues that a *restrictive* and *individualist* model of the public interest characterizes the social media space, but that these conceptualizations may inadequately account for the realities of how these platforms function in the contemporary media ecosystem. The concluding section considers broader governance implications and potential research directions in light of this analysis.

2. Media governance and the public interest

First, it is important to articulate the linkage between the concept of the public interest and the concept of media governance, which, as many analyses have illustrated, has become increasingly prominent in the discourses surrounding

media performance and media regulation and policy (see, e.g., Council of Europe, 2009; Karpinen & Moe, 2013; Puppis, 2010). Media governance is an inherently broader, more inclusive concept than media regulation or media policy. The notion of governance is broader and more inclusive in terms of the range of stakeholders that are seen as participating in the process. These include not only policymakers, but also industry stakeholders, NGOs and civil society organizations, and even the media audience (see, e.g., Hasebrink, 2012; Helberger, 2008; Langlois, 2013). And, importantly, from a governance perspective “these actors are addressed as equal partners in shaping and implementing public policies and regulations” (Ginosar, 2013, p. 357; see also Nolan & Marjoribanks, 2011; Freedman, 2008). As Puppis (2010) notes, the notion of media governance can perhaps best be encapsulated as regulatory deliberations, processes, and outcomes that take place both within and beyond the state (for a critical take on the media governance concept, see Karpinen & Moe, 2013).

An emphasis on media governance (as opposed to, more narrowly, media regulation or media policy) has taken particular hold online. This is, in many ways, a reflection of – and response to – the distinctive characteristics of the Internet as a media platform, where (a) national legal and regulatory jurisdictions are more difficult to define and enforce (Lievens, Valcke, & Jan Valgaeren, 2011); (b) the very origins of the platform and its operational mechanisms reflect a somewhat decentralized, interconnected, collectivist undertaking of governmental, commercial, and non-profit stakeholders (Schulz et al., 2011); and (c) the traditional rationales for government regulation (e.g., spectrum scarcity) often lack clear applicability and relevance (Thierer, 2012). This combination of characteristics in many ways compels the employment of the broader, more inclusive governance orientation amongst many of the stakeholders invested in the performance of the individuals, organizations, and institutions that provide Internet access, content, and services.

Reflecting these contours of media governance, the concept of the public interest is being considered here not purely as a rationale and evaluative tool for government regulation (the most familiar application), but also in terms of its prominent and well-documented position as a guiding principle of professional practice for news organizations (see Napoli, 2005), and its use as a reflection of the demonstrated and perceived needs and interests of media users (see, e.g., Fowler & Brenner, 1982).

The profession of journalism (regardless of the technology via which news is disseminated) traditionally has been infused with an ethical obligation to serve the public interest (Barkin, 2002; Iggers, 1999). Various sectors of the news industry have maintained self-designed and -imposed behavioral codes that typically embody the public interest concept to varying degrees (see, e.g., American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2014; Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). The public interest as ethical imperative is perhaps most explicitly articulated in the Code of Ethics of the Radio and Television News Directors Association (2004), whose Preamble states: “Professional electronic journalists should operate as trustees of the public” (p. 1). The Code of Ethics goes on to state that “any commitment other than service to the public undermines trust and credibility,” and that professional electronic journalists should “Provide a full range of information to enable the public to make enlightened decisions” (Radio and Television News Directors Association, 2004, p. 1).

These articulations of public interest principles inherent in the professional practice of journalism parallel, to some extent articulations of the public interest that are found in the realms of media regulation and policy. As the U.S. Federal Communications Commission’s (1949) noted in establishing its rationales for broadcast regulation: “It is axiomatic that one of the most vital questions of mass communication in a democracy is the development of an informed public opinion through the *public dissemination of news and ideas*” (p. 1249, emphasis added). This, obviously, is where the public interest as regulatory mandate acts as a supplement to the public interest as ethical imperative, and where the principles of public service and commitment to the democratic process have been translated into specific government-imposed requirements to serve the “public interest, convenience, or necessity” (see Communications Act, 1934).

And finally, it should be noted how central the public interest concept has been to the work of advocacy groups working on behalf of media users. These groups often utilize the specific public interest principles articulated by media outlets and/or policymakers to advocate on behalf of specific behavioral practices or policy positions that presumably enhance the extent to which the media serve the news and information needs and interests of the public (for a more detailed discussion, see Napoli, 2009).

