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**Social filtering on the Internet  
– a new mechanism of content curation and its consequences<sup>1</sup>**

**KEY WORDS**

Internet, social networking sites, online news, filters, Facebook

**ABSTRACT**

This article shows that on-line news services are no longer motivated to filter out content before publication. Potentially, any piece of content can attract the attention of the audience, therefore is worth publishing. Moreover, large number of unpopular items can generate much more revenue than the small number of the most popular ones. Thus, the mechanisms of how the content is distributed and how its salience is determined are changing. This is done not by the editors before publication but, more often, after the publication, on social networking sites where users recommend content to each other, socially determining its relevance and importance. The results of World Internet Project research conducted in Poland confirms that social networking sites are used primarily as a way to access content on the web and to filter information for other users. As a result of the changes in selection and distribution of information the role of on-line media editors in setting the agenda is decreasing.

The significance of the Internet as a tool for accessing information and news is growing. Even though it is used by less than 70% of Poles aged 15–74 years, 41% consider it as a very important or necessary source of information. In 2013 almost two thirds of users searched for national and world news. The same percentage was interested in information on local events. Roughly 30% of users seek such information on the Internet at least once a day<sup>2</sup>. The web is of particular importance for young people (aged 15–29), two thirds of whom consider it as a very important or necessary source of information<sup>3</sup>. The Internet is also an important information source for those with higher education (very important or necessary for 57%), pupils and students (73%), and entrepreneurs (62%). The two latter groups and the youth regard it definitely as the most important source of news, more important than the press and television.

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<sup>2</sup> World Internet Project. Poland (2013), Warszawa 2013, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> World Internet Project..., op. cit., p. 74.

The Internet differs significantly from traditional media. In theory, everybody can publish on-line. And, in fact, there are many broadcasters: companies, organizations, as well as some ordinary users create their own content. This is encouraged by the low cost of publishing on-line, virtually no cost at all: it is only the cost of producing the information that counts, which usually is not high, either. However, the increase in the volume of published content involves not only the number of entities publishing on-line but also individual services, information portals in particular. Should we compare the current on-line newspaper websites to those from ten or fifteen years ago, which is possible thanks to the *Internet Archive*<sup>4</sup>, we will see that they contain several times more links to content pages than they used to.

Another notable difference from the traditional media is the much stronger capability of internet users to influence the distributed content. Social networks such as Facebook or Twitter have a key role to play here. Owing to the sharing of links to information by the users, these networks become important intermediaries in the access to current news.

The article is devoted to the problems tied to the consequences of the increase in the amount of information and the changes in the ways it is disseminated. Its following sections will explain what leads to the publication of increasingly greater amounts of information; how on-line services and content publishers strive to attract users; how users participate in the distribution of content; and, most of all, what are the consequences of the above for the role of editors and for the editor-recipient relationship. The results of Polish studies on the use of social networking services will also be analysed in detail.

### **More content**

The low cost associated with on-line publishing is not the only reason why information portals serve more and more content. The web is also free from other limitations characteristic of the traditional media. A website can post an unlimited amount of information at the same time, not being limited by space, as the traditional newspapers are, or time, as the radio and TV. It was shown very well by Pablo Boczkowski, who analysed the changing behaviour of readers, who consume information on the web virtually throughout the day. Therefore, the work of on-line editors differs from that in a newspaper, who work on a single morning or afternoon edition<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://archive.org/index.php> [accessed: 29 Jun 2015].

<sup>5</sup> P. Boczkowski, *News at work: Imitation in an age of information abundance*, Chicago 2010.

Publishing large amounts of information is economically justified as well. Currently, advertising-based operation is the primary business model for internet portals. This is why they aim for the largest possible number of users and page views<sup>6</sup>.

In the situation of information overload and a growing number of information sources, it becomes crucial for the media to compete for the recipients' attention. They thus employ various strategies for gaining it. For instance, emphasizing the novelty and originality of content can be one such strategy. Instead of simply serve information, some of the media increasingly go towards interpretation, which also makes them able to compete on the world-view plane. The topics and methods of serving information which enable drawing much attention are becoming increasingly important too. The tabloidization of content is yet another dimension of competing for attention. It has been observed that the content concerning more mundane matters which is simpler and less serious but served in a more sensational form finds more recipients. The evolution towards more tabloid-like content can be observed in web portals as well. This is hardly surprising, since the structure of internet users changed significantly in recent years<sup>7</sup>. In 2003 almost 63% of internet users in Poland either had higher education or were still studying. Less than 10% of internet users had not achieved at least secondary education. Whereas ten years later, in 2013, 32% of users had higher education, 13% were learning or studying, and almost one fourth of them had elementary or vocational education. The consequence of such a change in the user structure without any personalization of the distribution of information is that portals post lower and lower quality content, since it translates into a greater reach.

