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Audience 2.0?

Case Study: Implications of the New Audience Shift in International
College Students' Social Media Usage

**Global Media Studies
Master's Thesis**

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Abstract

New media technologies have transformed many aspects of our daily lives. Digital platforms and tools are growing exponentially and are challenging the rules of media exposure and consumption. They are also challenging communication and media research. This study discusses audiences and new media. This project also seeks to have a closer look at the “new audiences” and to explore the roles that international college students play when they use the Internet in general and social media in particular. It is also aimed to explore and try to understand the social media audiences and some of the dynamics that constitute its exclusivity. Being one of the key characteristics of social media, interactivity influences the way users interact with their peers, the way they participate, consume media texts, as well as their level of activity in the online sphere. This research did not rely on a pre-established theoretical framework but was framed according to some selected concepts that rise from the discussions surrounding the new media problem area. The results reveal the motivations for account creation and discuss traditional media versus new media consumption, participation, readership, action of commenting, social implications of social media, and identification of online roles by international college students.

Keywords : New media, new audiences, social media, interactivity, participation;

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1. Introduction

In the recent years, we have entered a digital era where new media technologies have transformed many aspects of our daily lives. In fact, since the emergence of the Internet, digital platforms and tools have been growing and expanding exponentially. Societies with access to new media technologies have witnessed a shift from the traditional media paradigm to a new interactive generation where the rules of media exposure and consumption are being challenged. People are not anymore passive audiences of a traditional mainstream media, but they are now active participants in the media arena. However, the roles individuals play in this landscape vary from one person to another, some identify themselves as passive viewers while some are more active users, and one can also find in the other extreme some individuals who engage in high production of material that is made available to their peers or in what Bruns (2006) has coined as “produsage”. A huge amount of user-generated content is now available for free in the Web and many people spend time editing entries in online collaborative sites such as Wikipedia. Internet has created a space for collective collaboration and sharing of knowledge, opinions and ideas. From very short posts on Twitter to open source software, the web is a host of numerous user-generated materials.

From the history of media and research studies, audiences have been studied in different ways. Even long before the emergence of new media technologies that created different discussions around media consumption, individuals were readers of texts created by other individuals. Though academically, the term “audience” dates back to a specific time, one can say that there have always been authors and spectators/readers/consumers. As societies started developing and especially after industrialization, the relationship between the author and the reader has become part of an agenda that involves multiple dynamics and includes the interests of different actors.

When the Internet appeared, it brought with it several expectations about the future of media, authorship and participation. Long before the Internet, McLuhan talked about a “global village” and the hopes that it brings, though this aphorism was not accurate when it first appeared. Benkler saw the Internet as a democratizing tool that will allow all citizens of the world to participate. Some other scholars had more fatalistic predictions for the world and raised topics such as surveillance, manipulation and commodification. Some perceived the users of media as victims of large cultural industries being manipulated, bought and sold, while others perceive them as breaking free and getting more empowered with the emergence of the Internet, and the social media more specifically. Recently, one could witness the role

that social media platforms have played and how it enabled to make drastic changes in political regimes in the Arab world. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook have been used for political reasons. Nowadays, thousands of people are being mobilized for local and global events. People who have never met start exchanging ideas and thoughts about life changing issues. It seems indeed, that McLuhan's aphorism became true and the world has become a global village, where neighbors meet each other on social media groups or forums though they are actually physically miles apart. Social media platforms are becoming more and more user-friendly. If one takes the example of Facebook, one can see that it is becoming easier to post links, upload photos and videos. The interface is being updated regularly with options that make it simple to provide more information on one's account. Internet users are engaging in several activities that involve complex mechanisms. One can witness the creation of a new audience that is not understood yet, taking into consideration its rapid changing nature as new tools, interfaces, trends, and interactive options pop up very frequently.

The main aim of this study is to have a closer look at what one can call as "the new audience paradigm shift" and to explore the roles that international college students play when they use the Internet in general and social media in particular. It is also aimed to explore and try to understand the new audiences and some of the dynamics that constitute its exclusivity. Interactivity is one of the key characteristics of social media; it influences the way users interact with their peers, the way they participate, consume media texts, as well as their level of activity in the online sphere. This research does not rely on a pre-established theoretical framework but will be framed according to some selected concepts that rise from the discussions surrounding the new media problem area.

In the background chapter of this work, a brief history of audiences and audience research will be outlined as well as a discussion around new media and their implications in the conceptualization of audiences. This section will also sketch out some of the main discussions rising from the previous research and literature.

2. Background

The following chapter traces a brief history of audiences and exposes the main audience research traditions. It will also discuss how audiences were conceptualized and the characteristics and features they had throughout the history of media research as well as some main dichotomies that rose. With the emergence of new media, the audience research agenda

and the conceptualization of audiences are being challenged; some sections of the background will cover the prominent discussions that come out in the literature.

2.1 Brief History

It is hard to trace with precision the origin of audiences. However, the prevalence of the audience as an institution can be linked to more than two thousand years ago as it dates back to the Greek and Roman ancient times when spectacles were already institutionalized. Indeed, there were regulations surrounding the events and one could detect a sort of early market segmentation as a large audience used to attend gatherings such as fights and games, whereas intellectuals would go to more refined events such as musical plays. Similarly to more contemporary audiences, the one of the Greco-Roman times also involved a sort of creative industry as it was based on the work of writers and actors and it involved sponsoring and censorship too. Furthermore, this audience was used for religion and politics (McQuail, 1997).

One main difference between the ancient times audience and the contemporary one is the relation to the physical place and time. In the past, audience members were all gathered in the same space (auditorium) where they could interact with each other and with the show. Though this experience is still possible today if one goes to a theater play or a football game for example, most of the audience experiences are now lived individually or within small groups with the use of media technologies. However, the reach became wider compared to earlier times with the emergence of ‘mass audiences’ (ibid.). It all started with the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century, when it became possible for individuals to engage in private readership. In the beginning, readers used to be characterized by their urbanity, social status, and language. In the early eighteenth century, newspapers and magazines were more common, and then in the nineteenth century print texts became more affordable thanks to technological innovations. At this stage already, there were several divisions amongst audiences and their preferences. Audience research has since then categorized those differences mainly by ‘class’, ‘status’, and ‘education’ (ibid.).

Technological and societal changes had impacts on audiences. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the production of books and periodicals shifted from a comfortable small sphere to large-scale industries. In fact, with urbanization, literacy and enhancements in the technology of printing, it became possible to reach millions of readers at the same time. There was a shift from live to mass audiences. The advertising industry and its growth also played

an important role in the development of media via financing and sponsorship. In fact, media used advertising as a source of income. It started in the nineteenth century, when advertising helped lower the price of newspapers and allowed mass distribution. The radio, and later on television, also broadcasted programs sponsored by the advertising industry (Gustafsson, 2006). Nevertheless, it is not until film and cinema were introduced that the “first social scientific concept of the audience emerged” (p.5). Another stage in the history of the audience started in the 1920s with broadcasting (ibid.).

Levinson (1999) used the analogy of a family (parents and children) to explain the changes that audiences have been witnessing with the emergence of different forms of media. Many political leaders used the radio during vital moments. At that time, individuals were listeners (radio family), as there was one authoritarian voice delivering a message through the waves. Listeners did not have the opportunity in this model to argue or refute the medium content. With television, there was a shift from listeners to viewers and from children to voyeurs. With the Internet, in 1998, people were not only viewers anymore, but more interactivity and a wider access to information was possible.

According to McQuail (1997), an audience can be different in multiple ways:

[...] by *place* (as in the case of local media); by *people* (as when a medium is characterized by an appeal to a certain age group, gender, political belief, or income category), by the particular type of *medium* or *channel* involved (technology and organization combined); by the *content* of its messages (genres, subject matter, styles); by *time* (as when one speaks of the “daytime” or the “prime-time” audience, or an audience that is fleeting and short term compared to one that endures). These opening remarks are sufficient to illustrate how this simple term embodies many ambiguities (p.2).

The influence of media has been an ongoing interest throughout history and this for many reasons. From a political and cultural view, there are concerns about the eventual effects that media can have on traditions. From a reformed perspective, critiques were formulated about the hegemonic effects of media, as serving the interests of the ruling class. From a business aspect, audiences are considered as markets and the interest is in influencing them for economic reasons (Schroder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003). However, (Schroder et al., 2003) explain that there is also a more neutral wave whose interest is mainly academic and aimed to understand the influence of media on society without any hidden agenda. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the media and communications field, audience researchers are involved with different research traditions. The following section will give a brief description of the three main audience research traditions: Effects Research, Uses and Gratifications Research, and Cultural Studies (ibid.).

2.2 Audience Research

2.2.1 Effects Research

The Effects Research tradition started in the 1920s and 1930s. The focus in this tradition is on the last part of Lasswell's definition "who says what in which channel to whom with *what effect?*" The main interest is in the role media play in democracy related issues and also in how businesses seek to reach consumers and influence their choices. Each new medium has influenced how audiences have been dealt with. For example, the radio has enabled politicians to widely communicate and reach potential voters (Schroder et al., 2003).

A few decades ago, scholars believed in the magic bullet theory. As media were considered to play a powerful role in the formation of public opinion, it was believed that people were influenced in a heavy way by the messages conveyed there. In the 1950s, with the popularization of the two-step flow hypothesis, mass media effects started to be understood in a different way. Through their work, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld show that *opinion leaders* get information from the media and transfer it to their peers. In this instance, interpersonal communication had an influence on the way media affected audiences. In the 1960s, media effects were believed to be moderated and linked to other variables. The research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly about television, came back to the powerful-effects model where audiences were again considered as strongly impacted by the media (Littlejohn, 2002). George Gerbner's 'cultivation research' in the 1970s is the major study of the effects of television. A distinction has been made between heavy viewers and light viewers, the formers were considered as having a more fatalistic vision of the dangers of the world rather than becoming violent (Schroder et al., 2003).

2.2.2 Uses and Gratifications (U+G) Research

This perspective sees the audience as 'active' and individuals as satisfying different needs through the use of media. In this case and oppositely to the effects school, it is not the media that is doing something to people but it is the users who are dealing with the media products in their own way. However, the U+G research has been introduced by researchers who had grounds in the effects paradigm. People are considered to be using the media in multiple manners that are first rooted in interpersonal relationships before being linked to any medium itself (ibid.).

Though the strongest U+G research studies were done in late 1960s and early 1970s, U+G has started in the 1940s with studies about the relationship between the listener and the

text such as Herzog's. The researcher interviewed radio soap opera fans and identified three gratification types as being emotional, wishful thinking and learning. Katz and Blumer (1974) are considered to be the founders of the U+G school which mainly intends to explore:

[...] (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratification and (7) other consequences (Schroder et al., 2003, p.38).

Oppositely to the effects tradition, this school sees the member of an audience as a 'discriminating' media user. The U+G approach's emphasis is put on the consumer rather than on the message. In fact, the audience member is in control of his/her media choices that are formulated in order to meet specific needs and goals. The media in this case are only a means to meet and gratify personal needs. This is the original idea of U+G and further theories have been developed as an extension to it such as the expectancy-value theory and the dependency theory (Littlejohn, 2002).

2.2.3 Cultural Studies

The cultural studies perspective has been linked with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and its directors Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart at Birmingham University. However, the Frankfurt School has influenced cultural studies in the 1930s in Germany and has inspired many works in the 1960s and 1970s. The Frankfurt School considered the audience and media users as being deceived by the ruling groups. Media and cultural industries are considered to be part of a large capitalistic picture that created mass deception. The Birmingham School's concern on the other hand is about cultural struggles (Schroder et al., 2003).

This tradition is reformist and scholars view their work as a means to change. Scholars consider their field as 'cultural studies' instead of 'media studies' because, even though media are an important and powerful tool, they are not the only worry of the researchers in this tradition. *Articulation* is used in cultural studies to refer to the process of "having our realities reinforced from many sources" (Littlejohn, 2002, p.217). In fact, in this tradition, any ideology shared among a group of people results from a set of different influences. Furthermore, cultural theorists explain that the dominant ideology is usually the one of the elite, which leads to hegemony instead of a fair representation of society's interests (ibid.).

2.2.4 Audience Research Controversies

Audience research has raised several controversies in media theory. There have been arguments and discussions among the theorists about the conceptualization of audiences. The main disagreements are about: (a) the notion of the audience as a mass public against the notion that it is a small community, and (b) the perception of the audience as active versus the audience as passive (Littlejohn, 2002).

The first controversy confronts the Theory of Mass Society to Community Theories. Scholars of the former perspective perceive the audience as an uncritical mass that can be shaped by the media while proponents of the second see them as a part of small groups. The Theory of Mass Society developed from the modern state and its bureaucratic features. This theory sees people as a moldable mass that lacks individuality and personalized interactions. Though this theory is not as prominent today as it was before, it influenced several theories such as the cultivation theory. The Community approach was coined as the Social Action Media Studies by Gerard T. Schoening and James A. Anderson (1995). It views audiences as members of small communities that are characterized by their own norms and values. In this configuration, people are influenced by their peers rather than by the media (ibid.).

The second controversy is the passive versus active audience. As the name suggests it, the passive-audience perspective considers that individuals are directly affected and influenced by the media. Audiences used to be considered as passive viewers, grasping the media texts they are exposed to without questioning. Some media researches have been focusing on the audience as a victim ruled by a dominant ideology and mass mediated messages. On the other hand, the active-audience perspective considers people as taking real decisions while using the media. Furthermore, active audience theory explains that people are clever and can make up their own minds¹ (ibid.).

In his article “Opposing Conceptions of the Audience: The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory”, Frank A. Biocca (1988) distinguishes five features of the active audience: (1) *selectivity*: while choosing the media to use, active audiences are being selective, (2) *utilitarianism*: active audiences use the media for specific purposes, (3) *intentionality*: the media are used purposefully, (4) *involvement*: active audiences are making efforts during their use of the media, and (5) active audiences are considered to be *impervious to influence*; in fact, the media cannot easily persuade them.

¹ Active audiences and the construction of meaning.

According to Schroder et al. (2003), there are two main audience research paradigms, quantitative and qualitative, evolving towards convergence. However, the difference does not only lie within the methodology itself, but it also involves both a functionalist and a critical conceptualization of science. In general, the dichotomy in media and communication research, and not only in audience research, has been defined in different ways by different scholars. In fact, there is the “process school” (focus on the senders-receivers transmission) and the “semiotic school” (focus on social rituals, meanings, and formation of ideologies).

There are four main approaches to audience research: (1) media ethnography, (2) reception research, (3) survey research, and (4) experimental research (Schroder et al., 2003). The most important studies about audiences are of qualitative and ethnographic nature. However, there are problems of generalizations (Morley, 2006).

Audience research is different from studies that deal with only media content as it interferes with people and may consequently have effects on them. While doing audience research, one should distinguish between:

[...] on the one hand, how people *use* the media as an integrated part of their daily lives, as a *social practice* alongside other social practices, and on the other hand, how the cultural meanings offered by the media are *made sense* of and may *gratify* people’s needs for information and entertainment (Schroder et al., 2003, p.16).

Audience research has been carried for different reasons, in addition to building theories; audience research goals include advertising and marketing studies, product testing, and audience choice manipulation. The motivations behind the studies on audiences vary from “audience control” to “audience autonomy”. According to McQuail, most of the research falls within the “audience control” side.

The audience has often been perceived in a negative way because of the prejudice about mass media. In fact, the concept of mass audience has been linked to low taste. This critique is part of the “ideology of mass culture” as defined by Ang (1994/2006, cited in Storey, 2006, p.190): “In this ideology some cultural forms – mostly very popular cultural products and practices cast in an American mould – are *tout court* labeled ‘bad mass culture’”. Mass culture has indeed been linked to negative connotations. The Frankfurt school denounced the deceptive intentions of cultural industries. In fact, in this school, the audience is considered as being manipulated by capitalist media producers. In the same line of thought, C.Wright Mills formulated a harsh critique explaining that the American society was weak under the power of a dominant advertising and media industry. According to him, media was set in a non-interactive way where audiences could not express themselves but only

surrender to an imposed stream. Within critical theory, the needs of the audience were considered as fake and generated by the dominant capitalist ruling group (McQuail, 1997). Mass societies needed media machines to work. It was needed to transmit mass messages to large audiences and ensure that the same ideology is kept (Manovich, 2001).

