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NEWS SHARING ON TWITTER: A NATIONALLY COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Introduction

The utility of Twitter as a medium for public engagement with news events has been well documented. Research has particularly highlighted the importance of Twitter as a space for the rapid assembly of *ad hoc* publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2015) around breaking news events, aided also by the availability of hashtags as a flexible mechanism for collecting all tweets marked as relevant to a specific topic (Rambukkana, 2015). In this, Twitter arguably even surpasses Facebook, as its flat, non-reciprocal, weak-tie network facilitates the dissemination of news more effectively than the hierarchical, reciprocal, strong-tie structure implemented by Facebook (Dewan & Kumaraguru, 2014).

Reflecting on this function, Hermida (2010) and Burns (2010) have both described Twitter as an “ambient news network” that is always active in the background, and springs into foreground action as major news breaks. While this correctly characterises Twitter’s role during such events, much less is known about the platform’s performance during its “ambient” phases – that is, about the day-to-day news sharing and news engagement practices of users *outside* of periods of heightened attention. In part, this comparative lack of research into routine news practices on Twitter also stems from the methodological challenges associated with researching them: while it is relatively easy to capture all of the hashtagged tweets relating to a given breaking news event, it is

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considerably more difficult to track general, non-exceptional user activities on Twitter (Burgess & Bruns, 2015).

Addressing this substantial gap in the literature, this paper presents the first results from a major, long-term, internationally comparative study of news sharing on Twitter. Gathering Twitter data since mid-2012, we have managed – within the limitations set by the public Twitter API – to capture all tweets linking to a large selection of news sites in Australia, Germany, and the Nordic countries; our analysis of these data shows the distribution of attention to these sites, the dynamics of such marketshare over time, and the structure of each nation’s news-sharing user populations on Twitter, as well as comparing these patterns across the countries against the backdrop of their respective media ecologies.

Approach and Method

Given a domain name such as *abc.net.au*, the Twitter Search API returns all recent tweets containing links to that domain, even if those links were shortened in tweets by Twitter’s mandatory URL shortener *t.co* and/or further secondary URL shorteners such as *bit.ly* or *ow.ly*. Building on this functionality, we have used the Twitter data capture tool *yourTwrapperkeeper* since mid-2012 to track tweets linking to some 35 Australian news sites; since late 2012 to track some 400 German news sites; and since late 2013 to track some 100 news sites in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. In each country, these lists of sites constitute a comprehensive selection of all major news and opinion sites in the local mediasphere; in each national case they include newspaper, television, radio, and online-only news sites. In total, this approach has resulted in datasets comprising some 45 million tweets linking to Australian news sites; some 50 million linking to German news sites; and some 10 million linking to Nordic news sites.

Building on these large datasets, we develop a number of key metrics for nation-by-nation and comparative analyses. First, the study of long-term sharing patterns reveals the respective marketshare of each news site within the overall volume of sharing activity in each country. This indicates the key sources that Twitter users draw on in their routine news sharing activities. Second, our longitudinal dataset enables a study of the dynamics of this market structure, showing the relative rise and decline of specific sites within each national mediasphere. We examine this both for the entire timeframe covered by each dataset, and in the context of specific major events, to explore whether the marketshare of specific sites is greater in particular news contexts (political scandals, natural disasters, sporting and entertainment events) than over the long term, and correlate this with existing knowledge about the digital and social media strategies of these sites and about how these sites are generally perceived in each country.

Third, we examine the structure of the specific userbases for the leading news sites in each country. This provides information, for instance, about the extent to which their marketshare within overall sharing activities is driven only by a small number of highly active users, or by widespread sharing across a large userbase, and thus indicates the relative general popularity or topical specialisation of each site. Fourth, by systematically analysing the overlaps between these userbases we are able to shed new light onto users’ prevalent news sourcing practices within these national

Twitterspheres, identifying which combinations of sites are commonly shared by the same users. This is likely to reveal a number of affinities between sites: for instance, users may typically share links to a selection of all sites that is based on the sites' perceived quality, ideological orientation, or topical specialisation, and sharing patterns may also be influenced by cross-promotions between sites belonging to the same media outlets.

Preliminary Analysis: News Sharing in Australia

Early analyses of the Australian data, for instance, reveal a number of significant patterns (fig. 1). First, there is a clear and largely stable hierarchy of site popularity amongst Twitter users, with the national public broadcaster *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* and the quality broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald* closely matched in first and second place, a second tier of broadsheet *The Age* and generic online-only site *news.com.au*, and all other sites playing much more minor roles. Since 2012, the volume of news sharing in Australia has increased substantially especially for these leading sites; this may point to the changing demographics of the Australian Twittersphere, as well as to a rich-get-richer tendency that over time directs more and more attention towards already leading sites.