### **Not all people are interested in the same – the long tail principle**

The production of large amounts of content in digital media is justifiable, since their production cost is low, and the storage, publication, and on-line distribution costs are virtually non-existent. Simultaneously, any content can potentially draw attention of some group of users, even a small one. The digital circulation is of great importance here, but so is the off-line on-demand printing capability, thanks to which the cost of producing additional copies is low. For this reason, the content on the digital market is virtually never forced out of circulation: it may be available indefinitely and able to attract some attention even after some time has passed.

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<sup>6</sup> Other advertising accounting models could make other strategies justified as well.

<sup>7</sup> D. Batorski, *Poles and communication technology – access conditions and modes of use*, "Contemporary Economics" 2013, Vol. 7, special issue, p. 335–359.

The change in the conditions of content distribution also affects the profitability of producing its various types. Before, due to the limited transmission capabilities of the traditional media, the distribution costs were high, so it was profitable to create content able to attract the largest number of recipients in a short time. There is no such necessity any more. It is also more and more profitable to meet less popular tastes and needs<sup>8</sup>.

The majority of produced and published information is of a very niche character; however, a large number of such less popular content can, as a whole, attract much more attention than a small number of the most popular ones which enjoy the actual mass interest. It is the long tail principle, formulated by Chris Anderson in 2004<sup>9</sup>. According to it, it may be more profitable to address the content to a large number of small niches than to focus on the most popular content producing mass interest<sup>10</sup>. Good examples of services whose operation can be described according to the long tail principle are Amazon and Netflix. While both of them sell and rent very popular content as well, they earn money mostly thanks to large amounts of niche information, each piece of which reaches a small group of recipients. In the case of Netflix, all the less popular films are, in total, rented more frequently than the more popular ones. The advantage of Amazon is also based on an enormous stock of books which are difficult to find anywhere else rather than the titles which can be bought anywhere<sup>11</sup>. According to the data presented by Erik Brynjolfsson, Yu Jeffrey Hu, and Michael D. Smith, in 2006, when Amazon had 3 million book titles in stock, with an average traditional bookstore having 40–100 thousand titles, 30–40% of the company's income came from selling the 2.9 million less available titles.

While the Internet brings the capability to offer significantly greater amounts of content, taking advantage of the long tail requires reaching with the niche information to the users interested in it. Simply having large resources of it does not guarantee its successful dissemination. Without reaching individual recipients with an appropriate offer, the potential of niche tastes will remain untapped<sup>12</sup>.

Selecting such a mode of operation requires gathering data on the interests of users, recognizing their needs and tastes, as well as using appropriate recommendation algorithms. This is actually the foundation of operations of such services as Amazon or Netflix. On

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<sup>8</sup> E. Brynjolfsson, Y.J. Hu, M.D. Smith, *From niches to riches: Anatomy of the long tail*, "MIT Sloan Management Review" 2006, No. 47, p. 67–71.

<sup>9</sup> C. Anderson, *The long tail*, "Wired" 2004, No. 12.10, <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html> [accessed: 4 Mar 2015].

<sup>10</sup> C. Anderson, *The long tail: Why the future of business is selling less of more*, New York 2006.

<sup>11</sup> E. Brynjolfsson, Y.J. Hu, M.D. Smith, *From niches to riches...*, op. cit., p. 67–71.

<sup>12</sup> M. Cha et al., *I Tube, You Tube, Everybody Tubes, Proceedings of the 7th ACM SIGCOMM Conference on Internet Measurement – IMC '07*, New York 2007.

information websites, however, this kind of personalization mechanisms is used to a very small extent, if at all<sup>13</sup>. Polish web portals focus on delivering possibly large amounts of content and reaching with it to as many people as possible while assuming that everybody has the same interests, more or less, so they do not personalize their offer in virtually any way. Thus, they focus on the most popular mass tastes thereby producing the problem of tabloidization.

Instead of using the data on users' interests to personalize information, on-line newspapers and information services more frequently give way to such companies as Google and Facebook, whose services help showing users the content which is more interesting to them while targeting advertising actions. Both search engines and Facebook match the content shown to the user with what they know about this user<sup>14</sup>. For instance, the newest studies carried out by Facebook researchers show that personalization algorithms show less content incompatible with the users' views to the users whose views are well defined<sup>15</sup>. Filtering which information reaches the user may be based on a variety of mechanisms, which are being tested empirically<sup>16</sup>.

Personalization does not involve only normal content, however, but advertising as well. Currently, the advertising intermediaries enable even small services to make profit on it. Thus, on the Internet there are no such barriers which function in the world of traditional media, where the cost of entry for new entities was high not only due to the production costs of the media but also with the fact that advertisers could more easily find the media and services with the largest reach. However, that which is beneficial for small services does not necessarily have to prove a good strategy for large portals. Using external advertising networks or Google means surrendering one's control over the source of income<sup>17</sup>.

In order to attract traffic, i.e., the attention of users of search engines and social networking services, portals have to prepare their content and pages in a specific way according to search engine optimization (SEO) and social media optimization (SMO) rules. Further in the article I will focus on the use of social media and its consequences.