As should be clear, the public interest concept connects quite well with the range of stakeholders and actions inherent in definitions of media governance, as it extends beyond the narrow realm of the assessments and decisions made by media policymakers, to also include the actions and professional norms and principles employed by media organizations, and the needs and interests expressed by media users and the advocacy organizations that operate on their behalf (see, e.g., the BBC’s in-depth exploration of how the public interest concept is interpreted by news professionals, regulators, and the audiences that they serve; Morrison & Svennevig, 2002). Thus, like the notion of media governance, the public interest concept extends into the formal and informal, national and supranational, centralized and dispersed, mechanisms that aim to organize media systems.

Of course, one of the defining aspects of the public interest is the extent to which it has been subject to multiple interpretations and applicational approaches over time, as well as (particularly relevant to this analysis) the extent to which evolutions in media technology have served as the impetus for such revisions (see, e.g., Bollier, 2002). Consider, for instance, the well-known and persistent tension in both the policymaking and professional sectors between trusteeship versus marketplace approaches to the public interest. Trusteeship approaches to the public interest (see, e.g., Hundt, 1996; Sunstein, 2000) place policymakers and (within the more expansive governance framework) media organizations in the position of identifying and defining specific values and priorities that need to be addressed in media policymaking and media performance. Such values and priorities typically extend into media organizations’ contributions to the political and

cultural well-being of the citizenry, encompassing objectives such as pluralism, diversity, competition, and localism (Karpainen, 2012; Napoli, 2001). And so, historically, we have seen a variety of “public interest obligations” imposed upon media organizations (broadcast licenses in particular) directed primarily at the news and information needs of media users (Napoli, 2001). In the realm of professional practice, this trusteeship approach is well-reflected in the social responsibility theory of the press, which is characterized by the centrality of normative principles and social responsibilities such as serving the political system, enlightening the public in order to facilitate self-government, and serving as a governmental watchdog (Peterson, 1963).

A key aspect of the public interest principle is that it has traditionally contained both restrictive and affirmative dimensions. That is, the articulation and application of the public interest standard in media governance has generally included restrictions on what media organizations could – or should – do (e.g., in relation to issues such as adult content, violence, etc.), as well as affirmative requirements or responsibilities related to serving the information needs of communities in ways that support a well-functioning democracy (e.g., providing minimum levels of news, informational, and educational content; meeting standards of accuracy and reliability in reporting, adhering to specific journalistic values, etc.) (Napoli, 2005).

The evolution of the media environment, particularly in terms of new video services such as cable television and home video recorders emerging as alternative, competing distribution platforms, provided an important impetus for revised thinking about the meaning of the public interest. In an environment of increased competition, an interpretive approach that placed a greater reliance on market forces emerged (see, e.g., Fowler & Brenner, 1982). Under this media governance framework, public interest determinations are delegated primarily to the interactions between media organizations and their audiences, with media organizations performing a central intermediary function in terms of gauging consumer demand and providing content and services accordingly.

3. The emergent public interest in social media governance

This background on the public interest standard and its interpretations and applications in media governance serves as a baseline for this section's consideration of the emerging meaning of the public interest in the realm of social media governance. At the outset, it is important to emphasize that this exercise requires extracting an implied model of the public interest from the state of social media governance, as explicit articulations and discussions of the concept and its application to social media are somewhat rare (for exceptions, see Andrejevic, 2013; Foster, 2012; Papandrea & Armstrong, 2008). This is likely due to the fact that, as was noted above, social media platforms do not have institutional origins in which issues of serving communities' news and information needs were foundational principles (see Ananny & Crawford, 2014). Further, these platforms have not operated in a regulatory environment in which there are regulatory bodies with clear-cut authority to impose any interpretation of the public interest (as it relates to news and information provision) upon them. Consequently, the goal here is to identify the elements of an emergent, implied notion of the public interest in social media governance, through an examination of relevant policy discourse, organizational practices, and the dynamics of how these platforms serve users' news and information needs.

3.1. Public interest policy discourse

Perhaps the most extensive articulation thus far of a public interest framework for social media governance can be found in recommendations adopted by the Council of Europe (2012) regarding measures to protect and promote respect for human rights in social networking services. As the Council of Europe (2012) noted in its introductory statements:

Social networking services or platforms [have] a great potential to promote the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the freedom to express, to create and to exchange content and ideas, and the freedom of assembly. Social networking services can assist the wider public to receive and impart information... The increasingly prominent role of social networking services...also offer great possibilities for enhancing the potential for the participation of individuals in political, social and cultural life.