From the history of communication policy, there are three main models about audiences (Ettema and Whitney, 1994):

1/ The Effect Model: Audience as a Victim

- Audiences get exposed to contents that are harmful to them;
- Media can encourage audiences to enjoy useless and negative content;
- There is restricted exposure to positive content and a more dominant to the negative one.

2/ The Marketplace Model: Audience as Consumer

- Audiences know how to protect their interests in a rational way;
- They know what they want and make personal choices while selecting the media;
- The media system responds to the audience's preferences.

3/ The Commodity Model: Audience as Coin of Exchange

- Audiences have an economic value;
- Audiences can be created and sold by commercial media;
- Public interest: keeping advertiser -supported media.

In summary, audiences have been conceptualized in different ways (Schroder et al., 2003):

- Public of informed citizens;
- Passive masses that do not question what they are being exposed to;
- Markets and consumers;
- Interactive.

The discussions above are all linked to traditional media. The concepts of passivity, activity and interactivity of audiences have different implications with the emergence of new media. The following section will deal with new media technologies and the changes it brought to audiences.

2.3 Audiences and New Media

2.3.1 Early Predictions

The changes in media technologies are creating changes in the nature of audiences and also in the way older media are being used. There was a belief that all media will, in the future, converge into one. For McQuail (1997): “Audiences will become more and more fragmented and will lose their national, local, or cultural identity” (p.24). However, the change brought by electronic media was seen as reinforcing surveillance and control.

McQuail (1997) identified four changes about the audience: (1) larger supply and easier and cheaper reach with cable and satellite, (2) opportunities for recording and wider choice thus making the audience experience less homogenous, (3) transnationalization and global reach, (4) wide interactivity. This fourth change is a result of the growing interactivity found in media due to computerization. The one-way model of transmission has become a two-way or even multiple-way model. The user of the media now has more control. This change is going in the opposite direction of what one used to witness in the history of media audiences. It seems that there is equilibrium in the sender-receiver power relationship. However, the mass audience becomes fragmented through the individualization of uses (McQuail, 1997). According to McQuail (1997), it is not only the technological changes that create audiences but also changes in society: “the possibility of entering an interactive utopia is also as much dependent on social factors as on technological possibilities” (p.11).

Concerning how traditional media are being used with the emergence of new technologies, continuity and change are two factors that have been concluded by last century’s audience research. A study conducted in 1997 by Coffey and Stipp showed that the use of computers did not affect the use of old media and that there is interaction between the two media. Using the Personal Computer (PC) Meter Service, a device that enables to measure computer usage, PC activity was measured in 10,076 households in order to test the hypothesis that digital media will cause the decrease of television viewing (Coffey & Stipp, 1997). However, a longitudinal study conducted by Stempel et al. from 1995 to 1999 showed that there was a regression in the use of older media but that was not related to newer ones. A critique of similar studies is that they only concentrate on the subject without taking into consideration other variables such as society and culture, in addition to the fact of not taking into account the “inter-media competition”, between television and the computer (Siapera, 2004).

2.3.2 *New Media*

During the past years, several scholars have been researching the new media and formulating reflections around them. The newness of a medium is a relative description. In fact, a medium that was considered as new in the past centuries is not part of the new media of today and all old media were once new. However, innovations in science and the field of technology have been referred to as new media. New media are usually linked to new techniques of transmission, creation and information storage (Mayer, 1994). The term ‘new’ has a positive connotation. The phrase ‘new media’ inspires that progress will be achieved through a new technology (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2003). Nevertheless, one needs to be careful not to fall within a media-centric view of the world. With his aphorism “the medium is the message”, Marshall McLuhan formulated his belief in technological determinism and he saw media technologies as important driving forces in society. He also had an optimistic outlook of what media could bring to people contrary to Neil Postman who explains through the “ecology of technology” that media affect society in a negative way. On the other side of the technological deterministic spectrum stand scholars who do not see technology as primary factors of change, but merely as another variable added to the multiple set of complex variables of society (Harper, 2002).

New media are usually linked to four sorts of change that affect society, culture and economy: (a) a change from modernity to post-modernity, (b) a growing globalization (no more boundaries), (c) an emergence of post-industrial information age, and (d) a decentralization of geo-politics (Lister et al., 2009).

Marvin (1990) stated that:

Media give shape to the imaginative boundaries of modern communities, then the introduction of new media is a social historical occasion when patterns anchored in older media that have provided the stable currency of social exchange are reexamined, challenged and defended (p. 4).

A new medium will usually build upon old media: speech is in all media, the telegraph uses words for example, and the television uses animated images and audio. The Internet is now encompassing forms from so many old media (Levinson, 1999).

According to Manovich (2001), a common way to define new media is by giving examples of the most common tools categorized under this label, such as the Internet, computers, etc. However, he also raises attention to the products generated using computers such as animation films and photographs. Manovich (2001) points to the fact that people

usually understand new media as being linked to the distribution made via the computer instead of the use of computers for production. He also explains that on the same line of thought, only digital texts are considered to fall within new media while print texts do not, which is a restricted definition.

Whenever media were new, they brought a revolution and had impacts on society; however, the computer media play a role in the different levels of the communication process, from production to delivery, and they affect all different kinds of media texts (Manovich, 2001).

Considering the relativity surrounding the newness of media; Scolari (2009) raises questions about how to label the new communication forms emerging in the digital era. Amongst his suggestions are the terms 'interactive communication', 'digital communication', 'hypermedia', 'networked' or 'collaborative communication'. New media have been attributed different characteristics throughout the literature.

According to Scolari (2009), there is indeed a semantic confusion. "The arrival of a new generation of digital media that is no longer based on the broadcasting logic is challenging the knowledge about traditional mass communication" (p. 944).

After the diffusion of digital media, two opposite views emerged among researchers. There are those who critique digital media; for them, nothing has changed and the same economic and political interests that were prevalent within the old media paradigm will pertain, keeping a vertical flow of information towards a passive population (Lister, 2003). On the other side, there are those who have more optimistic views about the digital media and their democratizing and egalitarian potentials. Scolari (2009) explains that this opposition is not enough and that it is not covering the complexities of scientific discussions. Both opponents and proponents of digital media have their approaches built on older communication paradigms. Some opponents' views lie on the Frankfurt School while some proponents of a digital revolution have applied Marshal McLuhan's thoughts to the new digital communications and see that his global village theories, that were criticized in the past, can be applicable now. Scolari (2009) explained how the new digital media research could fit into the old mass communication theories paradigms (critical, empirical, and interpretative); however, he explains that new discourses must be elaborated as a complement. These new discourses could be part of the concept of cyberculture. New methodologies and theories have been created. An example of that is the field of cyborg anthropology. The following section will outline some discussions that emerged around new audience research.

2.3.3 *New Audience Research*

There is now a new agenda for audience research. For Livingstone (2003), the importance of audiences in new media research lies in three instances: (1) ‘the implied audience’: either audiences are considered as participants or victims, it affects the way research is going to be held. This discourse is not concerned with media theory as much as it is concerned with how the audience is being imagined. (2) Acknowledging the importance of empirical research on audiences. There is a growing need in knowing the audience and the role they play in social and technological changes. Indeed, audiences are becoming more stratified with new different habits. There is still a debate about new media and whether it is a new challenge for old theories that can be adapted or if there is the need for new conceptual and theoretical frameworks. One can notice that most of the theory is linked to television studies. (3) “Transformation of the audience itself”: as most studies during the last four decades have been done about the television audience, there are now challenges brought by the new media shift. There is a need to understand audiences as ‘plural’, as ‘active’ and as “embedded and distanced” from particular usage situations. Livingstone (2003) raises a shift from the question “what’s happening?” to “where am I?” She raises also attention to the fact that what is new about the Internet is actually old in traditional communication theory as interactivity is one of the main features of the traditional face-to-face communication. In this case, the newness of the Internet and challenges to audience research lies in its massive features (wide reach, large contents, and global characteristics).

New media brought several changes to audiences:

1/ “Multiplication of personally owned media”: old media are becoming cheaper and more accessible; they are also becoming more numerous within the household and thus used in different settings. Livingstone (2003) explains that the newness of the media is linked to the social environment in which it is used rather than on the technological innovations.

2/ “Diversifying in form and contents”: there is a larger choice of local and global content as well as a more diverse one of forms (television, computers, video games, etc.).

3/ “Convergent forms of information services”: there is an interconnection between the media that blurs the several structural boundaries. “Convergence can be construed as part of a general trend towards democratization – at least in terms of making visible forms of knowledge and opinion whose domain has been traditionally restricted to higher status groups” (Livingstone, 2003, pp. 62-63).

4/ “Shift to interactive communication”: is the last and most important change. In fact, there is a change from the traditional one-way communication to a model that is more interactive. Internet makes it possible to challenge the classical hierarchies, the relation between the public and the private, and to create and express individualized preferences through its democratizing feature (Livingstone, 2003).

According to David Gauntlett, the emergence of Web 2.0 necessitates Media Studies 2.0. For him, Media Studies 2.0 is an acknowledgement of the witnessed changes in the media landscape during the past years, as the importance of the Internet has been growing and has been also affecting other media. It is also an acceptance of the fact that boundaries between producers and audiences are becoming more and more blurred. Moreover, Gauntlett (2009) explains that given the potential of Web 2.0 in encouraging participation and creativity, Media Studies 2.0 are “interested in the everyday participatory and creative possibilities of media, as compared to the focus of traditional media studies on professional media consumed by audiences who had to take what they were given” (p. 149). However, Media Studies 2.0 is also worried about the less liberating matters of the trend such as surveillance issues. Active Internet users can also be passive consumers of advertising in the web. But once again, Web 2.0 is not the only variable involved in this audience shift and one should keep in mind that there are other factors coming into play.

New media are also affecting the consumption/production dichotomy. The boundaries between authors and readers are now blurred because of hypertext and the hyperlinks through which users can access the electronic texts they choose to. Scolari (2009) suggests that these new patterns of consumption could be studied in different ways. He explains that cultural studies as well as traditional media audience research have dealt with the consumption of technologies.

The borders between consumers and producers are less rigid which creates a hybrid status of *producers*. Indeed, participants of the web can easily switch roles from being a producer to a consumer. According to Bruns (2006), producers are part of “the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further development” (p.21). Bruns (2006) raises attention to the distinction between the products of the produsage process and those of the classical industrial one. Enabled by social software, produsage is a concept that:

[H]ighlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge... the role of ‘consumer’ and even that of ‘end user’ have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance (Bruns, 2006, p.2).

The shift from a consumer to a user involves being more active. In cultural studies, the audience is not passive but is engaged in interpretation. However, the way web users interpret new media content differs from the dynamics of the traditional mainstream media. The new variable is that in addition to intentionally expressing themselves, the basic expression of the users' choices is measured by traffic analyzers. These choices have impacts on other users as well after being operationalized (Bruns, 2006). With the necessary tools, consumers became users within the new "protocols of interaction".

Today more than before, it has become accessible and easy for amateurs to share their productions on the web. This phenomenon has created discussions and debates about the expertise of the new producers (Ross, 2010). There is a distinction between publics and users as discussed by Gitelman (2006), through their activity, users contribute to the development of the media. However, to what extent this activity affects the technology can be elaborated in further studies.

For Hartley (2008), the consumer and the citizen evolve hand in hand in modernized societies. Those two personas are an expression of two "energies": (a) the desire for freedom (evolution of citizenship from historical revolutions to what Hartley labels as "Do It Yourself (DIY) citizenship") and (b) the desire for comfort (evolution of the industrial mass consumption into deliberate choices). Recently, the web has been the host of social media and their exponential growth. Social media is one of the recent years' 'buzzword'; it is a trendy expression being used in different fields (marketing, public relations, politics, etc.). So, what is actually meant by it?

2.3.4 Social Media

Contextualized within the new media shift discussion, this study will focus on social media platforms in particular. Since a few years ago, social media have been established as the most common new media trend. It is not sure yet for all interested parties what social media exactly stand for. In fact, while reviewing the literature and making research to define the term, one could find that there is no generally agreed upon definition of social media. Moreover, there is a tendency to use this term along with Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC) from which they differ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Some scholars use social media the same way they use Web 2.0, which is a more technological definition, while others focus on the social aspect and consider social media and social networking as two similar concepts (Bruns, 2009). Thus, before defining social media, I found it necessary to

first give a definition of the terms with which the former concept has been used interchangeably; in other words, I will briefly outline what Web 2.0, UGC, and social networking usually stand for:

Web 2.0: It is a term that was first coined in 2004, in order to refer to how users and software developers started using the Web. The term Web 2.0 was first introduced by Tim O'Reilly in 2004. He identified it as "harnessing collective intelligence" (Creeber and Martin, 2009, p.39). In this platform, users can continuously participate in the modification of contents. Web 2.0 creates collaboration and participation. For example, a personal website is part of Web 1.0 while a blog belongs to Web 2.0. Adobe Flash, RSS and AJAX are needed for the running of Web 2.0. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) regard Web 2.0 as the platform where social media evolve.

Generated Content (UGC): It is defined as the ways in which social media is used and was cited by Dawson (2007) in the "Future of Media Report" as one of the eight developments in media. It usually refers to the contents generated and published by users, and this in the context of Web 2.0. UGC existed in the early 1980s, long before Web 2.0, however, the coming together of technological, economic, and social factors make the contemporary UGC very different from the one existing before (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

- Technological factors: affordability of technological tools and high broadband, and availability of user-friendly production devices.
- Social factors: need for interactivity and expression of creativity as well as shift to a generation of digital natives that is skilled.
- Economic factors: cheaper broadband Internet and tools, financing opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007).

Social Networking Sites (SNS): They are applications that allow users to create personal pages and connect with other people (friends, colleagues, etc.). SNS usually give the possibility to send emails and to chat with other users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The largest SNS is Facebook with more than 800 million users (according to the official Facebook page).

Social Media: They can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation

and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Nevertheless, there are different sorts of social media and there is still no methodical categorization of those different types. Furthermore, new applications appear on a continual manner. Another definition was given by Bruns (2009); for him, social media are “websites which build on Web 2.0 technologies to provide space for in-depth social interaction, community formation, and the tackling of collaborative projects” (p.5). Both definitions highlight the Web 2.0 foundation of social media. However, it is important to keep in mind the “social” feature in social media.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) decided to use media research theories and social processes in order to be able to come up with a way to classify social media applications. In the field of media research, they relied on ‘social presence’ and ‘media richness’. Social presence theory explains that the ‘social presence’ is different from one medium to another. ‘Social presence’ in this instance stands for “the acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be achieved” (p. 61). It is affected by whether the communication is interpersonal or mediated (intimacy of the medium) and also whether it is synchronous or asynchronous (immediacy of the medium). Media richness theory assumes that communication is aiming at uncertainty reduction and ambiguity resolution. Media are different in their richness and are consequently different in their effectiveness for avoiding uncertainty and ambiguity. For Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the first way to classify social media is based on their richness as well as the social presence they enable to have. In the umbrella of social processes, they relied on ‘self-representation’ and ‘self-disclosure’. Self-representation states that, while interacting with others, people want to be in command of the impression they give about themselves. Self-disclosure happens when people provide with information about themselves. The second classification relies on the kind of self-representation that it enables people to give and the level of self-disclosure it calls for. For Bruns (2009), ‘community’ and ‘collaboration’ are two important characteristics of social media. He identified some key aspects that make social media websites work: *low threshold to participation* (there are no obstacles for potential users to join and participate in the social media sites), *highly granular participation tasks* (users can participate and contribute step by step while evolving in the social media site), *assumption of user equipotentiality* (all users have *equal potential*, however they are not equal in the sense that some will choose to be more active contributors than others), *shared content ownership* (users feel that are in charge of the content they create or participate in creating) (Bruns, 2009).

