

News sharing on social media

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The emergence of social media platforms has empowered everyday users to assume a more prominent role in the dissemination of (political) news content. By engaging in news sharing—which entails granting a specific group of individuals access to news content via social media—people are actively involved in shaping the flow of news. This entry provides an overview of research on news sharing from the perspective of political communication. It begins by offering a definition of ‘news sharing’ and situating it within the existing research landscape. Subsequently, the entry focuses on discussing key findings, specifically examining the role of news sharing (1) users, (2) content, and (3) networks. In an outlook, the entry highlights challenges and future research directions related to news sharing research. These include a stronger focus on the role of platform algorithms, a deeper exploration of contextual dynamics and cross-platform sharing, and the assessment of long-term effects.

News Sharing; News diffusion; Online journalism; Participatory Journalism; Social media

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Since the advent of social media platforms, ‘ordinary’ users play an increasingly important role in creating, curating, and sharing online content. Besides being a source of entertainment, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram have also become central for engaging with news and political information. In that regard, they have not only facilitated a process that has been labeled as news internalizing (e.g., browsing and reading news), but also news externalizing, that is, forwarding, posting, and disseminating news for others to consume (Choi, 2016). This “practice of giving a defined set of people access to news content via social media platforms” (Kümpel et al., 2015, p. 2) has primarily been discussed under the term news sharing. With this, scholars refer to a wide range of behaviors that users perform to distribute news articles, videos, or other forms of current affairs content either publicly, semi-privately (e.g., in social media groups), or privately (e.g., via direct messages). While the term has also been used to refer to sharing activities by news organizations or political actors, the focus of this entry will be on news sharing by average social media users. Accordingly, news sharing can be seen as a subtype of people’s online news engagement or even as a form of citizen journalism.

Political communication researchers in particular have been interested in studying news sharing to gain insights into the changing dynamics of information dissemination, the formation of public opinion, and news sharing’s potential to foster civic engagement. More recently, research has also become increasingly concerned with the sharing of disinformation and misinformation as well as so-called fake news (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019).

Investigating which users are sharing which types of content on social media platforms characterized by different network structures and affordances is thus crucial to understand the threats and opportunities of news sharing for online civic culture.

This entry discusses central findings in news sharing research, looking at the roles of (1) users, (2) content, and (3) networks. It also outlines challenges and future research directions in this area.

Findings on news sharing users, content, and networks

In their review on news sharing in social media, Kümpel and colleagues (2015) cluster the literature along three dimensions: (1) news sharing users (e.g., what kind of persons are sharing news, what are their motivations?), (2) news sharing content (e.g., what kind of content is shared widely on social media?), and (3) news sharing networks (e.g., how does news sharing differ between different platforms?). This entry will also follow this basic

structure to discuss overarching findings, with a particular emphasis on political news sharing.

News sharing users: Although, in principle, news can be shared by any social media user, some users seem to be more likely to engage in sharing activities than others. Research suggests that people who regularly share (political) news perceive themselves as opinion leaders and tend to have a high number of contacts/followers. They exhibit more diverse media use patterns than the average user, usually relying on multiple sources to gather information. Moreover, avid shares tend to have higher levels of political interest and more interest in hard news (e.g., Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). Political news sharing was also found to be predicted by exposure to disagreement, suggesting that individuals aim to reaffirm their political identity by sharing—and thereby also criticizing—news with disagreeable information (Kim et al., 2021). In terms of motives, sharing is driven by self-serving motives (e.g., gaining reputation), altruistic motives (e.g., provide others with important information), and social motives. Of course, this classification is primarily analytical, as sharing is often simultaneously triggered by the need to get recognition, informing others, and strengthening social bonds. For fake news sharing, research indicates that it is fundamentally driven by the same motivations as ‘true’ news sharing, with social considerations being particularly important (e.g., Duffy et al., 2020; Osmundsen et al., 2021).

