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The Impact of New Media Influencers: A Video

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The Impact of New Media Influencers: A Video

Curtis Richardson

School of Communication

Honors Research Project

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The Impact of the New Media Influencers

Introduction

In this project, I wanted to conduct an educational and entertaining essay translated into a video format. This "Video Essay" would cover how "New Media stars" (including people on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, but specifically Youtube or any other form of video content online) have affected and influenced demographics and culture. Specifically, I wanted to study how strong the reach of a social media star is, the effect of this reach on the consumer, and how it influenced opinions, thoughts, and habits. However, to set this project apart from the typical research paper, I wanted to take it more into the media realm and create a video documenting my findings from a review of the literature. This video wouldn't necessarily be conventional, but it would be a blend of new media style video (to pay homage to the subject itself) and properly formatted visuals, including shots, information, research and graphs. Much like a documentary, it would follow the process of my findings from my research. A link to the video can be found on page 15 of this paper.

The goal of this project was to truly identify the role of media and influencers, and examine how powerful the media really is on a more micro level. The media has an ability to push some form of agenda, and I wanted to discover how powerful this agenda setting was, and discover what limitations they may have. In a sense it would answer the question, "Who is more powerful, the media or the people?" by examining how the media has affected people during this new media generation. Not to mention that *if* the people are being manipulated, is it within our power to stop that manipulation, or is there a need to at all. This is important because in the current world, media is taking a completely different turn, growing faster than ever. What people watch isn't what it was before, and this info presented will help to clarify the gap between the

two institutions (society and media) if there is one at all. My motivations for digging into this topic are firstly because it has intrigued me for a long time. I wish to go into media myself, and possibly wield and audience of my own, so knowing how much power one actually would have is important. If I did one day become someone of influence in the industry, would the me of now see myself with disgust, or with praise, for how much power would be weld. Hopefully this information would give some insight (if any at all) on if the media has as big of an influence on the general population as we think.

The methodology of this project was to be split into several parts. The initial research question was to be answered by accumulating specific kinds of research. To answer the research question, I learned how effective new media influencers truly are, saw how effective the influence and ad tactics were, and see if the "Hypodermic Needle Theory" (the media primes the audience to push an agenda or belief) as well as a variation on the two step flow theory, stood true and was effective. This would then translate over with new media, seeing engagement with social media, the influence of ads online, and the power of influencers online who distribute information to an audience. If the statistics show that people think more based off what is seen, and are being swayed away from their own beliefs based off of media, the media has become a more negative than a positive influence on the people. This research is based heavily on theories about the media industry, on how the media behaves, and why they behave like they do. However there were limitations on the scope on the project, as I'd need statistical evidence to prove any hypothesis, and if the statistics are not available about a certain platform in the literature I review then I won't be able to incorporate that.

The overall timeline structure for how the video was to be created in 4 parts, split fairly evenly time wise. The research phase would help me try to inductively see what the case might

be with new media and old media. After amassing a certain amount of evidence, I'd form a

coherent script that would cover the video that would be filmed. I'd then record the script, and

include visuals, and scenes from the information I gathered and edit it into a video format. The

most important part would be finalizing a script that contained all my information, and had a

solid structure. As explained earlier, the script would be the written portion of the project. The

script itself will be a compilation of the research reviewed, and overall formatting of the video

that will be made. This wouldn't necessarily be a paper, but an outline of what each section of the

video discusses. Each section would explicitly state the information that was presented, the

direction of shots taken, and the voice over monologue that helped convey the message of that

section.

The physical video is visual version of the script, in other words a video essay. The video

was to run about 10 minutes depending on how the final conclusion was reached. The video

itself was to be split up into sections of *addressing the problem*, *identifying if new media stars*

truly effect the media, *analyzing the power it holds, then identifying if the influence is negative,*

positive, or something in between.