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<sup>13</sup> N. Thurman, S. Schifferes, *The future of personalization at news websites*, "Journalism Studies" 2012, Vol. 13, No. 5–6, p. 775–790.

<sup>14</sup> E. Pariser, *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*, New York 2011.

<sup>15</sup> E. Bakshy, S. Messing and L.A. Adamic, *Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook*, "Science" 2015, Vol. 348, No. 6239, p. 1130–1132.

<sup>16</sup> I. Guy, I. Ronen, A. Raviv, *Personalized activity streams*, in: Proceedings of the Fifth ACM Conference on Recommender Systems – RecSys '11, New York 2011.

<sup>17</sup> N. Thurman, S. Schifferes, *The future of personalization...*, op. cit.

### **Change in information filtering principles**

Due to the profitability of production and distribution of large amounts of digital content, the decision not to publish something in media operating on the long tail principle has become irrational: even poor content may draw attention. Once it is not affordable to filter content prior to publication, one of the key features of the traditional media associated with the selection of information disappears. Consequently, so do the prioritization of individual topics and shaping of agendas.

Nowadays that which content is adequate and should be featured is more and more frequently decided not by editors but other mechanisms. Internet portals, such as Onet.pl or Gazeta.pl, have already implemented mechanisms for monitoring the popularity of individual content items in real time. Based on the gathered data, some content items are highlighted on the fly so that they are easier to find, whereas other items lose this status becoming less visible. As a result, it is not just editors who decide what is more important and visible but also algorithms and data on how the actual content is accessed by the users themselves.

It is a truly momentous change as it removes the need for prioritization. This was not possible in the traditional media because of spatial limitations, be it on the front page of a newspaper or in the main edition of TV news. Therefore, the editors had to decide on what was important, whether they wanted to or not. This is not necessary online. The content which is well clickable, and thus gets many views, is being promoted. When the number of views decreases, the main page editors remove links to it and replace them with others.

Pre-publication filtering was characteristic of the traditional media and the times when the cost of publication significantly limited the amount of delivered content. It mostly involved filtering out, that is deciding what would not be published. Currently, it is mostly the so-called filtering forward and it takes place after the publication<sup>18</sup>. The role of ordering and prioritizing individual pieces of content thus belongs to users. As David Weinberger notes, it does not contribute to the reduction of content; to the contrary, it is associated with the production of additional content and increases the amount of information<sup>19</sup>.

The decreased importance of editors in prioritizing the content is also due to the main pages of web portals losing significance. Their role in directing users to individual content is decreasing. There are more and more direct entries to particular subpages from other sources like search engines, blogs, and most of all social media services. Users recommend content to

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<sup>18</sup> D. Weinberger, *Too big to know: Rethinking knowledge now that the facts aren't the facts, experts are everywhere, and the smartest person in the room is the room*, New York 2012, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

one another in social networking media, reaching portals and other websites through such services.

### **Promoting current news in social networking services**

The importance of search engines and social networking sites as the sources of traffic to other websites has been high for several years. In the late 2009, the first data began appearing which showed that Facebook was the largest traffic source on-line, that is, it directed more traffic to other services on the internet than does Google or the remaining sources. The data from compete.com actually showed that, in the late 2009, Facebook was a more important traffic source than Google for some large portals like Yahoo, MSN, and AOL<sup>20</sup>. The former generated a whole 13% of traffic, while the latter only 7%. While Google prevailed in other categories, the results of Facebook were also impressive and had a greater growth dynamic. In the same time period, comScore showed that the source of 25% of visits to websites originated in the largest social networking services. What is more, this value grew by 83% between December 2008 and December 2009.

It is thus not surprising that social networking media are one of the tools used to attract the attention of internet users. Journalists use it to an increasingly large extent to reach their recipients, involve them to discuss and further distribute content, as well as to gather information<sup>21</sup>. Such activities are justified and effective. The study of traffic sources of 25 most popular information sites in the United States showed a growing importance of social recommendation, with Facebook as the key source for attracting attention<sup>22</sup>. However, when these analyses were carried out in 2011, the importance of the main pages of individual portals was greater.

The analysis performed in 2014 which examined the importance of social media, Facebook and Twitter in particular, for the readership acquisition of the 66 major newspapers in the United States with on-line editions showed that all of them had been using these services to attract readers for a long time<sup>23</sup>. Other media usually make use of social networking services by posting links there to the content they have published on their own websites. Many newspapers employ special staff members for this purpose. Research shows

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<sup>20</sup> R. Dash, *Facebook now responsible for majority of web portal traffic*, "AdWeek" 2010, <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/facebook-responsible-for-majority-of-online-traffic> [accessed: 8 Mar 2015].

<sup>21</sup> M. Ananny, *Networked press freedom and social media: Tracing historical and contemporary forces in press-public relations*, "Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication" 2014, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 938–956.