The Council of Europe (2012) later goes on to describe social media as having “public service value.”

On these bases, the Council put forth a number of general recommendations, including enhancing transparency about data processing, ensuring access for people with disabilities, protecting users from harmful content, and providing an enabling environment for users of social networks to exercise their rights and freedoms (Council of Europe, 2012). More specific recommendations that emerged from these general recommendations fell into three broad categories: (a) providing essential information and measures to users (e.g., assuring that users are well-informed about the operation, functionalities, and data usage policies of social media platforms); (b) protecting children and young people against harmful content and behavior (e.g., restricting access to adult content and providing protections against online predators and bullying); and (c) maintaining trust in the handling of personal data (e.g., limiting the range of uses of user data and assuring users some level of control over how their data are used)

An analysis of emergent social media governance concerns by Schulz et al. (2011) identified three similar areas of concern. The first of these involves privacy and transparency. Specific points of focus here include issues of access to, and usage of, user data by social media platforms and third parties; transparency about any uses of such data; as well as transparency related to advertising and marketing practices. The second involves issues of content ownership; specifically

the application of relevant copyright laws to the ways in which social media platforms facilitate the production and distribution of user-generated communication that often integrates copyrighted material. The third involves the protection of minors. Central concerns here include exposure to hate speech, vulnerability to sexual predators, and online bullying and stalking (see also Papandrea & Armstrong, 2008).

Reflecting the multi-stakeholder approach inherent in the notion of media governance, actions on behalf of such concerns often have been collaborative. Facebook, for example, in 2008 entered into an agreement with U.S. Attorney General, which focuses primarily on protecting children from inappropriate adult contact and content, as well as on restrictions on tobacco and alcohol advertising (Stone, 2008). Similarly, Stein (2013) has illustrated the varied extent to which users of social media platforms have been able to play a role in their governance. In her analysis of YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia, the specific priorities once again include protecting users from exposure to violence, sexually explicit content, hate speech, and harassment; as well as safeguards for user data, and restrictions on the posting and dissemination of copyrighted material (see also Youmans & York, 2012 for cases studies in social media governance – all of which involve restricting the dissemination of certain categories of content). In its recommendations, the Council of Europe (2012) specifically calls for the development of strategic approaches that involve “member States, in consultation with private sector actors and civil society.”

As this brief overview suggests, the emerging contours of the public interest in the realm of social media governance are, at this point, very much associated with *restrictive*, rather than *affirmative*, approaches. That is, the emergent meaning of the public interest is thus far much more oriented around the activities that the operators of these platforms *should not* be engaged in (in order to protect the public), and the type of content flows that need to be restricted (see, e.g., Youmans & York, 2012), rather than on articulating, imposing, or adopting specific formulations of activities they *should* be engaged in, or content flows they *should* be facilitating, in order to effectively serve users' information needs. For instance, as much as the Council of Europe's (2012) preamble to its recommendations emphasized social media's significant role in helping the “public to receive and impart information,” none of the general or specific recommendations that followed deal in any meaningful way with the flow of news and information via social media (i.e., social media's increasing journalistic function).

The closest approximation to a more affirmative articulation can be found in the Council of Europe's (2012) prioritization of providing an enabling environment for users of social networks to exercise their rights and freedoms (see above). In this governance priority we see the essence of what is being termed here the *individualist* model of the public interest in social media governance. Specifically, in this formulation, social media platforms are to provide an enabling environment in which individual responsibility and autonomy can be realized in relation to the production, dissemination, and consumption of news and information. This formulation can, in many ways, be seen as an extension of the valorization and empowerment of the individual media user that has been a prominent theme in the discourse on the Internet in general, and social media in particular (see, e.g., Morozov, 2011; Taylor, 2014). From this perspective, in terms of whether social media platforms serve the public interest by providing the news and information essential to a well-functioning democracy, the responsibility essentially lies with the individual users.

4. The public interest reflected in platform design and operation

In many ways, the dynamics of social media design and usage, and how they are factoring into the operation of contemporary media ecosystems, are fundamentally about this transfer of responsibility to individual media users. Within the context of social media, individual media users – working in conjunction with content recommendation algorithms – serve a more significant gatekeeping function for their social network than was the case in the traditional media realm; and are increasingly reliant upon their social network to perform a gatekeeping function for them (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). Of course, via social media platforms individuals are building, maintaining, and (potentially) helping to inform social networks of much larger scale than typically could be achieved via traditional secondary gatekeeping processes such as word of mouth. In sum, via social media individuals are increasingly performing the filtering, mediating, and disclosing roles that all are integral parts of the practice of journalism, and are doing so on a more expansive scale (Goode, 2010).