The reason this project is worth doing is because, it is a good representation of the field I

am in. I am a certified course author on LinkedIn Learning / Lynda & with Animaker Academy /

Rentrak, on contract to make series for these companies. These series are essentially discovering

the deeper complexities of topics by jumping into them directly. This is a topic I've always

wanted to explore, but now it has a much more strong appeal to me as someone who makes

online video for a living. This also makes the project worth doing, as it not only lets me practice

in a field similar to one that I am currently in, but it lets me learn more about how the media field

works. The benefits of this project aren't just for myself. For one, it may help people understand

how the new media world works. Not only that but it allows people to be informed and entertained.

From this project I expected to learn for myself how far I can push my ability to balance entertainment, information, and creating a discussion within a niche. Overall, I believe that goal to be a success, as I have worked on flow, balance, and learning how to keep the attention of the viewer while explaining new information. Another goal was to actually learn if new media is changing people, and if the amount of power new media holds is detrimental to society. Overall, I wholeheartedly came to the conclusion that it really is up to how the consumer consumes the information. There truly are good and bad influencers, and one just has to have the judgement to follow the right ones.

Literature Review

Social media influencers have a lot of power when it comes to spreading ideas. They have a very wide reach, and have the ability to influence opinions. Similar to the two step flow theory, they can provide information to their audience who isn't necessarily as media savvy. However, the exact levels of influence of an internet celebrity, and what they are isn't necessarily understood. This literature review was done with the purpose of understanding the scope of an influencers influence, and seeing how they impact consumerism and opinions of their audience.

My first article was titled, *Identifying the new Influencers in the Internet Era: Social Media and Social Network Analysis* (2016) by Miguel del Fresno García, Alan J. Daly and Sagrario Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo. This article discusses what exactly a "social media influencer is" and helps dictate what characteristics it has. The article defines them as a new type

of independent actor who is able to shape audience attitudes through the use of social media

channels. The authors also introduce us to a form of social science known as Social Network

Analysis (SNA) (which became very important during the course of this project). SNA is a visual

representation of a how a group or persons effect the social structure of the people around them.

The researchers use the two-step flow theory and put it to test in a real life scenario.

The study done here used an algorithm to track Twitter users in a particular niche of their

influence over others. It tracked retweets and mentions of a choice number of accounts, and kept

track of their reach in particular networks. It then used a SNA to make a matrix of the accounts'

connections. The study went to show that it is indeed true that social media influencers connect

some people to certain information, and without these influencers, they would not necessarily

have access to it. This helped confirm the two-step flow theory.

This article overall helped my research, as it accomplished a few things. One, it helped

dictate the characteristics of a social media influencer. The SNA graphs were solid proof that

they are indeed parts of the internet ecosystem. However more importantly, it gave a visual

representation of their influence, or rather their reach. Some 13 out of and odd thousands

accounts connected in both RT graphs, and MT graphs. While this doesn't necessarily mean they

have an influence on their actions, it does mean that these accounts do have the ability to limit

information, and push an agenda, and their removal from the structure would prevent a massive

amount of information flow. More research will need to be done on to establish if this is an

actual influence.

My next article was *Transmedia (Storytelling?): A polyphonic critical review* (2016) by

Sánchez-Mesa, Aarseth, Pratten,and Scolari. This article starts with the first dive in the actual

effects of a product of new media, transmedia storytelling, or creating a narrative. A deep dive is

taken on transmedia storytelling (storytelling across media), transmedia world building, and transmedia characters. Although the article covers this information through the lens of video games as well as television shows, it does a lot of coverage on connecting with the audience, and giving them a given investment to care about their characters, and in turn, the company. The article really drives home the idea that having experience is more important than the content involved.

Overall the points made by the researchers draw from how to manipulate in audience (but not in a negative connotation) and the importance of getting them to care. Smartphones and other devices used to consume media have become key to personalization. However, some media may work more advantageously than others depending on what type of storytelling is desired. Certain people want something different and knowing your audience seems to be the first step for a lot of developers and producers. All in all, the immersion of the audience in the story is a necessity.