News sharing content: Looking at the question of which content characteristics determine what makes news ‘shareworthy,’ research has focused, among others, on the influence of news factors/values, the valence of the content, or the publishing source. Compared to research on news sharing users, the findings on content diverge quite substantially, depending on studied contexts, the use of automated or manual content analysis, or definitions of ‘news’ (see also Pipal et al., 2023). The most robust finding seems to be that negative political news are shared more often than positive ones (ibid.; de León & Trilling, 2021). Likewise, sharing appears to be more likely for arousing content. Moreover, the originating source or news outlet—and likely associated perceptions regarding its credibility or quality—seem to have an influence on sharing performance as well (e.g., Karnowski et al., 2021). It is, however, important to note that the impact of content characteristics cannot be examined separately from processes of algorithmic amplification: If social media platforms’ algorithms prioritize specific types of content (e.g., more negative/arousing articles), the shareworthiness of political news might also stem from the resulting increased visibility.

News sharing networks: Basic sharing functionalities differ between different sites, which is why research has also investigated how news sharing looks like on various social media

platforms. Previous studies have primarily focused on Twitter, with some attention given to Facebook, while other platforms and comparative analyses have received limited consideration. Although general motivations for sharing news appear to be rather consistent across platforms, the choice of platform does play a role, particularly when examining the sharing of biased content or the correction of misinformation that has been shared (Rossini et al., 2021; Weld et al., 2022). The mentioned research suggests that this has both to do with different perceptions (e.g., messaging apps being perceived as safe spaces compared to public social media) and affordances (e.g., the availability of a downvote function). Taken together, platform architectures influence both news sharing behaviors and effects due to different network structures, the underlying algorithmic filters, or processes of (political) information exposure and content moderation.

Considering the effects of news sharing on positive civic outcomes such as political participation, there is evidence that both the active sharing of political information and the more passive observation of other users' sharing activities is associated with increased political engagement (Kim & Ellison, 2022; Lane et al., 2017). Thus, news sharing can be regarded as a mobilizing force in today's information environment. However, it is important to note that this engagement can also arise from exposure to dis- and misinformation and may even contribute to forms of political activism that pose a threat to democracy.

Challenges and future research directions

While research on (political) news sharing has made significant progress in understanding the dynamics and effects of disseminating news in recent information environments, there are still some challenges and blind spots that warrant further exploration.

First, there has been a limited focus on the role of platform algorithms. Much of the research has focused on user- or content-level factors in news sharing without considering the influence of algorithmic curation on the visibility of specific news items and thus their likelihood of being selected for further sharing. Of course, investigating the influence of algorithms is not an easy task. Viable options include the combined investigation of tracking and self-report data or the use of controlled experiments. For these, researchers could manipulate algorithmic factors such as the visibility/prominence of news items in a feed or the availability of personalized recommendations and then observe changes in participants' news sharing patterns.

Second, there is a need to delve deeper into contextual factors such as the broader socio-political and cultural contexts in which news sharing occurs. Much of the research has been conducted in Western contexts, primarily focusing on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Accordingly, it seems necessary to expand the scope of research by including a more diverse range of platforms and countries. Somewhat relatedly, research on political news sharing has often focused on electoral periods, while less attention has been given to routine political periods characterized both by different media coverage (and, thus, pool of shareable news items) as well as a different importance of news sharing motives.

Third, processes of news sharing have predominantly been studied within a certain social media platform, while cross-platform sharing has been an overlooked aspect in the research landscape. Again, this likely results from methodological difficulties: While it is easy to trace how often a news post was publicly shared on Facebook, it seems almost impossible to track how a screenshot of the same post made its way to a WhatsApp chat. This also points to the difficulties of studying news sharing in closed or ‘dark’ social media environments such as messaging apps or social media groups (Swart et al., 2019). Although studies have started to address this type of news engagement (*ibid.*; see also Masip et al., 2021), it will be crucial to conduct further research that surpasses the limitations of self-report data. For example, retrospective data donations of chat protocols could provide more objective and reliable insights into the dynamics of (semi-)private news sharing.

Fourth and finally, long-term effects and consequences of news sharing need to be examined more comprehensively—both at the individual and societal level. This includes understanding the impact of repeated exposure to certain news items or narratives on users’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors over time. Examining these long-term effects will be particularly crucial for news sharing in politically extreme online spaces due to their potential for reinforcing extremist ideologies and exacerbating societal divisions (Dowling, 2024). By deepening our understanding of news sharing dynamics, political communication research can help to better navigate the challenges of dysfunctional sharing, but also to identify the potential of social media as a powerful tool for news engagement and civic participation.

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