Reflecting this perspective, Singer (2014) describes social media users' activities in relation to the identification and dissemination of news and information as “secondary gatekeeping” – a process through which journalists are “passing off to online users” important journalistic functions (p. 56). As Singer (2014), notes, “Users now have the capability to make and implement what essentially are editorial judgments about what is worthy and what is less so, about what others should read and what they might as well ignore.” (p. 56). Certainly, individuals have always possessed this capability to some extent, through traditional means of secondary gatekeeping such as word of mouth. However, the point here is that, within the context of social media platforms, the flow of news and information is much more dependent upon the judgments and subsequent actions (e.g., liking, sharing, retweeting, etc.) of the individual users of these platforms. This is why, for instance, the news industry is devoting substantial resources to gaining a deeper understanding of the type of users most likely to share content via social media platforms, and the categories of news stories most likely to be widely shared (see Napoli, 2014b). But the fact that recent research indicates significance differences in the type of news and information disseminated by legacy news organizations and the type of news and information shared by social media users highlights the autonomy that individual users can exercise, in terms of the news values and priorities that dictate the dissemination and consumption of news and information (Bastos, in press).

The common refrain that is repeated and debated in journalistic circles today is the notion that social media users operate under the presumption that “if the news is important, it will find me” (see, e.g., [Dredge, 2014](#)). Inherent in this statement is a potentially dramatic reconfiguration of how important news and information is disseminated and consumed; one in which individuals engage in less purposeful, directed information-seeking, and rely instead on the operation of their social media platforms, and the behaviors of the individuals and organizations within their social networks, to place relevant news and information in front of them.

Further, as was noted above, traditional news media operated from regulatory mandates and professional codes of conduct grounded in specific public interest principles. It is in part from these institutionalized public interest foundations that news and information emerged. The key point here is that, when we compare traditional models of news production and distribution to the realm of social media, these institutionalized representations of the public interest are absent, beyond the extent to which they are indirectly represented in the content uploaded by news organizations hoping to have it viewed and disseminated by social media users. Within the context of social media, these users thus play a much more important and influential role in the extent to which the platform ultimately serves as a robust source of news and information than was the case with traditional media. Users' tastes, preferences, and inclinations to disseminate are much more directly determinative of the news and informational character of the platform as a whole (and thus its service to the broader public interest) than was ever the case in traditional news media.

This contrast with traditional news media is in part a reflection of the nature of the platform and how it operates; but it also is a reflection of something of a public interest vacuum at the institutional level that has characterized how these platforms are designed and operated, at least in relation to the issue of the dissemination of news and information. As [Facebook \(2014\)](#) for instance, notes in its very brief mission statement, the platform's mission is to “give people the power to share.” Twitter's similarly brief mission statement focuses on giving “everyone the power to create and share ideas and information” ([Moss, 2013](#)). The overarching goal, clearly, is to empower individual users; and so the service of any broader public interest must emerge from them. The pursuit of these missions is not accompanied, for example, by any known public interest principles embedded in the processes via which individual news items are brought to the attention of the individual social media users.

This point is highlighted in recent research examining the professional values at work in the design of news sharing and dissemination applications, in which platform designers expressed virtually no connection with the values and practice of journalism ([Ananny & Crawford, 2014](#)). As one app designer was quoted as saying, “I don't think that the people in this space...are familiar with these ideas of journalism...I don't think they believe they're important. I think there are no ideals being pursued” ([Ananny & Crawford, 2014](#), p. 9).

5. Algorithms and the public interest

This observation highlights another important dimension of how social media platforms operate in the dissemination of news and information – the role of algorithmically driven content filtering and recommendation systems. It is important to emphasize that the individualist model of the public interest in social media governance has developed within a context in which the individual media user is not completely responsible for the circulation of news and information. Certainly, the algorithmically driven recommendation systems that facilitate the discovery and dissemination of news and information play a significant role, and have the potential to exert significant influence over the dissemination and consumption of news and information ([Dredge, 2014](#)). Of course, these algorithms are designed to be responsive to, and reflective of, the demonstrated needs and interests of individual users ([Webster, 2010](#)). In this regard, the news judgments and consumption and sharing behaviors of individual users still play an influential role in the operation of these algorithms. Nonetheless, within the process of algorithmic design and calibration resides substantial independent authority to affect the flow of news and information (see, e.g., [Diakopoulos, 2014](#); [Napoli, 2014a](#)).