This article helped my research, but not in a typical way. Storytelling is indeed important, especially when developing an online persona. It helped in the means of traditional media to a degree of explaining how this storytelling worked, but focused more on video games, which I'm not sure cover the scope of my argument. However, this information is not to go unused, as this taught a lot about how personalities, both online, and in radio and TV get the audience to care. Getting the audience to care then gets them invested, and more willing and opt to engage with you further. In the case of this article, it was to purchase the next game, or watch a new season.

The next article in my research was titled *Teen relationship with radio and television: Internet moves away from traditional media and redirects to new leisure formats. A case studio in a center of Province of Ciudad Real* (2017) by Milagros García Gajate. This article I originally wasn't going to go over, because it was in Spanish, however the study conducted in

the article was pretty critical to my argument, so it became necessary. Thankfully I have taken

two years of Spanish here at the University of Akron, and three in high school, so I have a solid

grip on what was being conveyed. Also, since a part of my video presentation is to add humor, I

figured finding a source and translating it to English in the video, would be a fun roadblock to

include. The point of the study done here was comparing the influence of the radio and television

and seeing if that consumption was influenced or interrupted at all by the internet. Using a

Likert-type scale, reliability scales and general open ended questions, they gauged 252 students'

responses. They separated results by sex, and provided varying results.

The results of the study showed that there was definitely a preference for viewing TV

over radio (M = 7,34 vs. M = 4,01). There was also a positive correlation between radio and TV

consumption, (As radio went up, TV went up), however due to the internet, usage overall had

dropped significantly for students. This is reaffirmed as radio and TV consumption has been

steadily dropping since 2012, while internet consumption has gone up. Internet consumption

took the place of the consumption of other forms of media in different locations as well

(especially the bathroom). Internet has mostly opened access to a lot more different types of

media to the subjects. The consumers are then slowly redirected out of the traditional media.

Overall this helped my research a lot, giving a lot more perspective about how the

internet has affected traditional consumption. Although, there is no information on its influence

on people, it does make a good note on its reach, which will be addressed at the beginning of my

analysis. It doesn't affect it in the ways I had previously thought, but it brings up some good

points on how the internet is actually more influential, possibly because it has a stronger hold on

people. These are areas for future research.

After that I examined the article titled, *The Emotional Impact of Traditional and New Media in Social Events* (2017) by Salcudean and Muresan. This article was very intriguing. The researchers examined a tragedy where 64 people died in a fire in a Bucharest night club in Hungary. The study monitored the opinions and side effects through social media, and turned that into quantitative data. This relates to my article as it is important to gauge if the opinions of others are present and reaching to others. It also is a good way to see if new media has influence in a context of potential negative effects. When opinions are considered in the social sphere on a controversial event, what does this mean for a media ecosystem? Would this lead to a situation implied in the theory of "spiral of silence?" Or would very aggressive arguments be taken with a different tone? This proposes potential situations in which people behave via social media, shedding light on its influence.

The researchers' study and information aims to prove the blending of the two is most influential, traditional and new media, which didn't occur as a concept to me. Rather than two opposing forces, both can work together, and this creates the strongest influence. After the tragedy, a lot of residents of Romania saw news and articles both on TV and online about the event. They then vented their frustrations on social media, mostly Facebook. The article states that following the tragedy, social media operated as a "tool of maximum utility", with users reacting spontaneously in great solidarity almost immediately. In particular, many people showed their solidarity by using the hashtag "#Colectiv". It was mentioned 50,588 times during the first 12 days, and registered 575 million impressions. As a social influencer, artist Tudor Chirila, saw his popularity grow exponentially during the period and he became a role model for the youth. However, blogger and influencer, was Ciutacu. He fired back against protestors, being

critical of them, and his most popular posts claimed protestors might be being manipulated by politicians.