From the discussions above about new media, I would like to shed some light on some key concepts and debates brought by the shift from traditional to new media (specifically social media) and the changes it brings to audiences. After being synthesized, the following points will be the main focus for the theoretical framework:

- Social media have challenged the traditional communication transmission model: there is a shift from an up-down one to many model to a horizontal many to many one;
- Being the main change brought by new media, interactivity has several implications for new audiences and new media usage;
- New media have caused a blurring of boundaries;
- Changes brought to audiences are not only due to technological factors, but also to societal ones;
- There is a rise of participation opportunities;
- There are now new conceptualizations for new audiences (characteristics and behaviors of social media users);
- There is an emerging debate: need for a new research agenda or adaptation of old theories to new media landscape?
- Traditional media versus new media consumption;
- Emergence of convergence.

3. Theoretical Framework

There have been different conceptualizations of the new media audience of users and attempts to understand the characteristics, behaviors, and motivations of this emerging group. This study is aimed at getting to know how international college students behave online and the choices they make, from available options, to get information and entertain themselves. It is also an attempt towards an identification of the interactions and dynamics involved within the social media sphere. Rather than following a pre-established theory or known model, the theoretical discussion for this study will be based on emerging concepts and debates that one can encounter several times throughout the review of the literature and that were outlined in the previous chapter of this study about new media and audiences.

3.1 Interactivity

Interactivity is one of the main characteristics of new media. It creates changes in the relationship between the author, the audience and the media text. Despite its ubiquity in the discussions about new media, interactivity has not been conceptualized in a clear way and the concept still remains, in different aspects, difficult to define (Bucy, 2004; Kiousis, 2002). Instead of defining the concept, Bucy (2004) considered that it was more judicious to delimit interactivity. In his opinion, interactivity “may be a special case of *mediated* social interaction” (Bucy, 2004, p. 375) and he warned about not using it interchangeably with face-to-face communication.

Interactivity is also one of the main underlying key themes for this investigation along with wideness. Wide reach is indeed important in the conceptualization because it is the massive feature of the Internet and the platforms hosted there that make this interactivity different from the one in interpersonal communication. In fact, though it was listed by several authors as an important specificity of contemporary new media technologies (Lister et al, 2003; Livingstone, 2003; Scolari, 2009), interactivity is not a new concept in human communication. It is even at the core of face-to-face and social interaction. Also, levels of interactivity vary depending on the media.

3.2 Conceptualization of Audiences

The activities linked with the term “audience” are mostly listening and watching. It seems that nowadays it is being replaced by the term “user” that has more individualistic implications and takes away the collectivist quality of audiences. New media technologies are creating new roles and also new forms of interaction with the media texts: “*playing* computer games, *surfing* the web, *searching* databases, *writing* and *responding* to email, *visiting* a chatroom, *shopping* online” (Livingstone, 2003, p. 25). Livingstone (2003) suggests that instead of coming up with a new term that encompasses the changes that media technologies have brought to relations between people to conceptualize the audience “as a relational or interactional construct, a shorthand way of focusing on the diverse relationships among people – who are first and foremost workers, neighbors, parents, teachers or friends – as mediated by historically and culturally specific social contexts as well as by historically and culturally specific technological forms” (p.25). In the digital era, it is challenging to study closely the patterns of reception and use of new media. Now, individuals own a set of private

tools such as laptops and mobile phones that connect them to different media texts and enable a private experience oppositely to television sets.

Throughout media research, media audiences were theorized in relation to the nature of the medium. Within film studies, people were dealt with as spectators; the audience was conceptualized as viewers and consumers, while the advent of Web 2.0 brought the term ‘user’ (van Dijck, 2009).

For this study, social media audiences will be hypothetically operationalized as interactive. In fact, social media users have the opportunity for interactivity; however it is not sure how they incorporate it in their practices. Access and presence in interactive platforms does not imply active usage; there should be a willingness for that.

3.3 Transmission Models

One of the main issues dealt with in older media research is the media-audience relationship. Not only have media technologies challenged the media-audience relationship but they also affected way people communicate with each other. It challenged mass communication and also interpersonal communication (Walther et al., 2011). Interactivity has allowed a shift from an up-down transmission model to a horizontal one. It has also enabled a two-way one to many as well as a many to many communication as the figure below shows.

Figure 1: Traditional versus New Transmission Model



Social media enable a two-way communication between its users. In traditional communication research, dialogical communication is not a new characteristic; it is actually the basis of interpersonal communication. However, the new and challenging issues about the new media transmission model are the possibilities that new media technologies enable.

3.4 Media Convergence and Participation

Convergence has often been used to explain the shift from old media to new media (Rennie, 2007). Indeed, in a digital age, convergence has often been introduced as the new framework in the field of research. One can now purchase multifunctional digital tools (Fagerjod and Storsul, 2007). Media convergence concepts started in the 1970s and 1980s. Convergence started with the digitalization of signals. There are six major interpretations of media convergence:

- Network convergence: when they are digitized, all signals become the same and can be transmitted within the same network.
- Terminal convergence: terminals can converge; there could be several devices converging in one. However, one can still witness that different devices still have their specific social functions even if the ‘distinction’ between them becomes blurrier. In fact, “One could describe the computer as a “lean forward” medium, requiring constant selective activity from the “user”, while television is “lean back”, requiring only the “viewer’s” attention” (Fagerjod and Storsul, 2007, pp. 22-23).
- Service convergence: services are converging in the same network and they become intertwined.
- Rhetorical convergence: this is related to the convergence of ‘expressions’ and ‘genres’. Different digital media become mixed and new media genres are created.
- Market convergence: formation of “multimedia companies”. It happens when several companies are merging with each other.
- Regulatory convergence: involves having one ‘regulatory framework’ for networks. However, when it comes to media services and contents, there are still distinct regulations.

Media tools are converging and social media can be accessed at any time through mobile technologies. One can witness a convergence of media technologies and also a convergence of media contents. Social media sites have changed the way individuals use the Internet. User generated content is not only available through open source software and entries in collaborative encyclopedias like Wikipedia, but video sharing sites like Youtube allowed the upload of millions of videos that range from home made clips to parodies or snapshots from television shows, news and documentaries. Nowadays, the broadcast happens also the other way as clips that initially were broadcasted on Youtube are starting to be shown on television (Bell, 2009). Convergence is affecting the way media spaces are being lived and experienced. As tools that connect to the Internet are becoming more mobile, it is now

possible to connect via the cyberspace from anywhere. Not only can people be connected to the Internet but they also can get connected to each other. Bell (2009) describes the new media as a “me media”. There is a recreation of spaces that requires some different conceptualizations. The combination of viewer and user has led to ‘viewer’, while producer and consumer led to the term ‘produser’.

There is a distinction between the digital revolution paradigm and the convergence paradigm. The former deals with assumptions that everything was going to be changed by the introduction of new media and that old media will become obsolete while the second states that there will be a complex relationship between old and new media. For Jenkins (2006), “convergence is...and old concept taking on new meanings” (p.6). According to him, convergence is not only about the developments in technology that enabled some devices to fulfill different functions, but it is about a ‘cultural shift’. In fact, one can talk about a participatory culture where ‘consumers’ are enabled to be more active and trace their paths within the media and its contents rather than being passive spectators. According to Jenkins (2006), participatory culture is a culture “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (p.290). The distinction between media consumers and producers is being blurred and there is a new form of participation that still requires to be understood (ibid.). However, not all individuals can participate equally as some are more powerful and have more access than others. According to Jenkins (2006), convergence is not only linked to new media technologies, in fact it is not enough to have a media tool and to be able to connect to the Web to be part of the process. However, convergence happens within the individuals’ mindsets and also when they connect to other people. Jenkins sees collective intelligence as a power. For him, the ‘collective power’ is used currently in light ways, mostly for entertainment and leisure but he sees the potential of using this power in more important aspects of life.

In the 1990s, rhetoric about a coming digital revolution contained an implicit and often explicit assumption that new media was going to push aside old media, that the Internet was going to displace broadcasting, and that all of this would enable consumers to more easily access media content that was personally meaningful to them (Jenkins, 2006, p.5). Jenkins has studied how the convergence culture has influenced the “relationship between media audiences, producers, and content” (p.12). His challenge was that the focus of study is under continuous change. Convergence is “a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process” (Jenkins, 2006, p.18). Media convergence is requiring changes in different industries as new media consumers are considered to be more empowered. Many

companies are now adapting to the new social media trends and assuring their existence by making sure to be there. Scholars like Benkler see the networked information economy as a huge opportunity for citizens to make their voices heard and get to listen to other different opinions from all corners of the world. Technology is not seen as an alienation of democracy but as an emancipation of it. Indeed, it is harder for authoritarian governments to control their peoples in the interactive era (Benkler, 2006). Participatory culture is broadening its verges and this is an essence of democracy.

3.5 Social Interactions

In addition to participation, the Internet is a fertile nest for social interaction. Tim Berners-Lee (2000), the creator of the World Wide Web, explains in his book *Weaving the Web*, that “[t]he web is more a social creation than a technical one” (p.133). He adds that, while designing it, he intended the web to be a platform where people could collaborate with each other.

Social interactions are influenced by the context in which they occur. According to Edward T. Hall (1974), the combination of three specific elements characterizes the context of a social interaction. First, there is the physical setting or the place, then the social environment and finally the activities involved (before, during, and after the interaction). In his study of sociology, Max Weber put the emphasis on the role of social interaction. Through the German word *verstehen*, Weber explained that a “sympathetic understanding” is needed in order to be able to comprehend social actions. A social action is “anything people are conscious of doing because of other people” (Littlejohn, 2002, p.110) while a social interaction “involves two or more people taking one another into account”.

Rosen (2007) makes an appropriation of the Spanish proverb: “life without a friend is death without a witness” to simplify it to “life without hundreds of online ‘friends’ is virtual death” (p. 26). The exponential expansion of social media platforms has created a new social convention. Individuals who want to keep up with their friends may feel the need to assure and maintain an online presence. Coyle and Vaughn (2008) explain that social networking is not linked to the Internet, as human beings have a societal need to bond with others; however, what is new is that social networking has created new way for people to connect.

Surveillance and wide reach are two different implications that new media have brought to social interactions. Peer-to-peer surveillance or what Andrejevic has been also labeling as ‘iMonitoring’ involves individual’s access and use of surveillance tools. From

looking for information about mates in Google, and checking pictures in social network utilities such as Facebook to tracking the location of friends or children through GPS equipped devices, there are many banalized daily actions that make normal citizens' each other's big brothers. In fact, a person who may not find it ethical to stalk a fellow in the street may engage more readily in iMonitoring and feel less guilty about it. The gratifications sought by this form of surveillance can explain the behavior. In Romantic relationships for instance, people may want to watch each other to learn new information or find some hidden facts, while people already established in a couple may want to investigate an eventual infidelity (Andrejevic, 2007).

One has to contextualize new media within society in order to be able to understand how the media environment is changing. In fact, the daily life involves different variables and societal dynamics. The way a media technology will affect an aspect of life has to do with other factors such as family, economy or occupation (Livingstone, 2003). One can say that being a student affects the role that media play in the daily routine as opposed to being a worker for example. Indeed, the way new technologies will affect sociality depends on the established social interactions. Similarly, the way technologies will affect a person depends on the attributes of this person. Media has been considered as playing a role in socialization; accordingly, social factors have an influence on people's uses of media.

There are both pessimistic and optimistic views concerning the Internet and its implications for social interactions. A pessimistic approach views technology as non-compatible with social relations. It also argues that the Internet might have depressive effects. For some scholars, the time spent online is time wasted not spent with real people. They also explain that the emancipation that the Internet offers, the premises of expression and participation can also have several inconveniencies, especially for younger users. The optimistic view stands for a completely different argument. It sees the Internet as nurturing social interaction. People for whom it is usually hard to participate in discussions can participate via the Internet (Rice and Haythornthwaite, 2002).

3.6 Technological versus Sociological Determinism

As this study is about the audience shift that is mainly linked to the usage of social media, one may ask questions about the impacts of the technology itself on the behavior of the college students. For example, is the interface of a social media platform and its user-friendliness making them more active or are there other factors that come into play? I did not

formulate hypotheses about this question and the potential factors before the data collection process, but I decided to start by contextualizing it within the technological and sociological determinism debate. There is indeed an ongoing discussion about the role technologies play in social change. The term “determinism” carries a negative connotation and has been under close critique. It was first introduced by Thorstein Veblen, an American sociologist and economist. “Technological determinism seeks to explain social and historical phenomena in terms of one principal or determining factor” (Chandler, n.d., p.1). Technology-led theories perceive technology as the main factor of social change. Media technologies in this case are considered as triggering some changes in society while ‘human factors’ are considered as ‘secondary’ (Chandler, n.d.).

Technological determinism uses causality as an explanation for phenomena. It involves reductionism. Social reductionism had also many scholar critiques and is usually linked to the quantitative research. Holism comes as an opposite view to reductionism. Holistic explanations deal with a specific phenomenon as a whole and consider its complexities and mechanistic models are weak in explaining social phenomena (ibid.).

In Social Shaping of Technology (SST) studies, technologies develop as a consequence of social processes. SST does not however fall within social determinism (Williams and Edge, 1996). “SST is seen as playing a positive role in integrating natural and social science concerns; in offering a greater understanding of the relationship between scientific excellence, technological innovation and economic and social well-being; and in broadening the policy agenda” (Williams and Edge, 1996, p.865). These changes and transformations are not caused by technology but by users as they are the ones who adopt these innovations and introduce them in their lives (Merrin, 2009).

3.7 Media Consumption Habits

Any new media usually goes through several stages before being adopted by a society. In fact, according to Rogers’ diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory (1962), an innovation is communicated via a timeline process. Furthermore, Rick Altman came up with the idea of “crisis historiography” to explain the diffusion of new media. A new technology usually goes through a process whereas its identity is questioned. In the crisis historiography model by Altman (2004), the definition of a new technology lies in a social and historical uncertainty. In other words, a new media is not only defined by its structure but also by the way it is understood and used. Media analysts have first to understand users’ conceptualizations and

responses to the technology before understanding its evolution. Then, their writings have to not only rely on contemporary definitions but also on older notions. One example provided is the one of moving pictures. Indeed, one should understand the older conceptions of the terms ‘moving’ and ‘pictures’ to be able to comprehend and explain the history of this innovation (Altman, 2004).

Whenever a new media emerges, questions are raised about its predecessors. What would be the implication of the new for the old? Will people stop using older forms of media after adopting the newer ones or will they incorporate both old and new in their daily consumption habits. Traditional media were the main sources of information and entertainment for a long time, but with the appearance of the Internet, people started to have more options and more choices were available.

3.8 Research Questions

Before formulating questions about the dynamics involved in the use of social media and the new implications for audiences, the first research question investigated in this study is a simple one:

What are the main reasons behind the creation of social media accounts?

By asking this question, one can figure out the initial “why” and “how” of social media use. It is important to first identify the motivations of the studied group for joining the social media sphere.

The interactivity and dialogical communication is not new, but what is new are the technology and the availability of resources in order to produce content more easily and have a wider reach. Furthermore, social media users are also affected by the online presence of their peers:

How do international college students interact with the social media platforms and with other users?

The Internet brought premises of participation and emancipation, mostly in theory, however not all users choose to participate and make their voices heard:

What are the factors that contribute to or encourage international college students' participation in the social media sphere?

Whenever a new medium appears, questions are raised about the effects that it will have on many aspects of society. The Internet has brought changes to the way people interact with each other and also to the way they get information and entertainment.

How do international college students negotiate the way they get information and entertainment in the social media platforms and how is their consumption of older media affected?

People use social media in different ways. In fact, users differ in their levels of activity and participation in the social media sphere. Some individuals tend to be viewers while others are more productive authors.

How do the social media users identify themselves?

As discussed earlier, social interactions and socialization are non-negligible variables that accompany the use of social media platforms. The following question will help identify the perceived impacts of the social media accounts in the social life of the studied group.

What are the social implications of the social media accounts in the life of the international college students?