<sup>22</sup> K. Olmstead, A. Mitchell, T. Rosenstiel, *Navigating news online: Where people go, how they get there and what lures them away*, Washington 2011, p. 1–30.

<sup>23</sup> A. Ju, S.H. Jeong, H.I. Chyi, *Will social media save newspapers?*, "Journalism Practice" 2014, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 1–17.

that a greater range in social media is associated with a larger number of the users of the on-line editions of newspapers<sup>24</sup>. Thus, being active in social networking services is indubitably profitable for the media.

However, on-line information services of traditional media are not limited to their presence in social networking sites. The studies of on-line newspapers also show that they have many features which facilitate sharing published content by the users<sup>25</sup>. Facebook “Like” plugins are good examples. Through such solutions the services strive to take advantage of the users’ tendency to share information between one another.

As Mikko Villi and Janne Matikainen rightly observed, the chief contribution of users does not involve creating the information content (although media can make use of it as well) but taking part in its distribution<sup>26, 27</sup>. Besides user-generated content, we can much more frequently find user-distributed content. It is also facilitated by the increased importance of content consumption with such mobile devices as smartphones and tablets<sup>28</sup>.

### **Social networking services and other users as sources of information**

Research shows that internet users acquire information on current events from other services than classic information portals with growing frequency. Online information consumption is a social process, and 75% of people who read news on the web receive links to it via e-mail or social networking services<sup>29</sup>. Thus, the significance of various social networking services for accessing such information is growing. In the study carried out by Pew Research Center in 2013, as many as 52% of Twitter users and 47% of Facebook users declared acquiring information through them<sup>30</sup>. Reddit was a source of information for an even greater percentage of users (62%), yet it is used by a significantly smaller number of people. Taking into account the extent to which individual services are used, one might say that 30% of Americans acquire information from Facebook. This service is of particular importance for young people: as many as 61% of young Americans (aged 18–33 years) acquire political information there. A much smaller percentage of them watch this kind of news on the TV

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> J.B. Singer, *User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space*, “New Media & Society” 2014, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 55–73.

<sup>26</sup> M. Villi, *Social curation in audience communities: UDC (user-distributed content) in the networked media ecosystem*, “Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies” 2012, No. 9, p. 614–632.

<sup>27</sup> M. Villi, J. Moisander, A. Joy, *Social curation in consumer communities: Consumers as curators of online media content*, “Advances in Consumer Research” 2012, Vol. 40, p. 490–495.

<sup>28</sup> M. Villi, J. Matikainen, *Mobile UDC: Online media content distribution among Finnish mobile internet users*, “Mobile Media & Communication” 2015, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 214–229.

<sup>29</sup> K. Purcell et al., *Understanding the participatory news consumer*, Washington 2010, p. 1–51.

<sup>30</sup> J. Holcomb, J. Gotfried, A. Mitchell, *News use across social media*, Washington 2013.



(only 37% per week)<sup>31</sup>. Social networking media are an increasingly important source of current news not only in the USA but in other countries as well<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, not only information but also cultural content are being circulated<sup>33</sup>.

Yet other examples of websites used for information filtering by users are services like Wykop.pl, Digg<sup>34</sup>, or Reddit. While they work based on various mechanisms and may vary in time, it is characteristic of all of them that the ordering of information depends on the actions of users, and there are no editors who might decide which content should be better visible and which not.

### **Social networking services as content filtering sites**

The importance of such social networking services as Facebook or Twitter for information filtering stems from their ability to deliver information and other content, which is adequate or simply interesting for the user, better than other tools. It is fostered by the fact that the information is provided by friends or by the institutions and entities which the user decided to follow. Since the phenomenon of homophily is present in social networks – i.e., it is more likely to establish relationships and maintaining contacts with people similar to us<sup>35</sup> – it is very likely that the content shared by our friends will be more interesting to us than randomly served content. Moreover, the majority of people show a natural interest in that which is interesting to their close ones. Thus, the friends themselves provide the content they share with additional significance. The portals which, as mentioned above, do not personalize the content presented to a given user, do not play such a role.

The significance of the phenomenon of social filtering of content cannot be overestimated. Some who want to be well-informed rely on others. Half of the Americans declare that other people (friends, family) tell them when there is something they should know<sup>36</sup>. Brian Baresh and his colleagues adduce<sup>37</sup> the words of the student quoted in “The New York Times” who said “If the news is that important, it will find me”. These words aptly

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<sup>31</sup> A. Mitchell, J. Gottfried, K.E. Matsa, *Millennials & political news: Social media – the local TV for the next generation?*, Washington 2015.

<sup>32</sup> R.K. Nielsen, K.Ch. Schröder, *The relative importance of social media for accessing, finding, and engaging with news*, “Digital Journalism” 2015, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 472–489.