This point is highlighted by the recent controversy surrounding Facebook's study on “emotional contagion,” in which researchers manipulated the news feeds of over half a million Facebook users to determine whether increases or decreases in the amount of “positive” or “negative” expressions displayed by others affected the extent to which users produced positive or negative posts of their own (see, e.g., [McNeal, 2014](#)). The results indicated that, indeed, the prevalence of more positive expressions displayed in users' news feed led to their posting more positive posts and that the prevalence of more negative expressions similarly led to the posting of more negative posts ([Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014](#)).

These findings highlight the impact that social media content can have, thereby illuminating the influential role that the operators of these platforms can play via algorithmic manipulation of the flow of news and information. Just as concerns long have existed about how those who control the traditional news media might use the tools at their disposal to affect the political process, it now also seems reasonable to raise similar questions about the potential influence of social media platforms. What if, for instance, Facebook or other prominent social media platforms wanted to affect specific election outcomes; or shift the political orientation of the country in a more conservative or liberal direction; or make individuals more intolerant towards certain ethnic or political groups? These are all, in theory, effects that are within these companies' capabilities via the alterations of its content recommendation algorithms and the news and information that users receive (see, e.g., [Tufekci, 2014](#)). Along these lines, recent research suggests that Facebook has adjusted its News Feed algorithm in ways that have increased the prominence of politically partisan news ([Abbruzzese, 2014](#)).

The concerns that arise in response to such activities are very much in keeping with those that originally led to the imposition of the public interest standard and specific public interest obligations on traditional media outlets (Napoli, 2001). Similarly, it is the recognition of this influence potential that undergirds the professional codes of journalistic practice discussed above (Napoli, 2005). This situation raises the question, as one critic of Facebook's study briefly suggested, "Is there any room for a public interest concern, like for journalism?" (Gillespie, 2014).

Recent events seem to finally be bringing greater public deliberation to questions such as these. The fact, for instance, that reports of the events taking place in Ferguson, Missouri were largely absent from algorithmically curated Facebook feeds, particularly in comparison to the prominence of Ferguson news in Twitter feeds (which are not algorithmically curated; see Holcomb, 2014), has generated discussion about the articulation and implementation of news values (or the lack thereof) within these digital intermediaries (see, e.g., Bell, 2014). The events in Ferguson were followed soon after by the online dissemination of video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley by members of ISIS. Twitter's decision to take down any such postings, and suspend the accounts of those who had tweeted the video, has helped to further catalyze discussion around the fact that exact nature of the editorial authority and responsibility of these platforms has not been rigorously considered, articulated, or debated, and certainly not institutionalized in any meaningful way. (see Ball, 2014; Gillmor, 2014; Greenwald, 2014). But clearly, the restrictive, individualist model of the public interest that has to this point characterized the governance of social media is increasingly inadequate.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how the notion of the public interest appears to be taking shape within the context of social media governance. Two primary observations come from this assessment. The first is that formulations of the public interest are, to this point, restrictive rather than affirmative in their orientation, in that they focus on activities and content flows that should be prevented, rather than on activities or content flows that should be encouraged or required, with news and information largely neglected in these formulations. The second is that what is termed here an individualist model of the public interest appears to be taking hold; in which many of the responsibilities associated with the production and dissemination of the news and information essential to a well-functioning democracy fall, within the context of social media platforms, to individual media users, who are presumably provided with platforms that enable them to fully exercise their abilities to access and disseminate news and information. The reality, of course, is more complicated, with algorithmic content recommendation systems also playing an important role in the dynamics of the consumption and dissemination of news and information on social media platforms.

Ultimately, there does seem to be a bit of a danger here in that news organizations and the public are increasingly relying upon media platforms for the production, dissemination, and consumption of news that possess few of the public interest parameters or values that characterized legacy news outlets. Certainly, one could argue that the systems of checks and balances that are inherent in this participatory, somewhat de-institutionalized news ecosystem renders such concerns moot (see, e.g., Benkler, 2007). However, it seems that any kind of rigorous assessment of this fundamental cost-benefit dynamic has not been conducted at this point.