4. Methodology

The main research method used for this study is a qualitative one. I chose to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to answer the main research questions and also to figure out and discover some patterns that I have not necessarily identified or thought of before. One can focus on those particularities in the future and have narrower studies than the present one.

4.1 Study Sample (N=11)

Interviewees were international college graduate students enrolled at Karlstad University in the fields of social science, economics and media and communications. They were from different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. They all lived in Karlstad during the time period when the interviews were conducted and had daily access to the Internet. The eleven interviewees ranged from 23 to 37 years (mean age = 27). Four interviewees were recruited via email requests and seven were asked face to face. The research sample was selected for convenience reasons. I interviewed students who were available during the interviewing period. Some of the interviewees are part of the same program or former classmates, and acquaintances of classmates.

The interviewees' names will be kept confidential throughout the study and fictive names will be used to refer to the informants.

Presentation of Interviewees:

- **Martha:** 30 years old, Uganda, in her second graduate studies year;

- **Paul:** 37 years old, Kurdish living in Sweden for 12 years, in his second graduate studies year;

- **Emilie:** 27 years old, Estonia, in her first graduate studies year;

- **Tatiana:** 25 years old, Belarus, in her second graduate studies year;

- **Iris:** 30 years old, Ukraine, in her second graduate studies year;

- **Julia:** 23 years old, China, in her second graduate studies year;

- **Kim:** 25 years old, China, in her first graduate studies year;

- **Jacques:** 22 years old, France, in his second graduate studies year;

- **Bernard:** 25 years old, Bangladesh, in his second graduate studies year;

- **Peter:** 29 years old, Kenya, in his first graduate studies year;

- **Josephine:** 28 years old, Swedish student, *control interview*;

4.2 The Interviews

Before starting the interview, the interviewees were introduced to the topic and told that they will be asked questions about their social media activities in particular and activities in the Internet in general. They were also asked to fill in a pre-interview questionnaire on social media usages (the different questionnaire sections will be discussed in the next section). Having them fill in the questionnaire gave a preliminary overview of their behaviors and made it easier to ask more customized questions. For the interviews, I relied on an interview guide, the order of the questions varied from one interviewee to another, indeed, questions were adapted to the answers given and some follow-up questions that were not in the guide were asked as well when some interesting points were brought by the interviewees. This is the main advantage of semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes (mean = 20 minutes); they were recorded, with a digital voice recorder, in English and transcribed later on. Most of the interviews took place in the university library. Interviews were conducted till saturation.

4.2.1 The Interview Guide

Below are the main themes and questions that shaped the interviews, however, more questions were asked according to the interviewee's pre-questionnaire answers in addition to other follow up questions. Also, some questions were added after some patterns were identified during the first interviews.

General Consumption Habits: Questions about the consumption habits of students

- Do they consume more “new media” texts than “old media” ones? Is social media the main source of information and entertainment?
- Do they consume media texts that they would not have had access to otherwise?
- Do they consume some media texts just because they are easily accessible?
- Motivation of social media choices. (The “what” and the “why”? e.g.: What accounts do they have? Why do they have a blog? Why do they have a twitter account, etc..)

Criticality:

- Are they selective about the kind of media texts they consume?
- Do they question the media contents they encounter or do they take them for granted?

Participation:

- Is it easier for them to express their opinions? (via posts, etc)
- Are they more active because of the architecture of social media?
- Do they create discussion topics and debates through their accounts? How important do they think those discussions are? Does it encourage them to be more active?

Social Interactions:

- How do they interact with other users?
- What are the social implications of their use of social media? Is their online presence and participation related to their peers/communities?

Identification: How do they locate themselves in the interactive sphere? How would they describe themselves?

4.3 The Pre-Interview Questionnaire

The pre-interview questionnaire was used in order to have a first overview of the students’ online habits, and consequently it helped go straight to the points of interest during the interview and save some time.

The questionnaire included five main sections. Section I dealt with basic demographics data (gender, country, age, level of study and field of study). Then, it was followed by a short Section II that included questions about Internet usage in general. Section III is one of the main sections; it is the social media related one. In this section, I decided to principally focus on four social media platforms: blogs, Twitter, Youtube and Facebook. Facebook was chosen to represent social network sites, Youtube as a video sharing tool and Twitter for micro-blogging. These three platforms were selected for this study because of

their global popularity and prominence. In fact, Facebook and YouTube have been labelled by Bruns (2009) as world leaders. Youtube is the leading social media platform in the videosharing field (Bruns, 2009). Facebook is the second top site according to Alexa Traffic Rank and Youtube is the third most visited website, Twitter is the eleventh but first micro-blogging platform in the list. Before discussing the questions included in Section III, I will first give brief definitions of the four main social media platforms investigated in this project²:

Blogs: They are the social media version of personal websites. Most often led by one person, blogs allow interaction with other people via the possibility of adding comments. Blogs can take different formats and can be used for diverse purposes. I chose to include them in the pre-interview survey as well, and in the study in general, because they give their users a large room for expression and authorship and they are also the early form of social media.

Twitter: “Twitter is a real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting” (Twitter.com/about). Firstly designed for mobile phones, Twitter is a micro-blogging site. It started in 2006. It broke into the mainstream in 2008-09 (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). Twitter users can ‘follow’ other people and can have ‘followers’. Users can post “tweets” that do not exceed 140 characters in their length.

Slogan: “Twitter is the best way to discover what’s new in your life”.

Youtube: First launched in June 2005, YouTube was created by three previous employees of PayPal, Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim. The main aim of YouTube was to make it easy to share videos. ”The website provided a very simple, integrated interface within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge, and within the technological constraints of standard browser software and relatively modest bandwidth” (Burgess and Green, 2009, p.1). There was no limit for the number of videos that could be uploaded and users could also connect with each other as friends and videos could be used in websites via URLs. In 2006, the success of YouTube was confirmed when Google took it over for 1.65 billion dollars. YouTube is the third most visited websites in the world (Alexa Traffic) and 24 hours of content are uploaded each minute (http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics).

Slogan: “YouTube, broadcast yourself”.

² Note : this research has been conducted in 2011 and the interfaces of studied social media have changed since then.

Facebook: Founded in 2004, Facebook started initially as a college social network as it was first possible only for people who were enrolled in American Universities to create an account. Later on, it was open to users from all around the worlds. In Facebook's own page it is defined as “[g]iving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected”. It counts “more than 8000 million active users” according to Facebook. 700 billions minutes are spent each month on Facebook. Around 70% of the users live outside the U.S. Furthermore, around 90 bits of content are created by an average user each month.

Slogan: “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life”.

Respondents were first asked if they had an account in the platforms described above, if the answer was affirmative, they were asked more specific questions. One question was about the year when the respondents created the account to have an idea about how long they have been using it and see if the time spent there affects their usage. Then a question was asked about the frequency of posts. The answer options given were different from one social media platform to another taking into consideration the difference in the interfaces and likely uses. For example, concerning blogging and Youtube, the answer option for the most frequent usage was “everyday” while for Twitter and Facebook, it was “many times a day”. The section included a qualitative question: “What are the main reasons why you have an X account?” In the following paragraphs, questions that are social media platform specific will be discussed.

Measure of Blog Activities: respondents were asked about the type of blog they keep (personal journal/diary, academic/research, political/news information, technology, fashion and other with a request to specify). A yes/no question formulated as follow was asked: “would you say that there are many people who read your blog?” This question was formulated this way in order to measure the respondents' own perception of the size of their audiences; then they were asked to give an approximate number to get a more objective number. They were also asked the closed question “do you get many comments on your blog?” to measure their perception as well and find out later on if there is a cause and effect relation between their perceptions of the readership they get and how active they are.

Measure of Twitter activities: in addition to the questions about the year when the respondents joined Twitter and the frequency of posts, this section included questions about the number of followers the person has and also the number of accounts s/he is following; this information

was also required to be able to study later on any eventual correlation between the “following” habits and the posting frequencies.

Measure of Youtube activities: respondents were asked about the number of videos they have already uploaded, the number of subscribers to their account they have and also a yes/no question to get their perception about the quantity of comments they get (“do you get many comments on your videos”). This question again is meant to detect any eventual correlation relationship.

Measure of Facebook activities: respondents were asked about how often they update their statuses, and the frequency to which they post links to articles and/or external websites, pictures and videos.

Section IV of the pre-interview questionnaire was designed to disclose some consumption patterns and included some questions meant to be used to draw some correlations with other sections. Respondents were asked to choose between traditional media and the Internet and to select which one was their primary source of: information about what is going on in their countries, information about what is going on in the world, and entertainment. Informants were then asked if they sometimes watch videos or read some articles because one of their friends posted them or uploaded them on their personal pages. They then were asked about how many times they thought those articles/videos were worth watching/reading (always, most of the time, sometimes, never) and if they make comments on them (always, most of the time, sometimes, never). The final question of this section was “In general, would you say that you watch or browse videos/articles you are not really interested in just because they are easily clickable?” (always, most of the time, sometimes, never). This question was meant to measure the quality of consumption of the respondents and to see if the architecture of the interfaces and the user-friendliness affects that.

The final section inquired information about the media tools that the informants own and which one they use to connect to the Internet in general every day, and then which tool they use to access their blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube accounts if any.

In addition to the interviewees, the questionnaire was also distributed to other students and meant to nurture a quantitative section for this research, but considering the small size of the sample (N=30) and the statistical weakness, the quantitative data were ignored and only the qualitative parts of the questionnaire were analyzed and used. However, some sections of

the questionnaire that were mainly designed for statistical purposes will not be used in this study.

4.4 Validity

Qualitative research has been evaluated to be subjective. Indeed, the significance of some results and the importance of some parts of data over others are related to the researcher's own assessment. It is also not possible to say that the findings of a qualitative research can be easily generalized (Bryman and Bell, 2007). While conducting the interviews, I had in mind some specific questions that needed to be answered in order to be able to fulfill the purpose of the study, thus I was sometimes making sure that the interview was on the track of the research. The challenge while conducting the interviews is not to lead the interviewees to the answers that the researcher wants to find. This could happen easily by asking close-ended questions or giving a set of multiple choices. Giving more freedom to the interviewees helps them express their true behaviors more easily. One should try to avoid suggestion. However, after the two first interviews, I started seeing some patterns and then targeted those themes while interviewing the following students, the more I was getting ahead with the interviews, the more the patterns were taking shape as many responses were indeed converging. As I reached my eleventh and last interview, some patterns were repeating themselves. Though I wanted to have more interviews, for time and logistical reasons, it was not possible to go further and I decided to stop and focus on the points that reached saturation. Indeed, some initial main points were fully covered (all eleven interviewees confirmed them) while other aspects only partially (a few interviewees managed to discuss them). In fact, though six students have Youtube accounts, only one already uploaded home made videos, and another one expressed the intention to start uploading videos in the future. These results are not enough to discuss the production related section of social media usage. Also, only three interviewees have a Twitter account; however they provided with primary insightful data on the micro-blogging activities.

One issue that might be considered as compromising for the validity of this study is the lack of randomization during the selection of the sample group. As stated earlier, interviewees were chosen for convenience reasons. One of the 11 interviewees is not an international student and can be considered as a control interview that can be used for comparison.

4.5 Reliability

Considering the culturally heterogeneous background of the interviewees, there is the probability of interpretation ambiguities. Culture plays a role in the way messages are transmitted and received, consequently, misunderstandings could have happened in both sides: from the interviewer and from the interviewees. The errors in this case are mainly related to subjective interpretations of the respondents' feedback. However, I tried to minimize ambiguity during the interview through paraphrase. In the instances where I needed to make sure what the interviewee meant, I would paraphrase what they just said and ask for confirmation. Asking probing questions was also helpful, though sometimes asking questions that only require a yes/no answer can prevent from getting more details. The errors can also be linked to the interviewees' interpretation of my questions. The interviewer can identify this issue when the answer takes a different direction from the question, and then the question can be asked again and reformulated in a different way. However, in some instances, the interviewer might be distracted by the fact that all interviews are digitally recorded and miss some part or fail to identify some understandings till the transcription part. While interpreting results, it is also important to keep in mind that correlation does not imply causation. There may be a positive or negative correlation between two variables, but it does not necessarily mean that one is causing the other as other known or hidden factors may enter into play. Thus, during the analysis and interpretation of data, it is important to keep in mind the complexities of the process.

It is also important to note that the fact that all interviewees are graduate students can grant them an amount of criticality. They seemed to be more conscious about their media behaviors than other users might be. In their answers, many interviewees gave their own interpretation or self-analysis of their media habits or media usage. The data collected from the interviews may not be as raw as initially expected as interviewees might have influenced the coding with their opinions.

4.6 Analysis of Data

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed later on. After each transcription was completed, I proceeded to a first coding, which is the basic description of some data parts. The transcription of the first interviews was done during the same time frame where I was conducting other interviews. Thus, the first coding was useful in detecting some patterns and starting to frame the next interview questions accordingly. After

the first coding of all eleven transcribed interviews was finished, I moved to the second coding that is a thematic one and that helped identify the main categories and themes for the analytical part of this study.

5. Presentation of Results

The findings section is organized according to the main themes emerging from the results:

- Motivations for account creation;
- Traditional media versus new media consumption;
- Participation;
- Readership;
- Action of commenting;
- Social implications of social media;
- Self-identification.

Other miscellaneous relevant patterns that emerged from the data will be discussed. The findings are analyzed in line with the main discussion outlined in the theoretical framework part of this work.

Before introducing the main themes and argument, I will start by presenting some basic numerical figures from the pre-interview questionnaire. As explained earlier, some questions that were initially designed for a quantitative part of this research will be ignored in this study because of a statistically non-representative sample size.

5.1 Basic Statistical Data

This section outlines some results from the pre-interview questionnaire:

N=11

Female = 7

Male = 4

Mean age = 27 years

Ownership of Blog: 7/11

Ownership of Twitter Account: 3/11

Ownership of YouTube Account: 6/11

Ownership of Facebook Account: 11/11

1-3 hours a day	1
4-7 hours a day	6
More than 8 hours a day	4

Table 1: Internet Usage

5.2 Motivations for Account Creation

Interviewees explained the main reasons behind creating their social media accounts. The responses varied depending on the nature of the platform (*see Appendix B for some selected stories about account creation*).

<i>Blogs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To follow the blogging trend; - Interest for writing; - Interest in Web 2.0; - A means to express oneself; - To keep friends informed about what is going on in one's life (as an alternative to sending emails); - The blog was linked to another account; - For entertainment purposes.
<i>Twitter</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convenience of the platform; - To get information; - To follow other people; - To use for marketing purposes.
<i>Youtube</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To be able to post comments; - To upload videos (either university related or home made videos); - To keep a list of favorites.
<i>Facebook</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recommendations from friends; - To keep in touch and to see what is going on with friends; - For social networking in general.

Table 2: Motivations for Social Media Accounts Creation

These motivations can be synthesized into three main categories and one can say that amongst the main reasons for users to create social media accounts are: (a) an interest for trends and new technologies, (b) socialization and (c) instrumentalization for achieving various purposes.

Many interviewees disclosed that they created their accounts when they were far away from home, and four of the blog owners explained that though they have not cancelled their blogs yet, they do not use them anymore. In fact, some pages were created in order to meet some specific needs such as Emilie who explained that she was using her blog as an alternative to emailing.

Well, I posted in there but not the last three years because it was just for one year, when I was...when I was traveling...so I don't have to send emails all the time.

Emilie, 27 years.

Facebook is now established as the generic global social networking sites. In fact, all respondents have a Facebook account. The students who also have a local or national social network account usually joined Facebook after leaving their home countries to connect with 'global friends', and all of them keep their regional accounts to connect with friends from the native nation. I would like also to shed light on the fact that Facebook has been used as a generic term for social networking sites by the interviewees and this could be noticed in some of the excerpts expected in the coming sections.