<sup>33</sup> M. Filiciak, J. Hofmokl, A. Tarkowski, *Obiegi kultury: Społeczna cyrkulacja treści* [Circulation of culture: Social circulation of content], Warszawa 2012.

<sup>34</sup> K. Lerman, *Social networks and social information filtering on Digg*, in: Proceedings of 1st International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM-07) 2007.

<sup>35</sup> M. McPherson, L. Smith-Lovin, M. Cook, *Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks*, “Annual Review of Sociology” 2001, Vol. 27, p. 415–444.

<sup>36</sup> K. Purcell et al., *Understanding the participatory...*, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> B. Baresh et al., *Friends who choose your news: An analysis of content links on Facebook*, in: 12th International Symposium on Online Journalism 2011, p. 1–24.

convey the attitude of many young people, who not only share information with others but also, to an increasing extent, rely on others to be well-informed themselves.

The fact that the majority of users cannot regularly visit many websites contributes to the role played by social networking sites in accessing other content in the web. In general, internet users only visit a few or a dozen or so sites, even though their number in the web is growing. RSS readers are also relatively unpopular. To some extent, their role has been taken over by social networking media, whose users can not only follow the content shared by their friends but also by institutions, including other media.

In the United States, more than half of internet users say they share links to information with other users<sup>38</sup>. It is possible to identify the following activities undertaken in social networking sites, which affect the distribution of content: commenting on news (25% of users), sharing content links in social networking services (17%), tagging content (11%), creating original content of one's own – news and comments (9%), and using Twitter to disseminate information (3%).

### **The use of social networking services in Poland**

Using social networking services is one of the most popular applications of the Internet in Poland. More than three in four internet users have a profile in one such service. Using email is the only way of using the web which is more popular. Social networking portals belong to the most popular services also in terms of the time spent by users in various online services. Facebook enjoys particular popularity in Poland, being accessed by more than 60% of users. Other social networking services like Google+ and NK.pl are less popular<sup>39</sup>. The popularity of Twitter is growing: in 2013, 15% of users declared using it, yet only some of them do so actively.

Younger users use social networking services definitively more frequently and intensively. In the youngest age groups, almost everybody uses them (95% of internet users aged 15–24 years), yet even among the oldest users, aged 60 years and older, half of them use these sites<sup>40</sup>. In virtually every group of internet users, a substantial majority spend time in social networking services: there are no differences due to the place of residence, and education has only a small effect (the users with elementary education use them least frequently, yet 65% of them do so).

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<sup>38</sup> K. Purcell et al., *Understanding the participatory...*, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> World Internet Project..., op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>40</sup> World Internet Project..., op. cit.

Social networking services are the place on the internet where the greatest activity of users can be observed. Even though everyone can be a publisher on-line, only few internet users take advantage of it. Only 5% of users update their websites regularly, that is, at least once a week, and 4% of users keep blogs. Significantly more people post messages or comments on forums: 22% of internet users declare doing it at least once a week<sup>41</sup>. Much more frequently, users create content and share it in social networking services; also, they contribute to the dissemination of content created by others.

### **Role of users in content filtering**

Many studies show why people are eager to share information with others over social networking media<sup>42</sup> or which persons are more prone to use Facebook as a tool to disseminate and access current news.<sup>43</sup> Sharing links in social networking sites does not have to be an unselfish activity, since it turns out that it can improve the noticeability of a given users and increase the number of her followers<sup>44</sup>.

Content filtering is the basic activity performed in social networking services. They are usually advertised as tools to maintain contacts yet they serve as content access tools to an increasing degree. The main activity carried out by people using these services is not publishing their own content or statuses. It is well illustrated by the data from the Polish edition of the 2013 World Internet Project survey, analysed in this article<sup>45</sup>.

As can be seen in Chart 1, the main activities performed in social media services are clicking on links to websites (51% of users do it at least once per week, 26% of them every day) and receiving information and news (27% at least once a week, 23% every day). These uses are associated with social networking services curating content hosted elsewhere.

Slightly less frequently, though still relatively often, users undertake activities which can be classified as filtering content for others. They like, share, or otherwise promote content posted by other people (35% do so at least once a week). They also frequently send links, information, videos, etc. created and posted by someone else (29% do so at least once a week). All these activities associated with curating information and sharing it are more

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> C.S. Lee, L. Ma, *News sharing in social media: The effect of gratifications and prior experience*, "Computers in Human Behavior" 2012, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 331–339.

<sup>43</sup> C.J. Glynn, M.E. Hufe, L.H. Hoffman, *All the news that's fit to post: A profile of news use on social networking sites*, "Computers in Human Behavior" 2012, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 113–119.

<sup>44</sup> A. May et al., *Filter & follow: How social media foster content curation*, in: The 2014 ACM International Conference on Measurement and Modeling of Computer Systems – SIGMETRICS '14, New York 2014, p. 43–55.

<sup>45</sup> World Internet Project..., op. cit.

popular than the practices related to publishing one’s own content, such as updating one’s status, posting texts written by oneself, or one’s own photographs and drawings. Particularly large differences are visible in the frequency of using social networking services.