Legitimate concerns, such as those of algorithmic authority and integrity discussed above, have tended (until very recently) to reside at the periphery of social media governance discourse and certainly have not begun to take any concrete form within the realm of public policy. Meaningful discussions, for instance, regarding if and how the public interest should manifest in algorithmic construction and operation have yet to take place. In general, it seems that concerns about personal privacy and data practices have overshadowed and, consequently, marginalized such concerns for many of the stakeholders engaged in social media governance.

What is needed at this point, is broader discussion about *algorithm governance in the public interest*. Such a discussion should focus on the integration, either through regulatory oversight and/or professional codes of conduct, of well-articulated news values and/or the kind of institutional articulations of social responsibility that have, up until the Internet era, accompanied the development of each significant news platform (see, e.g., Foster, 2012). Broad, general, tech company mantras such as Google's "don't be evil," or Facebook's "giving people the power to share" seem inadequate in an evolving media ecosystem in which algorithmically-driven platforms are playing an increasingly significant role in the production, dissemination, and consumption of the news and information that are essential to a well-functioning democracy. The governance framework for these platforms needs to evolve in accordance with how these platforms have, themselves, evolved, so that there is greater congruence between the power they wield and the responsibilities they should possess.

This point is not meant as an argument that these platforms necessarily need to be regulated in specific new ways; only that some more explicit and robust public interest standards for assessment and decision-making need to be discussed, adopted and applied by all stakeholder groups that are engaged in their governance. Stakeholders in the realm of social media governance need to begin engaging in a wide range of discussions on questions such as: to what extent are the prominent social media algorithms that help shape the dissemination and consumption of news and information infused with public interest values? If such values are present, what are they and how are they being operationalized? If such values are not present, should they be? If so, what values, then, should be prioritized? And on what grounds, or via what mechanisms, might such infusion of public interest values into algorithmic construction and operation be compelled?

It now may be time to start migrating some of the specific public interest principles that have characterized the realm of traditional media governance to the social media sector. For instance, diversity concerns have attained a prominent position

in the broader discourse on Internet governance (Napoli & Karppinen, 2013), and the recent attention, and advocacy group action, devoted directed at the lack of ethnic and gender diversity in companies such as Twitter, Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn represents the first significant indicator of the principle resonating in the realm of social media governance (see, e. g., Zakrzewski, 2014). Moving further in this direction, we might ask, for instance, whether diversity of sources, content, and exposure is a fundamental public interest principle that needs to receive greater emphasis in social media governance (see Foster, 2012). Should, perhaps, a commitment to the circulation of diverse ideas and viewpoints from a diverse array of sources, in an effort to diversify the range of sources and viewpoints accessed by social media users, find its way into algorithmic design on social media platforms? This might represent one possible direction in which a more institutionalized commitment to the public interest could take hold in social media governance.

Another emergent public interest priority involves transparency. It is interesting to note that, in its complaint to the Federal Trade Commission in regards to Facebook's emotion manipulation study, the [Electronic Privacy Information Center \(2014\)](#) proposed that the FTC require Facebook to make public the algorithm that produces the platform's News Feed. This request reflects the fundamental challenge in social media governance of effective stakeholder monitoring of processes that remain largely concealed within the oft-noted "black boxes" (see, e.g., Diakopoulos, 2014). Determining the extent to which the algorithms that power social media platforms operate in a way that reflects specific public interest principles would certainly be facilitated by greater access to the details regarding how these algorithms are constructed and operate (Foster, 2012).

The obvious concern here, of course, is that any increase in transparency can jeopardize business models and revenue streams, and thereby hinder innovation. This would seem to be a solvable problem, particularly if we look to other areas of media governance such as audience measurement, where, for instance, the industry-sponsored Media Research Council conducts robust but confidential audits of proprietary audience research methodologies and systems, and issues accreditations – all, apparently, without exposing trade secrets to competitors (see Napoli, 2011).

Finally, it is important to recognize that this analysis has approached social media platforms, and social media governance, in something of a vacuum, independent of the larger media ecosystem in which these platforms operate. So it would be a mistake to overstate the implications of these conclusions, as social media represent just one of many platforms via which news and information are produced and disseminated. However, it is distinctly possible (even likely) that social media's role in the production, dissemination, and consumption of vital news and information will continue to increase in significance, so it is important to consider the potentially broader implications of how the public interest in social media governance is taking shape, in effort to articulate and implement a governance model for social media that is more proactive than reactive to these platforms' expanding role in the production, dissemination, and consumption of news and information.

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