5.3 Traditional Media versus New Media Consumption

Amongst the questions that were raised with the emergence of the Internet is whether the consumption of older media will be affected. Interviewees were asked about their new media consumption routine as opposed to the traditional media in the pre-interview questionnaire and were able to explain their habits during the interview. The questionnaire reveals that nine out of eleven respondents use the Internet as the main source of information about what is going on in the world and also about what is going on in their home countries, and ten out of eleven respondents use the Internet as a primary source of entertainment.

Many interviewees have identified traditional media as being time-consuming. Oppositely to the online sphere that allows flexibility for when to access news and entertainment, television usually has specific times for broadcasting. One has to wait for the news to start in order to get information while it is on demand online.

[...] because if you watch TV, it can be news broadcasted at specific times, for example nine in the evening or maybe you're not at home, and sometimes you come home...I heard for example an accident in Minsk, so yesterday I came and used Google to find some news about this accident...

Iris, 30 years old.

The excerpt above illustrates also how the Internet can be used as a complement of news heard about in traditional media. Some interviewees still prefer traditional media, television and physical newspapers but they use the Internet because they do not have the choice. The main restrictions that push them towards seeking information in the Internet are: (1) being far away from their home countries, (2) not having a television set and also the fact that (3) newspapers are costly while data can be retrieved online for free, in addition to (4) accessing online texts that are not accessible in the mainstream media.

I have nothing against the written press, it's mostly like, I'm a student and it's costly and it's time consuming...I mean, the Swedish ones are quite a big format...

Jacques, 22 years old.

I'm not in my home country and it's easily accessible...maybe I can see the TV live, live streaming...it's cheap, and also I can verify it from different sources...this is why it's more the Internet.

Bernard, 25 years old.

Kim uses the Internet as a primary source of information and entertainment because she is an international student in Karlstad, however when she was asked if the situation is different when she is in her home country, the reply was that she would still use the Internet:

Kim: Because I'm in Sweden, it's hard to get the traditional media...it's hard to find news about China...Internet is the only way I can get some news

Interviewer: But when you are in China, is it different?

Kim: It's the same, because traditional media, I rarely use it, I don't like to read newspapers and TV also, my mom occupies TV all the time...the Internet is good for information and entertainment and some things that I cannot see in the traditional media...

Kim, 25 years old.

Tatiana explained that she uses the Internet only because she is in Sweden as well, but when she goes back to her home country, she may use both sources:

I will still use it but I don't think I will use it as often as here and I would also have access to television...here I simply don't have it, so maybe in my home country, it will be fifty-fifty.

Tatiana, 25 years old.

The only interviewee who uses traditional media for both information and entertainment is Josephine, a Swedish student. However, Josephine explains that she also sometimes uses the Internet as a complement for news that she heard in the traditional media:

Sometimes, mostly because I've heard something on the television that I want to know more about and that I want to read about in my own pace, like I see, if I turn on the television and if I see something just very quickly, let's say in Oprah, and they talk about something, and I hear just a name or place..about this happening, then I can google it and see if I can find anything about it...

Josephine, 28 years old.

Another variable that influences the media choice is the occupation of the user. Being a student affects the Internet consumption habits:

As I said, it's cheaper, you can get easy access to everything...you don't need to go to bookstores, and another thing, presently, we are students so for our studies, we need to use the Internet, it has multipurpose, if we were not students working in some place where we don't need the Internet like maybe jobs in factories, we won't use the Internet so much, maybe newspapers...

Bernard, 25 years old.

Internet is used as an alternative to media that are not accessible in a material way:

Yeah, of course, because mainly I read everyday all newspapers from my home country online, so they are not available here in Sweden, as a paper...physical paper...it's impossible [...] and even TV channels, sometimes, online radio, local radio, I listen to them online in the Internet...

Paul, 37 years old.

Furthermore, Internet is also an alternative for getting information that is not accessible because of ideological reasons or restriction ones:

On traditional media, TV, sometimes you get one point of view...or sometimes the points of view are every official and formal...but on the Internet, you get more detailed information...and more aspects of the problem, it's not just one dimension...Internet is more democratic I guess...

Paul, 37 years old.

Though the majority of students acknowledged the practicality of the Internet as a source of information as well as the fact that it offers several viewpoints instead of one, they did not nevertheless become less selective and critical as a consequence. Indeed, most of them have specific websites where they get trustworthy news and also where they gratify their

needs for entertainment. Peter, a 29 years old international student, explains that there are four specific websites he checks everyday, the first website provides him with international news, the second has news about his home country and he has chosen the third site because he likes their stories, and the last one because it provides with brief information.

One interviewee saw the Internet as making people become less critical about the information they encounter as compared with the older times. He explained that, in the past, audiences managed to be more critical with the traditional media because they knew they were given only one vision.

I guess, it really depends, because...of course, not being submitted to one vision and finding different point of views is also good...to think about things you would not have thought about by yourself, at the same time I think people are getting less and less...they think less and less basically...before, at my parent's time, you had one national channel, and people were quite critical because they knew that there was only one vision...by themselves came to criticize and select....on the one side, it's good to have all this information but on the other side, peopleanymore, they read and formulate an idea, but not by themselves criticize the data...

Jacques, 22 years old.

Another interviewee formulated her skepticism about information found in the Internet.

I have this mentality that most of the things in the Internet are false.

Martha, 30 years old.

Social media and micro-blogging more specifically are new tools for getting more transparent information; it is also a way to get live news without having to go through the classical gatekeepers:

On the Twitter, there is such phenomenon when these events happening in the real time...people who are around and whether participate or observe these events, they can tweet what's happening and exactly what they see, they post it and you can give...you can read this and receive...they can also post immediately pictures of what they saw..so you receive information live, as it happened without journalists making an article out of it, adding their flavours or without anyone who might be interested to edit pictures or videos...so you get them raw...and this like, I think it brings to the credibility a lot...and you can like observe...actually those are not really good events that happened maybe some bombings that happened, in Moscow recently...and some others, I don't know, mostly they are from Moscow what I observed...

Tatiana, 25 years old.

5.4 Participation

The Internet brought several premises about participation and emancipation of its users. However, there are always several factors that contribute to the materialization of eventual potentials. In other words, a space that seems to be more democratic in theory will involve the interplay of a set of several complex factors before achieving real tangible democracy. It is not necessarily the interactive feature of the social media platforms that makes users feel that they have more room for participation but mostly the awareness about the wide reach as Julia and Jacques explain in the following two excerpts:

I think in terms of expressing myself, I wouldn't say that's easier, I would say that's wider...(...) it's very wide..for example like Twitter, micro-blogging, sometimes I just post something, for example when I see a lost kid, a missing child in the street, maybe I'll just take a photo of that kid and post it on my account and I have no idea who will see that, of course my friend...what if my friend retweeted, and the friend of my friend retweeted, there is probably a chance for the lost kid parents to see...so I can't control that...I don't think it's very easy for me somehow, but very widely...

Julia, 23 years old.

I wouldn't say you feel more empowered, I would say you feel that you can reach more people...of course you can reach more people, but sometimes, you can go into the idea that you need to be careful about the sources, it's not because it's in the Internet that you think it's true, even though some people think it is...I would say it's just changing now...before, you used to meet your friend in highschool at the café and whatever and discuss with them things...now, people are more isolated, even though you are still in contact with people, you go through the computer...with the computer and the social media, you are empowered...sharing, it's a facilitator I would say, a facilitator of sharing ideas...the main ideas were already there before, you just reach a broader audience and you can share much more...

Jacques, 22 years old.

Participation is happening in different ways. There are the users who post external links to videos and articles, while there are others who post their own texts such as links to blog entries or videos they made.

[...] sometimes, I post a video or share a video which is in my interest and I want to make my friends aware of this, to build the awareness you can say [...]everything people should know...you can share it with 200 people, 300 people...easily you can share it with everyone.

Bernard, 25 years old.

The new audience of social media users play also the role of gatekeepers for their peers, as they make deliberate choices about what to post and what content they think is interesting and worth sharing with their friends. The willingness of sharing also implies the perception that there is an audience willing to have a look at the shared texts.

Yeah sometimes, it depends on the topics...of course, if I'm very related to the topic or if I have more knowledge or more information about the topic, then I'm trying to give everything I know about the topic, so the other person, they know what's going on, it's not just like talking without knowing about this topic...

Paul, 37 years old.

Online participation does not turn out to be 100% democratic as some users are very careful about what they post and engage in self-censorship as well as protection of their privacies:

I used to do that, until recently, like three months ago...I used to post links to some interesting news or any piece of information on FB and I could also do that in Twitter...then I realized..you know, I got a bit scared you know, everyone got to like, commenting, sometimes commenting on things that I don't want them to comment, they were filling up my wall, then I sort got of paranoid

Peter, 29 years old.

Reticence towards publishing a person's own thoughts and videos does not only come from a will to protect privacy but also to protect one's intellectual property:

yeah, and I also think about one thing, I spent my time and skill editing something and that was really good, and upload it on YouTube, then probably somebody else would get it and use it...so, I don't want this sort of things to happen, so I just try to keep...I don't post it on YouTube, I don't want to post on YouTube but probably somewhere else that I think is safer than Youtube...

Julia, 23 years old.

Online participation is not necessarily aiming at making one's voice be heard. Tatiana has a public blog; however, she explained that she had it mainly for personal reasons, to see how her thinking might be changing throughout the years. So one can say that she is mainly using it for storage purposes:

Just for me, to see how my thinking may be changing...in 10 years, when I will read it and say, oh it was so childish

Tatiana, 25 years old.

Tatiana makes in average two to three tweets a week; when asked about the content of these tweets, she answered that:

It can be a link for my blog...an entry that I recently made...or some just current thoughts, maybe some comments on the news that I read...just also from the twitter...or I can also talk to other people and this kind...

Tatiana, 25 years old.

Tatiana is also careful about what she tweets, and avoids to make posts about simple tasks of the daily routine. She also explained that in Facebook, her posts are less thoughtful than the ones in Twitter. However sometimes she posts the same links in the two platforms. The posts are different depending on the nature of the platform.

When asked if social media made it easier for her to express her opinion, Tatiana was aware that she could express herself but that does not mean that she will be heard and listened to.

Considering the nature of the social media platforms and the possibility of having friends, followers or subscribers, it was interesting to know if within the social media audience, the users take into consideration their own 'sub-audiences' before publishing any material.

Interviewer: and do you take into consideration your friends when you post something?

Emilie: No, if I have one particular friend in mind then I rather send a personal message; I don't really like posting; so...

Emile, 27 years old.

Yes, even on Facebook, I always think about the kind of the friends that I have, especially in the use of the language, sometimes if I mention something in my native language...then I have, sort of translate it, and have it in English.

Peter, 29 years old.

If one follows the evolution of the interfaces of web platforms, one can notice that they are becoming more and more user-friendly, thus making it easier for potential participants to be more active on the social media sphere. The data collected showed that the user-friendliness is a factor that may encourage participation however it is not the exclusive one as the decision comes mostly from the readiness of the person to participate or not.

I'm not that good with those things and if it took, does one of the things, like if the computer is slow or if there is any problem uploading things, then I don't do it, because I'm a bit lazy there, I'm not that smart with computers so if there is a problem, "help, what am I doing now?"...I think the easier it gets, the more I can put stuff.

Josephine, 28 years old.

Yeah, I think it's easy to express yourself, but if you want...I'm not that...I don't want everytime just to write because I know some...I see some other people that are writing everything, every day...it's like, ok, it's too much...

Paul, 37 years old.

Through their activity, users make choices as to what to read and watch on the Net and also as to when and how to make comments. The following two sections will unveil patterns of 'readership' and 'commenting' and the motivations behind that.

5.5 Readership

In their use of social media platforms, the interviewed students engage in the consumption of media texts posted by their friends. Whether it was links to videos or articles; the study revealed that there are three main factors that influence the decision process: (1) the social relation to the person, (2) the content of the link, and (3) the reputation of the person.

1/ *Social relation to the person:* interviewees pointed out to the fact that not all their Facebook friends were their real friends. Furthermore, the closest the person is to the user, the more likely it is that they will check the content posted. However, the social relation only affects the decision of checking the media text or not; it does not mean that the content will be automatically enjoyed.

To some extent, there is a relation, I think it's maybe they found something good and I will be interested to see what is there, well but I still make my own judgment.

Martha, 30 years old.

2/ *Content of the link:* In this case, users first check the headlines and titles before making the decision of reading/watching the article/video posted by their friends. Here, the readership decision is based on *the appeal* of the content.

I'm usually very specific...to look for content, I mean specific content...if someone has posted perhaps a news item that is interesting like this viral about this guy who was found in some streets in the U.S., he was a drug addict and he was discovered to have a very nice voice...it was interesting to see how he was discovered...so if someone posts it then I will click it, I usually follow content first...

Peter, 29 years old.

It's based mainly on the title, it's not because my friend posted it that I will click it and watch it, it's based on the title...if the title is interesting.

Kim, 25 years old.

3/ *Reputation of the person:* the history of posts by friends builds a reputation that can be either related to *frequency*, *quality*, or *the thematic* of the posts. In this case, the users make the choice of watching and reading or not via the evaluation of the person's built *level of activity*, *credibility*, or *area of expertise*.

Someone who posts a lot...I don't like to read their stuff.

Martha, 30 years old.

Yeah, exactly, I know some friends they are just linking nonsense, useless links...I know some friends they are just linking funny things...some friends are linking more serious things, political things or article, so I read those as well, but I know some people they are just posting useless stuff...

Paul, 37 years old.

Yes, I'm selective...I usually like things that will build my spirit...so I like people that post edifying messages, but what can I say...there are some people who post things that are not really beneficial...so I won't look at that for instance

Martha, 30 years old.

If to say on the friends, yes, there is...for example friends who I know will always, all the time post crap...laughs, and I will not pay attention...but I know that like one, two friends, what they post might...I should maybe pay attention, but not everything of course

Tatiana, 25 years old.

there is actually a few friends like this, but as the Facebook has this..what do you call, this option that you kind of customize the people you see...like the people you don't communicate so much they kind of get lost from your newsfeed...so there is not so many friends I actually see, so there is few friends whom I know that it's worth to read or watch something...

Emilie, 27 years old.

In some instances, the decision can also be done based on a combination of some of the factors discussed above:

There is a process actually, I think about the person as well, something I think euh, this person always posts this, but it's there...most of the time, I think about the person and I have some of the friends of the forum, I have on Facebook now...first, I didn't like that because now they have real names, they have real lives and they are not just the user name, but I started to like it, I don't have all my forum friends on Facebook but anyway, that means that these people usually have those things in there articles, there is one person there that always put up things about vaccinations, she does not like the normal ordinary medicine, so she posts on that...of course, the person is always important because, yeah...

Josephine, 28 years old.

Yeah, It depends, for Facebook...Facebook friends are not always your friends, it has different meaning, so...it depends on who is posting and also on the title, if there is any status or comment on the link...if I find it interesting, then I go for it, most of the time, I skip the videos because I don't like what everyone is sharing or it's not in my interest, because not everything is in my interest.

Bernard, 25 years old.

5.6 Action of Commenting

Participation does not only involve the creation of material and publishing of posts and links on the online platforms, but it also includes reactivity to what is already out there in the cyberspace via commenting for example. In the following section, the processes and motivations that lead to posting comments will be discussed.

5.6.1 Extremes of Likes and Dislikes

Many interviewees explained that they usually choose to comment online either when they strongly like something or in the other extreme, when they extremely disagree with it:

When I like, specially when I strongly agree with something, I wanna share my idea, in that situation, I will always post my comment.

Kim, 25 years old.

There was a time, I saw something really nice and everyone was talking against it and I really wanted to put my view there and I couldn't succeed...but I haven't yet commented on videos...I created the account, not commented, I just liked.

Martha, 30 years old.

Yes, I do, especially when I see some music, I'm very critical to some music [...] when I listen to them, or watch them, I used to comment on them, I'm very critical.

Paul, 37 years old.