As the results presented above show, the key role of social networking services is related to the distribution of content: its curation and filtering of the content posted by others by sharing it with friends. Even if this filtering forward only takes place in micro-scale and the shared content is not publicly visible and is accessible only to the friends of a given person, this process is still very significant due to its range.

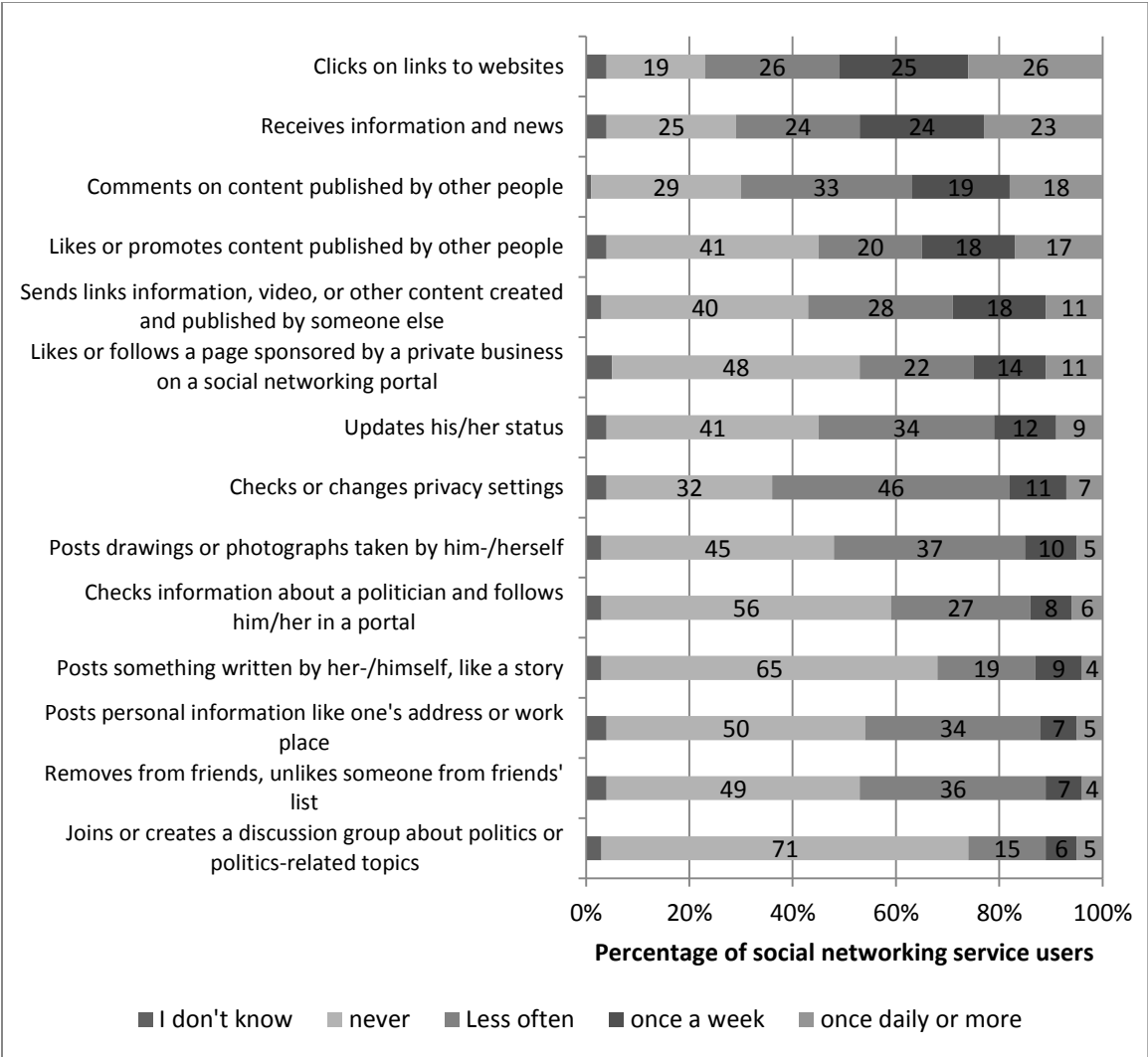


Chart 1: Activities of users in social networking services

Source: World Internet Project 2013, author’s own compilation

### **Importance of social networking services for filtering off-line content**

The significance of social networking media is not strictly limited to the on-line content. Facebook plays a very important role in promoting events taking place outside of the web too. It is quite popular to create pages for these events in the service and to send to one's friends invitations with confirmation of participation. This kind of information, shared among friends, can spread very widely due to the small world phenomenon observable in social networks. It is a structural property of networks where, starting from any person (network node) it is possible to reach the majority of others in a small number of steps<sup>46</sup>. The advantage of this form of dissemination of information is using pre-existing relationships and the fact that, while it reaches significantly less people, its effect is much greater than in the case of information from neutral sources, and greater still than from normal advertisements.