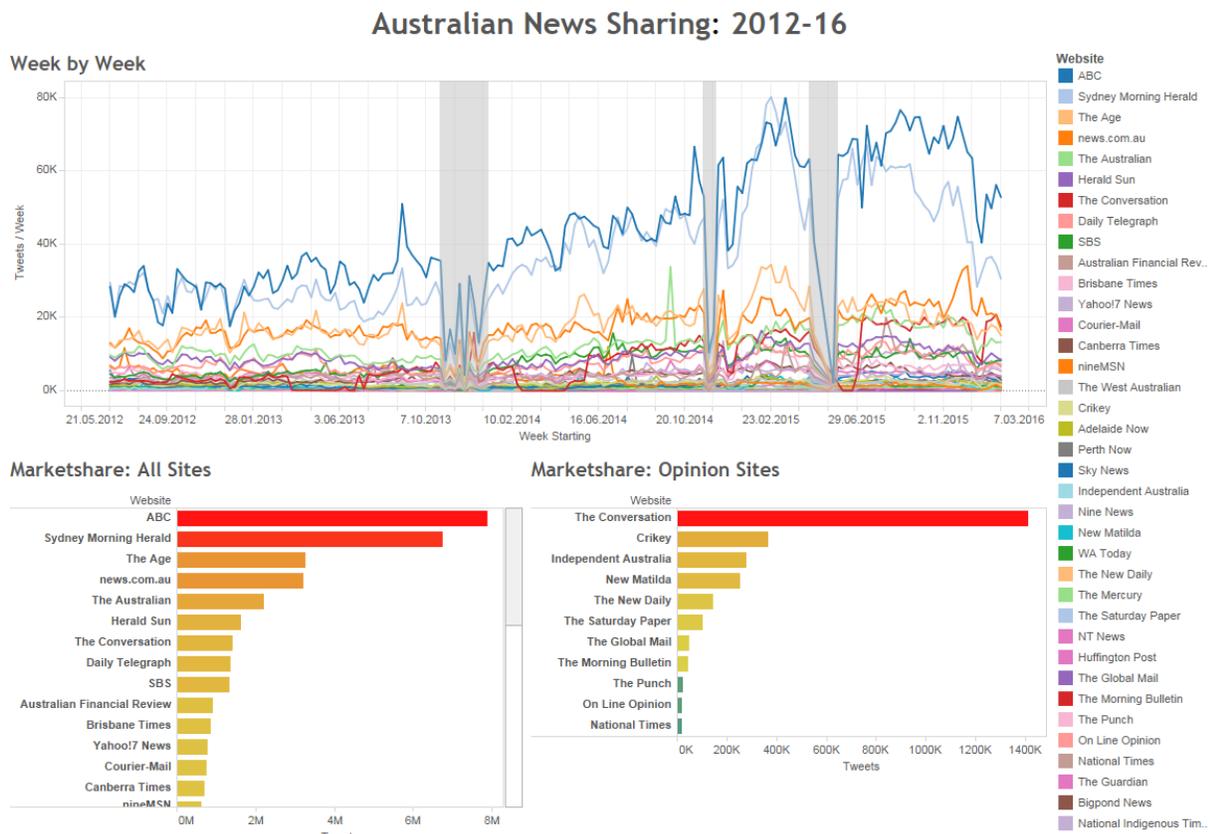


Fig. 1: Tweets per week linking to Australian news sites, Aug. 2012 to Jan. 2016

Further, an analysis of the overlaps amongst the 10,000 users each who most actively shared one of five leading sites in January to March 2015 points to some pronounced bifurcations in these users' sharing practices (fig. 2). There are strong overlaps in the

groups sharing links to quality news sites *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, and *The Australian (Aus)*, but considerably more limited overlaps between these groups and sharers of *news.com.au (news)* and especially tabloid news site *Herald Sun (HS)*; in fact, *Herald Sun* sharers constitute the most solipsistic group: nearly half of the top 10,000 *HS* sharers did not share any links to any of the four other sites. Somewhat surprisingly, userbase overlap for the *Herald Sun* is greatest with *The Australian* and *news.com.au*; this may be explained by the fact that all three sites belong to News Corporation and are cross-promoting each other's content online.

	SMH	news	HS	Aus	none
ABC	5,024	3,284	2,834	4,230	3,506
SMH		3,913	3,265	4,951	2,748
news			3,609	4,166	3,966
HS				3,734	4,681
Aus					2,932

Fig. 2: Overlap between top 10,000 sharers of links to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), news.com.au (news), Herald Sun (HS), and The Australian (Aus), January-March 2015. (Bruns, forthcoming 2016)

Our paper deepens this analysis and extends it across the various territories covered by the datasets, and thereby also enables further comparative studies of news sharing that reveal significant national differences in the use of Twitter for sharing the news. Additional nation-specific investigations are planned for the future.

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