Usually, when I like it or when there is something fascinating and so on...that's mostly, sometimes, if there is a really ugly discussion or something, I can...I don't do it often, for one, I'm not that interested, honestly I forgot my password...but if someone said something ugly or offending, I can tell, say that...I actually started my account when I saw a video of a little boy, was it in Belgium? I think...he sung in...when you can write your own song and compete with it, like the Eurovision song contest, but for children, this was in Holland, Belgium, I don't know exactly where but something there...he wrote a song about his two fathers...because he was adopted, and it was such a strong video, so I just had to comment it and to say that it was wonderful...I think that was the story actually...

Josephine, 28 years old.

Mostly when I disagree....and mostly I disagree [...] but I rarely do comment when I like something

Peter, 29 years old.

If it's really bad, then I won't say anything, I'll just close it...but if it's really good, then I will definitely leave a comment to encourage people to continue.

Julia, 23 years old.

Julia explains further that she does not give negative feedback to avoid endless debates :

I know that if I say something negative, there are probably some people who have a different idea, it never ends...I'll just let it go

Julia, 23 years old.

However, agreements and disagreements are not the only stimuli for making comments. Some students rather participate when a debate is appealing to their interests :

It's not about like or dislike; it's whether it's relevant to me, to my thinking or something like this...

Tatiana, 25 years old.

Yeah, it was like..it was a stand up comedian, who was from Australia...and the guy I know, like it was his video...and he used to be a stand comedian in Sweden, so I just commented that because we had some similar...because I had just moved to Sweden...

Emilie, 27 years old.

5.6.2 Privacy Issues

Some individuals are more protective of their privacy and make their comments accordingly:

I could comment, but something short...I could comment on something they probably have posted...very briefly, but I try to avoid that, especially in Facebook...because you know...now, when I comment, someone knows that I was online, and I didn't reply their messages...sometimes they send so many messages and I have not replied, so if I post something it will show that...

Peter, 29 years old.

I never comment on anything, and if I do, it's just a friend posted a video on each other and we comment on each other like we do in a real place, but I never post and never comment...

Jacques, 22 years old.

I rarely make comments...well, I make comments on newswebsites but I use a pseudonym, I never use my name

Peter, 29 years old.

5.7 Social Implications of Social Media: *"I'm on Facebook, therefore I am?"*

When asked about the importance of their social media accounts in their lives and if they were ready to deactivate their accounts, two interviewees expressed their willingness to do that. While Jacques sees the studied platforms as social facilitators, Peter on the other hand sees them as restraining his individual freedom and thinks that though they are more costly, traditional communication media such as the phone⁴ are more convenient for him.

I would say that social media are just a facilitator but I could live without it.

Jacques, 22 years old

I could say so...because I sort of don't need Facebook anymore...yes, I keep in touch, but whenever I have to use it, I realize...you know, it becomes like a circle, you keep reacting to what friends write, replying to their messages, it becomes like non-stop and when you stop then friends ask you what are you doing...it ties, it sorts of ties you...and you are not free...the good thing with the phone is that you can regulate, you can choose who to call, although it's expensive, but some friends, I like once in a month to make an attempt to call

⁴Note: Social media/Internet does not only work as a replacement and/or complement of traditional media as newspapers, radio and television, but replaces/complements also other communication devices such as the phone.

them, they also sms me, I sort of want to balance, and I reply to a few messages on Facebook and emails...

Peter, 29 years old.

Nine interviewees said that they were not ready to deactivate their accounts:

No, I can't cancel my account right now...I actually like my account because I can connect with friends...friends and family back home, but I know that when I'll go back home, I won't be as frequent user as I was, but even right now, I'm not that active, right now I'm busy...

Martha, 30 years old.

I think that once you are here, I think it's...I mean it's like a habit...when you are there, you are there I think...there is no return...but it's not like you are getting addicted to it, but it's like "why not?", once you are here, you have some friends there, and even if you get tired of Facebook, sometimes you can just: ok, I'm not gonna open it, but you have in mind that if you wanna contact some of your friends, you know that they are there, that's a good point...

Paul, 37 years old.

I think that would be hard...yeah...I'm quite addicted...I know I'm nosy, I like to know what people are doing but in a distances, I don't keep contact with some people really well, but I can keep, I can be a part and see what's going on, even though I'm not there, it's just a way to be able to stay in touch, I find it very easy because I have a bad memory about birthdays and this kind of things, and that is for me a help to tell me all those things, so for me, I think it's a good way to get these informations that I can't keep in my mind...

Josephine, 28 years old.

At the moment? No...because it's too much practical for me but I'm not so overly crazy about Facebook...so I keep myself fairly on the ground...

Emilie, 27 years old.

Maybe Facebook plays currently while I'm still in Karlstad University...and I have a lots of students and some information is important for me...but after leaving university; I feel easily..that I'm like more than sure that I will not use it at all...I will forget about it and deactivate maybe...Contactia, I would not deactivate it because there are still friends, though I'm not really...euh, chatting with them...there are friends from my home country...hmm...it's at least some connection and Twitter, maybe I depend a bit on Twitter...I will not delete it because, it has useful information and sometimes also entertainment...

Tatiana, 25 years old.

Yeah, at least abroad, it is...even when I will go back home, I have friends here, it would be a medium for me to keep in touch with my friends, though I have their contact numbers, email, Ids, but still, Facebook is just not for maintaining contact, it's like socializing platform.

Iris, 30 years old.

I think if I close all of them, then it will affect me, if I close some of them, I think it wouldn't be a big problem...

Julia, 23 years old.

No I don't think so, only if some more funny websites show up...yes, definitely...now if I try to contact some friends and they don't answer the phone, then I send them a message in Facebook or Chinese Facebook, sometimes they respond...so I think that it plays a really important role in my life.

Kim, 25 years old.

From the explanations above, one can summarize the main reasons and ways of why and how the social media accounts are important for their owners:

- Alternative and convenient way to keep in touch with relatives and friends (especially when they are far away);
- A means to know what is going on with friends via iMonitoring or peer-to-peer surveillance;
- A sort of directory that keeps records of friends' contacts;
- Established sources of information and entertainment.

5.8 Self-identification

The main initial motivation behind this study was to get to identify and understand the roles that the new generation of audiences take in while being part of the social media sphere. When asked how they would identify themselves by their use of social media, the interviewees gave the following answers:

I think...I would describe myself as a *traditional user*..I use it for traditional purpose, I'm not using it for "yoohoo, I bought a new dress"...I'm using it as an extension...additional use of media...

Jacques, 22 years old.

These days, more like a *viewer*, because these days I just open Facebook and see what's up with people and sign out because I don't want to post, and I told myself I'll go to Facebook on weekends, that's a discipline thing for me now...

Martha, 30 years old.

I'm an *active viewer*, which is called a lurker now in social media terms, I'm just viewing and selecting what I want to see and what I want to watch, what I want to read and if I wanna contact come of my friends, I rather do write them in a private message, rather than just write in their walls, yeah...if I wanna say something to them...sometimes, maybe you have...you want to explain something and you don't want the other to see what you are trying to say, to give the other person some privacy...

Paul, 37 years old.

co-creator...

Iris, 30 years old.

You feel like *you are participating*

Bernard, 25 years old.

I'm not one of those who post a lot, and drag people together, and organize protests, I'm more of a bystander, I just look at it and maybe join some time, right now, I don't see the internet as way of getting my own agenda out there...I don't think so, I can't seem to...but people, I don't do it myself, but I can say if I get married, it's quite popular now to have a page or a blog for your wedding, the guests can write, tell if they will call or not and read whatever the bride and groom are wishing for, my friends have this kind of pages, I can see myself having

one of these pages, as soon as I have it, I won't be a bystander anymore, it's a hard question...by now, *I think I'm a bystander, I think I'm a user...*

Josephine, 28 years old.

I feel like my privacy was seeking by somebody else... I'm kidding, I would say I'm a participant...yeah, that's what I thought.....I don't know if author is a good word to describe that, yeah, it could be but basically *a participant*...

Julia, 23 year old.

I don't know...hmm...I could say I'm *partly participant*, yes...

Peter, 29 years old.

I think it's *viewer*...I'm not participating that much.

Kim, 25 years old.

More like *a consumer*.

Emilie, 27 years old.

Maybe rather like a *viewer*.

Tatiana, 25 years old.

The answers listed above uncover two key categories of users:

- A *passive category* where students consider themselves as using social media the same way they would use the traditional ones.
- An *active category* that includes students who publish contents, comment on their friends' posts, create and upload videos, etc.

5.9 Other Patterns that emerged from the data

5.9.1 Clickability

All participants said that sometimes they *watch* videos because one of their friends posted them on their personal pages. However, two interviewees do not *read* articles just because they were posted by their friends. The main reason is that reading articles requires more efforts and is more time consuming, while a video only necessitates a *click* and they can close it if they do not like the first minutes of it. When asked about the access to some media contents on the online sphere and the *clickability*, some of the interviewees confirmed a positive correlation. Indeed, the easier it gets to access data, the more users will give it a chance as they become only one click far from the content.

5.9.2 *Friendship*

Many interviewees raised the point that their social media account friends are not necessarily their real friends. The perceived friendship and social relation is another variable that may affect the way new audiences behave and also the way they negotiate their identities online.

5.9.3 *Terminology*

In addition to the numerous buzzwords that got introduced with social media, this new and globalizing wave has set new concepts. In fact, the global success of some platforms has made generic terms out of them. For example, “Facebook” has started to be used interchangeably with what it stands for: a “social networking site”; during the interviews, one could notice expressions such the “Chinese Facebook” and the “Russian Facebook”.

In this section, some of the findings about social media usage were presented and briefly discussed. The following section will bring a more analytical discussion.

6. Concluding Discussion

As discussed in the background section, the concept of the audience existed way back before broadcasting and can be traced to more than two thousand years ago. Throughout history, audiences have been mainly classified according to their class, status, and education. Audience members could either meet in a specific setting/place at a particular time or live the media experience individually. Audiences can refer to large groups as is the case with “mass audiences” or can describe smaller and more stratified communities. Recent changes in the media environment have transformed media consumption and challenged the way audiences are conceptualized and studied. New media technologies offer their users/audiences several freedoms about when and how to consume media texts, contribute, and interact with each other. There are various stakeholders (e.g.: businesses, media industries and scholars) concerned with this new transformation of media consumption. Indeed, is there a need for media research to reconceptualize audiences?

There have been different conceptualizations of the new media audience of users and attempts to understand the characteristics, behaviors, and motivations of this emerging group. The main aim of this study was getting to know how social media users and more specifically international college students identify themselves, how they behave online and to understand

the choices they make, from available options, to get information and entertain themselves. It was also an attempt towards an identification of the interactions and dynamics involved within the social media sphere as related to this specific group.

The young international graduate students had several reasons for creating their social media accounts. Though the motivations for account creation were related to the platform, whether it was blogs, micro-blogging, video sharing or social network sites; accounts are mainly created because of an interest for new trends and media technologies, in order to socialize, or as a means to achieve different purposes. The two latter motivations can be looked at more particularly because of the international specificity of the studied sample. In fact, many students created their social media accounts after leaving their respective home countries in order to keep in touch with their social circles. Whether they are used in a synchronous or an asynchronous way, social media represents a convenient and cheaper way to connect with one's family and friends.

There was a social premise about the Internet when it was first created. The web was intended to be a platform where people will be able to easily collaborate and interact with each other. Interactivity is not a specificity of new media technologies as it is at the core of interpersonal communication; however technologies provide users with new ways to interact, disclose information about themselves, and learn about each other. New media also offer a wider and more global reach. Results show that the young users are careful about the information they disclose publicly and the comments they might post. In some instances, they indeed try to control the image they give and in some other cases they are simply cautious about privacy.

Concerning the relation between old and new media consumption, some college students explained that when they are in their home countries, they prefer to read newspapers and watch television, but they are using the Internet because they do not understand the Swedish language. Most of the interviewees usually prefer to use traditional media to get information but they cannot because it is not available to them. However, some of them listen to online radio or watch online television. So, the Internet is helping them access the online version of their respective countries' traditional media while they are abroad and can be used as an alternative and/or complement. One of the main Internet conveniences stated by the respondents is the fact that television has precise broadcasting schedules while the Internet can be accessed anytime for news. Furthermore, online sources are considered to be more affordable than their traditional counterparts. Using the Internet requires a minimum of criticality and sources are usually questioned before being considered as trustworthy. Social

media platforms are now a gateway to getting more transparent news stories that are sometimes made available by other users. As the traditional media available in Sweden might not broadcast/publish information about the students' native countries, it is hard to discuss the inter-media competition in a valid way.

Media centric views tend to give credit to technologies for changes that occur in society, however one has to be careful not to fall within technological determinism and attribute some interactions to the technology while ignoring several human and social aspects. Based on the answers of the interviewed group of college students, one can conclude that the technology itself does not trigger participation but it just makes it easier in the instances where the young user have a prior interest or motivation for sharing information or making their voices heard. Users can participate by publishing their original texts (e.g.: links to blog entries or home made videos), by commenting on already published contents, or by posting external links to videos and articles they thought were interesting and worth sharing with their social circle. Here, one can say that social media users play a gatekeeping role.

In addition to making information available to their friends, the students also consume different media texts posted by their peers. However, they are selective and do not check a link just because it is easily reachable online. The social relation to the person who made the post, the content of the link and the reputation of the person are the three main variables that affect the decision process.

Listening and watching were the main activities linked to traditional media while the Web 2.0 enables other actions such as browsing, clicking, publishing and much more. The most commonly used word to describe the Internet audience is 'user'. For this study, the audience of international social media users was operationalized as interactive. Results show that not all users make the same use of the new possibilities offered by new media technologies. When asked about how they identify themselves, the interviewed college students used the following terms: traditional user, bystander, active viewer, lurker, viewer, co-creator, participant and consumer. These answers reveal two main categories of users: (1) the passive category where the students use social media the same way they would use the traditional ones. New media in this case complements the older platform and there are no new usage patterns. Also, users in this category open their accounts to see and learn about what is going on with their friends without commenting or participating and (2) the active category that includes students who publish contents, comment on their friends' posts, create and upload videos, etc. It is important to note that the studied group did not include any extremely active user or someone who can fall within Bruns' definition of produsage, Even though some

of the interviewees defined themselves as traditional or passive users, the nature of social media platforms contradicts this self-identification. In fact, social media users have the power to choose when, where and how to consume the media texts and these deliberate choices means that they are more active than they might perceive.

Recent changes in the media environment have been happening rapidly and brought changes to the way audiences interact with media technologies as well as with each other. The advent of the Web 2.0 and the exponential growth of social media usage created new patterns of media consumption. The field of media and communication studies has a long history of audience research. Several theories have been developed in order to explain the relation between media and audiences. However, when the Internet emerged, the boundaries between authors and audiences became blurred and audience research started to be challenged. In fact, new media have challenged the way audiences are conceptualized and they also necessitate a new understanding of their users.

Being a key characteristic of new media, interactivity is also a feature of the social media platforms. This study is a modest attempt in trying to understand an international group of young social media users. It has resulted from a vivid motivation of understanding a new generation of audiences. The ubiquity of social media platforms has become very clear throughout the past years and media texts have started flowing heavily. We became each other's audiences within the social media landscape and these new relationships raise new questions. This research did not rely on a pre-established theoretical framework but was framed according to some selected concepts that rise from the discussions surrounding the new media problem area such as interactivity, participation, social interactions and change in media consumption habits. The results reveal the motivations for account creation and discuss traditional versus new media consumption, participation, readership, action of commenting, social implications of social media, and identification of online roles by the studied group: international college students. This study being still broad, one can focus on only one aspect of social media usage for a future research. The focus in this work has also been only on international students and findings cannot give a relevant insight on social media usage in general.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION I:

1. Gender: Female Male 2. Country: 3. Age:

4. Level of Study:

Undergraduate Graduate Post-graduate

5. Field of Study:

SECTION II:

6. How often do you use the Internet?

A few times a week 1-3 hours a day
 4-7 hours a day more than 8 hours a day

7. What are the main things you use the Internet for? (pick all that applies)

Email Chat Read news Watch videos
 Download files Make voice calls Online shopping
 Blogging Micro-blogging Social networks Upload files
 Other (Please specify):-----

SECTION III:

8. Do you have a blog? Yes No

If yes, please answer the following, if no, you can go to question 9

a. Since when do you have a blog? 20---

b. How often do you post in your blog?