Maintaining profiles in social networking media is an important way of building involvement and drawing attention for traditional media as well. In February 2015, the most popular profiles of the Polish media had several hundred thousand followers each. MTV Polska had the most followers, almost 700,000, TVN24 had close to 600,000. The third most popular profile, "Gazeta Wyborcza" had over 324,000 followers, Newsweek Polska had 311,000<sup>47</sup>. The profiles of the media on Facebook are even more popular. In February 2015 Radio Eska received more than 1876 thousand likes, ESKA TV over 1.35 million, MTV Polska had 1.1 million, and Disney Channel Polska over 1 million. The newspapers with the most fans were "Przegląd Sportowy" (over 429,000), Fakt.pl (356,000), and "Gazeta Wyborcza" (295,000) In the case of television, apart from the few channels mentioned above and other belonging to these stations (e.g., TVN and TVN24 having over 760,000 fans each), individual programmes also have their profiles. The most popular, *Tylko muzyka*, *M jak Miłość*, and *Voice of Poland* counted over 600,000 fans each<sup>48</sup>.

The significance of social networking services seems to increase as the number of other channels grows. The number of content producers does not just grow on-line but also in the traditional media. An increase in the number of radio and TV stations as well as press titles is still observed. At the same time, the largest ones are losing popularity. The main press

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<sup>46</sup> S. Schnettler, *A structured overview of 50 years of small-world research*, "Social Networks" 2009, Vol. 31, No 3, p. 165–178.

<sup>47</sup> Sotrender, *Twitter trends 02.2015*, <http://www.sotrender.pl/trends/twitter/reports/201502> [accessed: 23 Feb 2015].

<sup>48</sup> Sotrender, *Fanpage Trends 02.2015*, <http://www.sotrender.pl/trends/facebook/reports/201502> [accessed: 23 Feb 2015].

titles, TV and radio stations have less and less recipients<sup>49</sup>. The traditional media, too, have to compete more and more for the attention of users.

### **Significance of using social networking services**

The results presented so far show that the role of social networking sites in the distribution of information is significant. It remains an open question, however, whether they actually contribute to their users being better informed. In order to answer it, at least indirectly, I have analysed to what extent the Internet is a significant source of information compared to other media and how it depends on using such services as Facebook or Twitter.

Those who use Facebook or Twitter consider the Internet as a much more significant source of information than the users who do not (see Chart 2). Even if we only take into account these users who openly declare looking for current information on the Internet, two thirds of those who do not use Facebook consider the Internet as an important or necessary source of information, while among Facebook users this proportion reaches 77%<sup>50</sup>.

The differences are even clearer should we take a look at the people for whom the Internet is a more important information source than the TV, press, or radio. In 2013 they made up 14.5% of the population. This proportion was only slightly lower among the users who do not use Facebook. Whereas among Facebook users, as many as 28% consider the Internet as a more important source of information than the rest<sup>51</sup>. It is possible that using social networking services is the factor contributing to the web being much more frequently considered as the most important information medium.

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<sup>49</sup> J. Reisner, *Rynek telewizyjny w I kwartale 2015 roku* [TV market in the 1st quarter of 2015], Warszawa 2015; M. Trochimczuk, *Udział w rynku i wielkość audytorium programów radiowych w IV kwartale 2014 r.* [Market share and listening of radio programmes in the 4th quarter of 2014], Warszawa 2015.

<sup>50</sup> World Internet Project 2013 data, author's own compilation.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