The lasts bits of information were incredibly helpful for my article, as it shows that engagement in discourse does bring popularity. This makes sense as a lot of people rally around a cause. However even more so, being polarizing does as well, as the social media influencer who went against protestors gained popularity, or at least made an impression, due to expressing such opinions, and having a wide audience. Influencers indeed have power, and the ability to put different views on people's timelines. It's worth more investigation though, as the echo chamber theory is challenged here. Meaning, why are polarizing opinions getting a lot of views if that's true? There maybe be a balance between the two. Regardless, what can be taken away is that emotion is a strong pull in opinions, and a good source of gaining influence or exerting influence for influencers.

The final study examined was a review by Morgensen (2016) of a book by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) entitled, *Spreadable media: Creating Value and meaning in A Networked Culture.* This book considers our culture in context to being in a network, about connections being made, and what that really means. The book is about transparency with your audience. This is applicable to a working hypotheses I've developed on why influencers are trusted. A good point addressed from this piece is that you can break media influence into a few categories: The relationship between the media and audience, the appraisal of content, audience measurements, meaningful audience participation, designing for spread, media diversity and finally transnational implications of the new media landscape. The media can be considered as a product, or gift. However, companies are warned that it could backfire if they try to profit from such gifts freely. Taking advantage of your audience, ironically enough, isn't advantageous.

Although the information is generally everywhere, one metaphor I took from this sticks pretty hard. Cory Doctorow compares virality to a dandelion; it spreads its seeds without knowing where the process will end. Media and content is spreadable. From here, it goes into the concept of rights to content. Content does spread and influence, but does that influence become bad or good? Is it too influential because of how fast it spreads? The information and people might be simply just the product of an environment, as the authors suggest, but it proves more investigation might be needed.

Recommendations

Based on my experience, I recommend future producers of this type of content should focus on developing a sturdy outline. The outline is the basis of where the information will go, and when you have an open ended conclusion (as this is deductive research) it means that it may go in a place where you didn't necessarily mean it to. Originally the video planned on going in one direction, but due to lack of research found in that direction, and research that didn't apply, it had to go in a different one. Being able to see the whole course while working on individual parts is a necessity for this level of production. Having to collect new information, and looking for different articles more or less was challenging, however once I found a new course for the project, it ended up having a better grounding than the original version. What did prove effective was the asset gathering. Music, visuals and stylized effects really gave the video life, and what I'm really most proud about for this project! Having an idea of what emotions you want the video to convey with visuals gives it a more tangible feel on what direction it will go as well. Keeping these things in mind sets the course for a very well done project.

Reflection

Overall, I expected this Honors project to be a chore. Baseless asset gathering and information gathering simply to be another step closer to receiving a degree. However, as time went on, I thoroughly enjoyed doing it. I became very engrossed in the topic, and began to ask more questions that would help to flesh out the concept more. Not to mention, it gave me the initiative to get creative with the visual edits, and with voice over. As in my professional career after graduation I will be taking a job as a production assistant at Frederator Digital, it will involve me doing a lot of voice over for their content on their digital platform. This project gave me the opportunity to not just create something I'm proud to say is mine, but also to have also taken an in-depth look at how the world works, and what I can do moving into my career to take advantage of it.

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Honors Project, The Impact of the New Media Influencer, Full Video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cSQC9YaIsFgjm2wLF_y__j2ZGKfpyZ0f/view?usp=sharing

Disclaimer on Fair Use:

Essentially, some clips in this project may have some copyright issues, such as the "Spiderman" clips from the beginning. They are public clips shared via a Fandango associated Youtube Channel "Movie Clips". I believe they fall under fair use as general assets because:

1. They don't replace the original media

2. The clips are being used in an educational context.

They may fall in a gray area when it comes to publishing the content, so, I would request that the project not be published upon submission to the Honors College website at the University of Akron, and that it not be shared on the University of Akron's website.