Everyday 2-3 times a week
 Once a week 2-3 times a month
 Once a month Rarely Never

c. What kind of blog do you have?

Personal Journal / Diary Style Academic/Research
 Political / News Information Technology Fashion
 Other (Please specify):-----

d. Would you say that there are many people who read your blog? Yes No

Can you give an approximate number? -----

e. Do you get many comments on your blog? Yes No

f. What are the main reasons why you keep a blog?

9. Do you have a twitter account? Yes No

If yes, please answer the following, if no, you can go to question 10

a. Since when do you have a twitter account? 20--

b. How often do you make posts?

- Many times a day Once a day 2-3 times a week
 Once a week 2-3 times a month Once a month
 Rarely Never

c. How many followers do you have? ----

d. How many people are you following? -----

e. What are the main reasons why you have a twitter account?

10. Do you have a youtube account? Yes No

If yes, please answer the following, if no, you can go to question 11

a. Since when do you have a youtube account? 20--

b. Do you upload videos?

- Several times a week Several times a month
 Rarely Never

c. How many videos have you already uploaded?-----

d. How many subscribers to your youtube profile do you have?-----

e. Do you get many comments on your videos? Yes No

f. What are the main reasons why you have a Youtube account?

11. Do you have a Facebook account? Yes No

If yes, please answer the following, if no, you can go to question 12

a. Since when do you have a Facebook account? 20--

a. How often do you update your status?

- Many times a day Once a day 2-3 times a week
 Once a week 2-3 times a month Once a month
 Rarely Never

b. How often do you post links to articles and/or external websites?

- Many times a day Once a day 2-3 times a week Once a week
 2-3 times a month Once a month
 Rarely Never

c. How often do you post videos?

- Many times a day Once a day 2-3 times a week Once a week
 2-3 times a month Once a month
 Rarely Never

d. How often do you post pictures?

- Many times a day Once a day 2-3 times a week Once a week
 2-3 times a month Once a month
 Rarely Never

e. What are the main reasons why you have a Facebook account?**SECTION IV:****12. In general, what would you say is your primary source of Information about what is going on in your country?**

- Traditional Media (television, radio, newspapers, etc.)
 The Internet (online radio, online newspapers, online videos, etc.)

13. In general, what would you say is your primary source of Information about what is going on in the world?

- Traditional Media (television, radio, newspapers, etc.)
 The Internet (online radio, online newspapers, online videos, etc.)

14. In general, what would you say is your primary source of entertainment?

- Traditional Media (television, radio, books, etc.)
 The Internet (online radio, online videos, downloads, etc.)

15. Do you sometimes watch videos because one of your friends uploaded them on their personal pages?

- Yes No

a. If yes, how many times did you actually think those videos were worth watching?

- Always Most of the time
 Sometimes Never

b. Do you make comments on those videos?

- Always Most of the time
 Sometimes Never

16. Do you sometimes read some articles because one of your friends uploaded them on their personal pages?

- Yes No

a. If yes, how many times did you actually think those articles were worth reading?

Always Most of the time

Sometimes Never

b. Do you make comments on those articles?

Always Most of the time

Sometimes Never

17. In general, would you say that you watch or browse videos/articles you are not really interested in just because they are easily clickable?

Always Most of the time

Sometimes Never

SECTION V:

18. Do you have a....? (Please check all that applies)

Desktop Laptop Mobile phone

Blackberry/iPhone iPod iPad

Other (Please specify):-----

19. Which device do you primarily use to connect to the Internet every day?

Desktop Laptop Mobile phone

Blackberry/iPhone iPod iPad

Other (Please specify): -----

20. Which device do you primarily use to access your blog? (please disregard if you don't have any blog)

Desktop Laptop Mobile phone

Blackberry/iPhone iPod iPad

Other (Please specify): -----

21. Which device do you primarily use to access your twitter account? (please disregard if you don't have any twitter account)

Desktop Laptop Mobile phone

Blackberry/iPhone iPod iPad

Other (Please specify): -----

22. Which device do you primarily use to access your Facebook page? (please disregard if you don't have any FB page)

Desktop Laptop Mobile phone

Blackberry/iPhone iPod iPad

Other (Please specify): -----

23. Which device do you primarily use to access your Youtube account? (please disregard if you don't have any Youtube account)

Desktop Laptop Mobile phone

Blackberry/iPhone iPod iPad

Other (Please specify): -----

Thank you for your time ☺

Appendix B

Stories About Account Creation

About Facebook

I actually created my account on Facebook quite early, 2007-2008, it was not a long time after it was opened in France, I used it because I was going on Erasmus at that time to keep in touch with my friends from home, and it's not the same thing as by email...of course you can keep in touch with someone by email but you can't see video, you can't interact as broadly as with Facebook.

Jacques, 22 years old.

Yeah, I remember why I opened this Facebook account, it was in my last year of university...I realized that I won't be able to keep in touch with my classmates and friends, and at that time, I opened the Facebook account, and I'm glad, at least I know that I can find anyone...mostly, almost all of them have a Facebook account...but still for close friends or family, I don't need to use Facebook.

Bernard, 25 years old.

How it happened to me, first, I had the Russian Facebook, called "Contactia" in contact, and because I have only friends in my country, and then one of my friends went to work abroad and she said "oh we can keep in touch, but everyone abroad uses this kind of social network Facebook and she said let's make you a Facebook account and I said but I will not have so many friends, maybe you and that's it, she said, no come on, just make it, so I created a profile, and I had one friend, maybe one more, it began to grow actually...and then when I moved here, I had it already but what happened now, like a lot of my Russian friends, they began to open Facebook account...even if they stay there, for them it's a new media, because it was...ok, global network, but for Ukraine, use it for contact...but now they all began to have this Facebook, and I see, they just began with it, because they have 5 friends, maybe 4 friend, then more and more...

Iris, 30 years old.

YouTube

I wanted to comment on some videos, but realized that I can't comment so I needed to create an account for that...

Martha, 30 years old.

About Weibo, the Chinese micro-blogging site:

I think I created that for fun, because there are quite many celebrities who have that account, so, and..yeah, for fun, to see what my friends are doing now, and also to follow some celebrities and see their daily life...I did find a lot of interesting things, for example some celebrities, film stars there, they are so...they look really, they are fabulous, they are very gentle, they are soft, but actually in daily life, they might use some very bad words or cursing or something...it's easy to get to know their daily life

Julia, 23 years old.

Appendix C

Social Media and Participation: A new generation of Gatekeepers?

Lamia Tagrit, Karlstad University, Sweden

In the classical media scheme of mass communications, the agenda-setting theory explains that the media are providing audiences with what to think about. However, new media have challenged this relation. Not only people have a larger choice of exposure, but they can also choose what kind of media they want to expose themselves to. Furthermore, social media in particular have created new forms of interactions between their “users”. This article is an attempt towards understanding how the agenda setting works in the social media environment and how the new audience of users are providing their peers/friends with what to think about through their accounts and personal pages. It is also discussing the dynamics of readership and action of making comments involved in this process and will try to shed some light on this new generation of gatekeepers. The empirical part of this article is extracted from a larger study about social media audiences that involved the conduction of semi-structured interviews with a culturally heterogeneous sample of college students (n=11).

Keywords: Social media; new media; new audience; participation; gatekeeping.

Introduction

During the last few years, social media platforms became important key players in the new media landscape. Furthermore, the number of users has been growing exponentially as more and more people have been joining the online sphere through the creation of social media accounts. More than being simple Internet features, the emergence of social media has unveiled new extensions of social interactions. It has also revealed some other dimensions of how information and entertainment can be sought and went through.

Whenever a new media emerges, questions are raised about its predecessors. What would be the implication of the new for the old? Will people stop using older forms of media after adopting the newer ones or will they incorporate both old and new in their daily consumption habits? For a long time, traditional media were the main sources

of information and entertainment, but with the appearance of the Internet, more choices were made available.

While conducting studies on the web, one can notice that several online behaviors are not completely new and that they borrow from anterior traditions. It is also important to acknowledge how the features of new media are different from older ones. For example, it is not the interactivity itself that is the exclusive characteristic of new media, but the wide reach that the Internet allows to have. For this article, the interest is in having a closer look at how old concepts are being reconfigured in new contexts. In the classical media scheme of mass communications, the agenda-setting theory is used to explain that the media are providing audiences with what to think about. However, new media have challenged this relation. Not only people have a larger choice of exposure but they also can choose what kind of media they want to expose themselves to. There is also now a new generation of gatekeepers and opinion leaders. Long before the Internet, there were other means to go around the agenda setting process. The gatekeeping process was not always only restricted to the people who own the media, but several opinion leaders would emerge in small or larger social spheres (two-step flow of communication). In the online sphere, one can observe that information is spreading via models that resemble the traditional ones, such as word to mouth. Nowadays, it is more common to hear the expression "I saw it on Facebook" instead of "I heard it through the grapevine".

Before discussing social media, some thoughts about the new audience research agenda will be exposed. This article is not using gatekeeping and the agenda setting as theoretical bases, but is mostly borrowing the broad concept to discuss the dynamics of participation that occur in the online sphere. However, these two media and communication concepts will be briefly outlined.

New Audiences

There is now a new agenda for audience research. For Livingstone (2003), the importance of audiences in new media research lies in three instances: (1) 'the implied audience': either audiences are considered as participants or victims, it affects the way research is going to be held. This discourse is not concerned with media theory as much as it is concerned with how the audience is being imagined. (2) Acknowledging the importance of empirical research on audiences. There is a growing need in knowing the audience and the role they play in social and technological changes. Indeed, audiences are becoming more stratified with different

new habits. (2) There is still a debate about new media and whether it is a new challenge for old theories that can be adapted or if there is the need for new conceptual and theoretical frameworks. One can notice that most of the theory is linked to television studies. (3) “Transformation of the audience itself”: as most studies during the last four decades have been done about the television audience, there are now challenges brought by the new media shift. There is a need to understand audiences as ‘plural’, as ‘active’ and as “embedded and distanced” from particular usage situations. Livingstone (2003) raises a shift from the question “what’s happening?” to “where am I?” She raises also attention to the fact that what is new about the Internet is actually old in traditional communication theory as interactivity is one of the main features of the traditional face-to-face communication. In this case, the newness of the Internet and challenges to audience research lies in its massive features (wide reach, large contents, and global characteristics).

New media brought several changes to audiences:

1/ “Multiplication of personally owned media”: old media are becoming cheaper and more accessible; they are also becoming more numerous within the household and thus used in different settings. Livingstone (2003) explains that the newness of the media is linked to the social environment in which it is used rather than on the technological innovations.

2/ “Diversifying in form and contents”: there is a larger choice of local and global content as well as a more diverse one of forms (television, computers, video games, etc.).

3/ “Convergent forms of information services”: there is an interconnection between the media that blurs the several structural boundaries. “Convergence can be construed as part of a general trend towards democratization – at least in terms of making visible forms of knowledge and opinion whose domain has been traditionally restricted to higher status groups” (Livingstone, 2003, pp. 62-63).

4/ “Shift to interactive communication”: is the last and most important change. In fact, there is a change from the traditional one-way communication to a model that is more interactive. Internet makes it possible to challenge the classical hierarchies, the relation between the public and the private, and to create and express individualized preferences through its democratizing feature (Livingstone, 2003).

Social Media

Since a few years ago, social media have been established as the most common new media trend. It is not sure yet for all interested parties what social media exactly stand for. In fact, while reviewing the literature and making research to define the term, one could find that there is no generally agreed upon definition of social media. Furthermore, there is a tendency to use this term along with Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC) from which they differ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Some scholars use social media the same way they use Web 2.0, which is a more technological definition, while others focus on the social aspect and consider social media and social networking as two similar concepts (Bruns, 2009). Thus, before defining social media, I found it necessary to first give a definition of the terms with which the former term has been used interchangeably; in other words, I will briefly outline what Web 2.0, UGC, and social networking usually stand for:

Web 2.0: It is a term that was first coined in 2004, in order to refer to how users and software developers started using the Web. The term Web 2.0 was first introduced by Tim O'Reilly in 2004. He identified it as "harnessing collective intelligence" (Creeber and Martin, 2009, p.39). In this platform, users can continuously participate in the modification of contents. Web 2.0 creates collaboration and participation. For example, a personal website is part of Web 1.0 while a blog belongs to Web 2.0. Adobe Flash, RSS and AJAX are needed for the running of Web 2.0. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) regard Web 2.0 as the platform where social media evolve.

Generated Content (UGC): It is defined as the ways in which social media is used and was cited by Dawson (2007) in the "Future of Media Report" as one of the eight developments in media. It usually refers to the contents generated and published by users, and this in the context of Web 2.0. UGC existed in the early 1980s, long before Web 2.0, however, the coming together of technological, economic, and social factors make the contemporary UGC very different from the one existing before (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

- Technological factors: affordability of technological tools and high broadband, and availability of user-friendly production devices.
- Social factors: need for interactivity and expression of creativity as well as shift to a generation of digital natives that is skilled.
- Economic factors: cheaper broadband Internet and tools, financing opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007).

Social Networking Sites (SNS): They are applications that allow users to create personal pages and connect with other people (friends, colleagues, etc.). SNS usually give the possibility to send emails and to chat with other users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The largest SNS is Facebook with more than 800 million users (according to the official Facebook page).

Social Media: They can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Nevertheless, there are different sorts of social media and there is still no methodical categorization of those different types. Furthermore, new applications appear on a timely manner. Another definition was given by Bruns (2009). For him, social media are “websites which build on Web 2.0 technologies to provide space for in-depth social interaction, community formation, and the tackling of collaborative projects” (p.5). Both definitions highlight the Web 2.0 foundation of social media.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) decided to use media research theories and social processes in order to be able to come up with a way to classify social media applications. In the field of media research, they relied on ‘social presence’ and ‘media richness’. Social presence theory explains that the ‘social presence’ is different from one medium to another. ‘Social presence’ in this instance stands for “the acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be achieved” (p. 61). It is affected by whether the communication is interpersonal or mediated (intimacy of the medium) and also whether it is synchronous or asynchronous (immediacy of the medium). Media richness theory assumes that communication is aiming at uncertainty reduction and ambiguity resolution. Media are different in their richness and are consequently different in their effectiveness for avoiding uncertainty and ambiguity. For Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the first way to classify social media is based on their richness as well as the social presence they enable to have. In the umbrella of social processes, they relied on ‘self-presentation’ and ‘self-disclosure’. Self-representation states that, while interacting with others, people want to be in command of the impression they give about themselves. Self-disclosure happens when people provide with information about themselves. The second classification relies on the kind of self-presentation that it enables people to give and the level of self-disclosure it calls for. For Bruns (2009), ‘community’ and ‘collaboration’ are two important characteristics of social media. He identified some key aspects that make

social media websites work: *low threshold to participation* (there are no obstacles for potential users to join and participate in the social media sites), *highly granular participation tasks* (users can participate and contribute step by step while evolving in the social media site), *assumption of user equipotentiality* (all users have *equal potential*, however they are not equal in the sense that some will choose to be more active contributors than others), *shared content ownership* (users feel that are in charge of the content they create or participate in creating) (Bruns, 2009).

Participatory Culture

Media tools are converging and social media can be accessed at any time through mobile technologies. One can witness a convergence of media technologies and also a convergence of media contents. Social media sites have changed the way individuals use the Internet. User generated content is not only available through open source software and entries in collaborative encyclopedias like Wikipedia, but video sharing sites like Youtube allowed the upload of millions of videos that range from home made clips to parodies or snapshots from television shows, news and documentaries. Nowadays, the broadcast happen also the other way as clips that initially were broadcasted on Youtube are starting to be shown on television (Bell, 2009). Convergence is affecting the way media spaces are being lived and experienced. As tools that connect to the Internet are becoming more mobile, it is now possible to connect via the cyberspace from anywhere. Not only can people be connected to the Internet but they also can get connected to each other. Bell (2009) describes the new media as a “me media”. There is a recreation of spaces that requires some different conceptualizations. The combination of viewer and user has led to ‘viewer’, while producer and consumer led to the term ‘produser’.