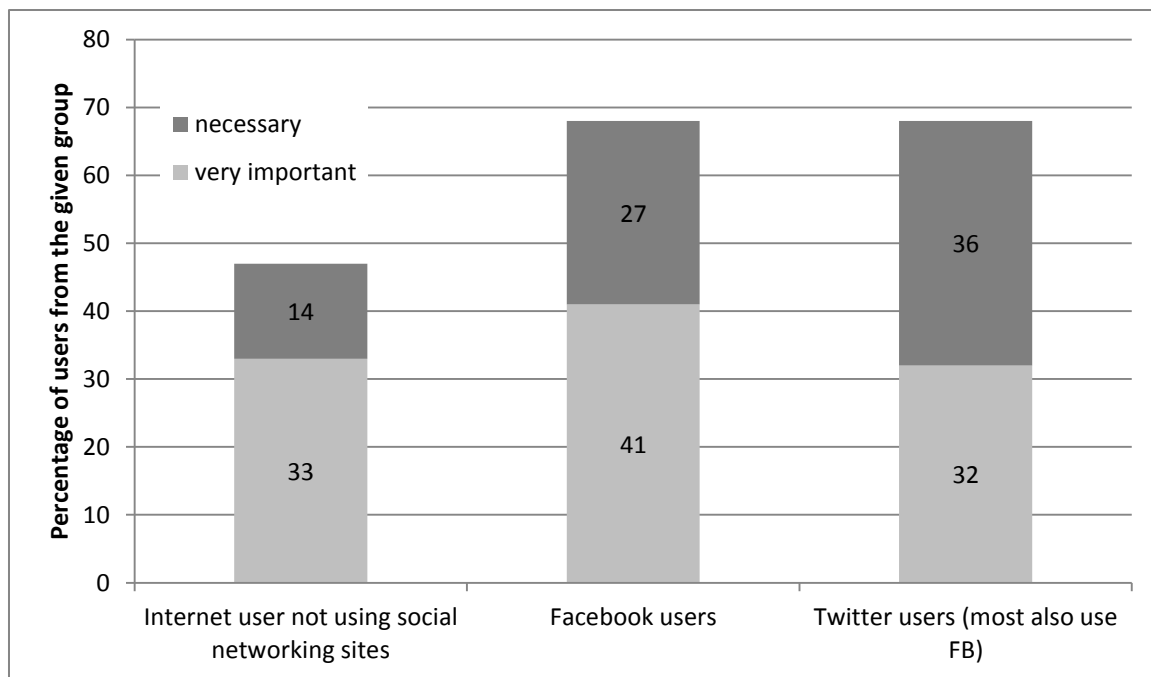


Chart 2: Evaluation of the importance of the Internet as information source

Source: World Internet Project 2013, author's own compilation

### Conclusion

Using social networking services is one of the most popular applications of the Internet. It is their popularity and the way they are used which are crucially important for the dissemination of content over the web. While other portals and on-line services more and more frequently adopt the strategy of publishing more content with accompanying decreased selectiveness, the social networking services are where the social prioritization of topics and filtering of already published content take place. The role of social networking services is visible not only in the surveys showing what their users do but, most importantly perhaps, in the statistics of websites, which register the largest traffic from the services like Facebook. At the same time, the role of both search engines and main pages of information portals is diminishing. This is why the strategies of active construction of audience gain in significance, and why the aforementioned profiles of internet portals and traditional media are present in social networking services.

Social networking media affect the flow of information and play an important role in relationships between the publishers and recipients of content<sup>52</sup>. A large part of social networking service users appreciate their networks of friends as the way to filter information,

<sup>52</sup> A. Hermida, F. Fletcher, D. Korell, D. Logan, *Share, like, recommend*, "Journalism Studies" 2012, No 13, p. 815-824.

unwilling to rely solely on the professional assessment by the media and journalists. In the past, the intermediaries (gatekeepers) filtering excess information were the editors of the traditional media, who selected what was worth of publishing from large amounts of information<sup>53</sup>. They play this role much less frequently on-line now, and the internet users are turning to another kind of intermediaries<sup>54</sup>, Instead of relying on professional filters (journalistic work, editors, and media) they use social filters<sup>55</sup>. The social prioritization of information is associated with the diminished role of media editors in this area<sup>56</sup>.

This phenomenon has far-reaching consequences. The hierarchic relationship between the producers and consumers of the media is changing. The social networking media affect the change in the public sphere, where the publications and their distribution are co-formed by the recipients. They also enable the involvement of recipients in the selection, distribution, and interpretation of information. Once, the journalists used to control the filtering and dissemination of news and information. Now, their ability to influence what and where the audience should know is getting smaller. The role of the media as the intermediary in the access to information who determines the importance of particular events is weakening, as the users to an increasing degree turn to their friends and relatives, who provide them with information they consider important. “Essentially, a person’s social circle takes on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story, video or other piece of content is important, interesting or entertaining enough to recommend”<sup>57</sup>.

As Weinberger observed, a large part of the power and authority of such traditional knowledge institutions as newspapers and encyclopaedias was due to the fact that they filtered and prioritized knowledge and information. Now, if the social networking services are becoming the new filters, the authority will also shift from a small group of distant editors towards the people we know and respect<sup>58</sup>. It can be interpreted in terms of democratization. The content which becomes well visible is the content people consider as important and want to share, and not the content considered so by a few editors. However, the quality of such content is another matter. Thanks to filtering forward, some content which once would have never seen the light of day is now available.

The change in the on-line content distribution mechanisms described in this article is a relatively new phenomenon. We should certainly expect further development of the forward-

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<sup>53</sup> P.J. Shoemaker, T.P. Vos, *Gatekeeping theory*, New York 2009.

<sup>54</sup> B. Baresch et al., *Friends who choose your news...*, op. cit., p. 1–24.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1–24.

<sup>56</sup> J.B. Singer, *User-generated visibility...*, op. cit., p. 55–73.

<sup>57</sup> A. Hermida et al., *Share, like, recommend...*, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> D. Weinberger, *Too big to know...*, op. cit., p. 10.



filtering mechanisms and offering specific content to individual recipients. These will most likely be not just social networking mechanisms but also ones using algorithms and data on the interests of users.