There is a distinction between the digital revolution paradigm and the convergence paradigm. The former deals with assumptions that everything was going to be changed by the introduction of new media and that old media will become obsolete while the second states that there will be a complex relationship between old and new media. For Jenkins (2006), “convergence is...and old concept taking on new meanings” (p.6). According to him, convergence is not only about the developments in technology that enabled some devices to fulfill different functions, but it is about a ‘cultural shift’. In fact, one can talk about a participatory culture where ‘consumers’ are enabled to be more active and trace their paths within the media and its contents rather than being passive spectators. According to Jenkins (2006), participatory

culture is a culture “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (p.290). The distinction between media consumers and producers is being blurred and there is a new form of participation that still requires to be understood (Jenkins, 2006). However, not all individuals can participate equally as some are more powerful and have more access than others. According to Jenkins (2006), convergence is not only linked to new media technologies, in fact it is not enough to have a media tool and to be able to connect to the Web to be part of the process. However, convergence happens within the individuals’ mindsets and also when they connect to other people. Jenkins sees collective intelligence as a power. For him, the ‘collective power’ is used currently in light ways, mostly for entertainment and leisure but he sees the potential of using this power in more important aspects of life.

In the 1990s, rhetoric about a coming digital revolution contained an implicit and often explicit assumption that new media was going to push aside old media, that the Internet was going to displace broadcasting, and that all of this would enable consumers to more easily access media content that was personally meaningful to them (Jenkins, 2006, p.5). Jenkins has studied how the convergence culture has influenced the “relationship between media audiences, producers, and content” (p.12). His challenge was that the focus of study is under continuous change. Convergence is “a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process” (Jenkins, 2006, p.18). Media convergence is requiring changes in different industries as new media consumers are considered to be more empowered. Many companies are now adapting to the new social media trends and assuring their existence by making sure to be there. Scholars like Benkler see the networked information economy as a huge opportunity for citizens to make their voices heard and get to listen to other different opinions from all corners of the world. Technology is not seen as an alienation of democracy but as an emancipation of it. Indeed, it is harder for authoritarian governments to control their peoples in the interactive era (Benkler, 2006). Participatory culture is broadening its verges and this is an essence of democracy.

Gatekeeping

The process of gatekeeping has been used to refer to the process in which newspapers decide what people should know. The research started with David

Manning White in 1949. White agreed with an editor that they would keep newspaper copies during one week and that the editor will later on explain why some stories were accepted while others were not. Below are the main reasons identified by the researchers (Harper, 2002):

- “Intensity of threshold value”: the more important and larger the events are, the great chances they will be published.
- “Unexpectedness”: Unexpected news are considered as worthy of publication.
- “Sociocultural values”: the decision is influenced by the values of the gatekeepers and as well as the values of the perceived audience.
- “Continuity”: Stories that were already published once will be published again.
- “Cultural Proximity or relevance”: The news that are accepted are the ones that are relevant to audience.
- “Time span”: Happenings that take place during the publication period will most probably get accepted.
- “Clarity or lack of ambiguity”: ambiguous news stories have less chance of being accepted.
- “Consonance”: Events that are expected usually get through the gatekeeping process.
- “Composition”: news stories are selected accordingly to other ones, and they might be selected because of that.

Agenda Setting

Since the 1970s, the agenda-setting hypothesis has been one of the main communication theory concepts. The main assumption is that the media try to prioritize which topics are more important than others. Then, it is up to the audience to respond to this agenda following their own choices. The media can be considered as manipulative to some extent as they put forwards some stories to the expense of others. However, audiences still have the liberty to follow the agenda or not (Chandra, 2004).

Method

Eleven international college students from Karlstad University were interviewed and questioned about their use of the Internet in general and social media platforms more particularly. Informants were from different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. They all lived in Karlstad during the time period when the interviews were conducted and had daily access to the Internet. The eleven

interviewees ranged from 23 to 37 years (mean age = 27). Four interviewees were recruited via email requests and seven were asked face to face. The research sample was selected for convenience reasons. I interviewed students who were available during the interviewing period. Some of the interviewees are part of the same program or former classmates, and acquaintances of classmates. The interviewees' names will be kept confidential throughout the study and will be referred to by using fictive names. The names assigned do not have a direct link with the ethnicity or country of origin of the interviewee. While interviewing the students, I decided to principally focus on four social media platforms: blogs, Twitter, Youtube and Facebook. Facebook was chosen to represent social network sites, Youtube as a video sharing tool and Twitter for micro-blogging. Those three platforms were selected for this study because of their global popularity and prominence. In fact, Facebook and YouTube have been labelled by Bruns (2009) as world leaders. Youtube is the leading social media platform in the videosharing field (Bruns, 2009). Facebook is the second top site according to Alexa Traffic Rank and Youtube is the third most visited website, Twitter is the eleventh but first micro-blogging platform in the list.

Blogs: They are the social media version of personal websites. Most often led by one person, blogs allow interaction with other people via the possibility of adding comments. Blogs can take different formats and can be used for diverse purposes. I chose to include them in the pre-interview survey as well and in the study in general because they give their users a large room for expression and authorship and they are also the early form of social media.

Facebook: Founded in 2004, Facebook started initially as a college social network as it was first possible only for people who were enrolled in American Universities to create an account. Later on, it was open to users from all around the worlds. In Facebook's own page it is defined as "[g]iving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected". Facebook counts "more than 750 million active users" according to Facebook. 700 billions minutes are spent each month on Facebook. Around 70% of the users live outside the U.S. Furthermore, around 90 bits of content are created by an average user each month.

Slogan: "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life".

Twitter: “Twitter is a real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting” (Twitter.com/about). Firstly designed for mobile phones, Twitter is a micro-blogging site. It started in 2006. It broke into the mainstream in 2008-09 (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). Twitter users can ‘follow’ other people and can have ‘followers’. Users can post “tweets” that do not exceed 140 characters in their length.

Slogan: “Twitter is the best way to discover what’s new in your life”.

Youtube: First launched in June 2005, Youtube was created by three previous employees of PayPal, Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim. The main aim of YouTube was to make it easy to share videos. “The website provided a very simple, integrated interface within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge, and within the technological constraints of standard browser software and relatively modest bandwidth” (Burgess and Green, 2009, p.1). There was no limit for the number of videos that could be uploaded and users could also connect with each other as friends and videos could be used in websites via URLs. In 2006, the success of Youtube was confirmed when Google took it over for 1.65 billion dollars. Youtube is the third most visited websites in the world (Alexa Traffic) and 24 hours of content are uploaded each minute (http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics).

Slogan: “YouTube, broadcast yourself”.

Gatekeeping 2.0

Recently, and with the wide spread of Web 2.0, there has been a tendency to explain the new patterns of old phenomena happening in this emerging platform by recycling them into 2.0. According to David Gauntlett, the current media landscape necessitates Media Studies 2.0. For him, Media Studies 2.0 is an acknowledgement of the witnessed changes in the media landscape during the past years as the importance of the Internet has been growing and has been also affecting other media. It is also an acceptance of the fact that boundaries between producers and audiences are becoming more and more blurred. Moreover, Gauntlett (2009) explains that given the potential of Web 2.0 in encouraging participation and creativity, Media Studies 2.0 are “interested in the everyday participatory and creative

possibilities of media, as compared to the focus of traditional media studies on professional media consumed by audiences who had to take what they were given” (p. 149).

This section is labeled as “Gatekeeping 2.0” however I would like to point to the fact that, in the discussion and analysis, technology is not considered to be the main factor of change.

The Internet brought several premises about participation and emancipation of its users. However, there are always several factors that contribute to the materialization of eventual potentials. In other words, a space that seems to be more democratic in theory will involve the interplay of several complex factors before achieving real democracy. It is not necessarily the interactive feature of the social media platforms that makes users feel that they have more room for participation but mostly the awareness about the wide reach:

I think in terms of expressing myself, I wouldn't say that's easier, I would say that's wider...(...) it's very wide...for example like Twitter, micro-blogging, sometimes I just post something, for example when I see a lost kid, a missing child in the street, maybe I'll just take a photo of that kid and post it on my account and I have no idea who will see that, of course my friend...what if my friend retweeted, and the friend of my friend retweeted, there is probably a chance for the lost kid parents to see...so I can't control that...I don't think it's very easy for me somehow, but very widely...
Julia, 23 years old.

I wouldn't say you feel more empowered, I would say you feel that you can reach more people...of course you can reach more people, but sometimes, you can go into the idea that you need to be careful about the sources, it's not because it's in the Internet that you think it's true, even though some people think it is...I would say it's just changing now...before, you used to meet your friend in highschool at the café and whatever and discuss with them things...now, people are more isolated, even though you are still in contact with people, you go through the computer...with the computer and the social media, you are empowered...sharing, it's a facilitator I would say, a facilitator of sharing ideas...the main ideas were already there before, you just reach a broader audience and you can share much more...
Jacques, 22 years old.

Participation is happening in different ways. There are the users who post external links to videos and articles, while there are others who post their own texts such as entries in blogs or videos made by themselves.

[...] sometimes I post a video or share a video which is in my interest and I want to make my friends aware of this, to build the awareness you can say [...]everything people should know...you can share it with 200 people, 300 people...easily you can share it with everyone”
Bernard, 25 years old.

Yeah sometimes, it depends on the topics...of course, if I'm very related to the topic or if I have more knowledge or more information about the topic, then I'm trying to

give everything I know about the topic, so the other person, they know what's going on, it's not just like talking without knowing about this topic...

Paul, 37 years old.

Yeah, you can participate and influence the media more the way you want to, and there are many different parties...you can even check your opinion with different kind of people, which you can't do when you watch television...it's just one sided view you get...it's more like a dialogue not monologue

Bernard, 25 years old.

The new audience of social media users plays the role of gatekeepers for their peers, as they make deliberate choices about what to post and what content they think is interesting for being shared with their friends. Also, the willingness of sharing implies the perception that there is an audience willing to have a look at the shared products. Online participation does not turn out to be 100% democratic as some users are very careful about what they post and engage in self-censorship as well as protection of their privacies. Reticence towards publishing a person's own thought and videos does not only come from a will to protect privacy but also to protect one's intellectual property. Online participation is not necessarily aiming at making one's voice be heard. Tatiana has a public blog however she explained that she had it mainly for herself, to see how her thinking might be changing throughout the years:

Just for me, to see how my thinking may be changing...in 10 years, when I will read it and say, oh it was so childish

Tatiana, 25 years old.

She makes in average two to three tweets a week; when asked about the content of these tweets:

It can be a link for my blog...an entry that I recently made...or some just current thoughts, maybe some comments on the news that I read...just also from the twitter...or I can also talk to other people and this kind...

Tatiana, 25 years old.

She is careful about what she tweets, and avoids to make posts about simple tasks of the daily routine. She also explained that in Facebook, her posts are less thoughtful than the ones in Twitter. However sometimes she posts the same links in the two platforms. When asked if the social media made it easier for her to express her opinion, Tatiana was aware that she could express herself but that does not mean that she will be heard and listened to. Considering the nature of the social media platforms and the possibility of having friends, followers or subscribers, it was interesting to know if within the social media audience, the users take into consideration their own 'sub-audiences' before publishing any material.

If one follows the evolution of the interfaces of web platforms, one can notice that they are becoming more and more user-friendly, thus making it easier for potential participants to be more active on the social media sphere. The data collected showed that the user-friendliness is a factor that may encourage participation however it is not the exclusive one as the decision comes mostly from the readiness of the person to participate or not.

Through their activity, users make choices as to what to read and watch on the Net and also as to when and how to make comments. The following section will unveil patterns of 'readership' and the motivations behind that.

Readership

In their use of social media platforms, the students engage in the consumption of media texts posted by their friends. Either it was links to videos or articles; the study revealed that there are three main factors that enter into play in the decision process: (1) the social relation to the person, (2) the content of the link, and (3) the reputation of the person.

1/ Social relation to the person: interviewees pointed out to the fact that not all their Facebook friends were their real friends. Furthermore, the closest the person is to the user, the more likely it is that they will check the content posted. However, the social relation only affects the decision of checking the media text or not; it does not mean that the content will be automatically enjoyed per se.

To some extent, there is a relation, I think it's maybe they found something good and I will be interested to see what is there, well but I still make my own judgment.

Martha, 30 years old.

2/ Content of the link: In this case, the users first check the headlines and titles before making the decision of reading/watching the article/video posted by their friends. Here, the readership decision is based on *the appeal* of the content.

I'm usually very specific...to look for content, I mean specific content...if someone has posted perhaps a news item that is interesting like this viral about this guy who was found in some streets in the U.S...he was a drug addict and he was discovered to have a very nice voice...it was interesting to see how he was discovered...so if someone posts it then I will click it, I usually follow content first...

Peter, 29 years old.

It's based mainly on the title, it's not because my friend posted it that I will click it and watch it, it's based on the title...if the title is interesting.

Kim, 25 years old.

3/ Reputation of the person: the history of posts by friends builds a reputation that can be either related to *frequency*, *quality*, or *the thematic* of the posts. In this case, the users make the choice of watching and reading or not via the evaluation of the person's built *level of activity*, *credibility*, or *area of expertise*.

Someone who posts a lot...I don't like to read their stuff.

Martha, 30 years old.

Yeah, exactly, I know some friends they are just linking nonsense, useless links...I know some friends they are just linking funny things...some friends are linking more serious things, political things or article, so I read those as well, but I know some people they are just posting useless stuff...

Paul, 37 years old.

Yes, I'm selective...I usually like things that will build my spirit...so I like people that post edifying messages, but what can I say...there are some people who post things that are not really beneficial...so I won't look at that for instance

Martha, 30 years old.

If to say on the friends, yes, there is...for example friends who I know will always, all the time post crap...laughs, and I will not pay attention...but I know that like one, two friends, what they post might...I should maybe pay attention, but not everything of course

Tatiana, 25 years old.

There is actually a few friends like this, but as the Facebook has this..what do you call, this option that you kind of customize the people you see...like the people you don't communicate so much they kind of get lost from your newsfeed...so there is not so many friends I actually see, so there is few friends whom I know that it's worth to read or watch something...

Emilie, 27 years old.

In some instances, the decision can also be done based on a combination of some of the factors mentioned above:

There is a process actually, I think about the person as well, something I think euh, this person always posts this, but it's there...most of the time, I think about the person and I have some of the friends of the forum, I have on Facebook now...first, I didn't like that because now they have real names, they have real lives and they are not just the user name, but I started to like it, I don't have all my forum friends on Facebook but anyway, that means that these people usually have those things in there articles, there is one person there that always put up things about vaccinations, she does not like the normal ordinary medicine, so she posts on that...of course, the person is always important because, yeah...

Josephine, 28 years old.

Yeah, It depends, for Facebook...Facebook friends are not always your friends, it has different meaning, so...it depends on who is posting and also on the title, if there is any status or comment on the link...if I find it interesting, then I go for it, most of the time, I skip the videos because I don't like what everyone is sharing or it's not in my interest, because not everything is in my interest.

Bernard, 25 years old.

Conclusion

When the Internet emerged, it became an alternative and complement to traditional media as users started using it as a source for both information and entertainment. Recently, the advent of Web 2.0 and the exponential growth of social media usage have created new patterns of media consumption. The boundaries between authors and audiences became blurred. Furthermore, the architecture of the social media platforms has created a sort of sub-audience as users became each other's audiences. Active social media users and frequent 'posters' became part of a new generation of gatekeepers as they select what bits of information and news they want to share with their friends or not. Moreover, one could also identify specific patterns of readership. In fact, the social media 'authors' usually go through a decision making process to decide on what to post or not and what could be interesting for their peers or not; the social media 'audiences' also engage in a process of evaluation before consumption. The three main factors that enter into play in the decision process being: the social relation to the person, the content of the link, and the reputation of the person.

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Youtube page: www.youtube.com

Facebook page: www.facebook.com