

Newspaper Editors vs the Crowd: On the Appropriateness of Front Page News Selection

Arkaitz Zubiaga
Computer Science Department
Queens College and Graduate Center
City University of New York, New York, NY, USA
arkaitz@zubiaga.org

ABSTRACT

The front page is the showcase that might condition whether one buys a newspaper, and so editors carefully select the news of the day that they believe will attract as many readers as possible. Little is known about the extent to which editors' criteria for front page news selection are appropriate so as to matching the actual interests of the crowd. In this paper, we compare the news stories in The New York Times over the period of a year to their popularity on Twitter and Facebook. Our study questions the current news selection criteria, revealing that while editors focus on picking hard news such as politics for the front page, social media users are rather into soft news such as science and fashion.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.1.2 [User/Machine Systems]: Human factors

Keywords

front page, news, social media, twitter, facebook

1. INTRODUCTION

The front page is the most important page of a newspaper. It is what passers-by will have chance to look at, and so it represents the showcase that might determine whether or not they will end up buying the newspaper. Thus, the stories of the front page are carefully selected to catch the attention of a large number of potential readers. Everyday, newspaper editors meet and discuss to choose what they believe are the newsworthiest stories of the day to constitute the next day's front page [2].

There has been some research on the factors that editors rely on when determining the newsworthiness of stories, such as timeliness, prominence, or proximity [3, 1]. Others have analyzed the editorial conferences through which story selection is discussed [2]. However, little is known about the effectiveness of current methods and criteria for story selection. It is unclear if journalists and editors tend to choose certain kinds of news for the front page by tradition, oblivious to readers' interests, or they really represent the interests of the crowd. While this has been unaffordable to measure from newspaper readers, social media enables access to a large community of users to infer what news they are most interested in. In this paper, we study one year of front page

stories in The New York Times, and compare to the stories of the newspaper with highest social popularity on Twitter and Facebook. We compare the categories of news that editors select for the front page to categories of news most shared on social media. Our study suggests that front page stories selected by editors are far from those catching the interest of the community. While users would like to see softer news on the front page, newspaper editors rather select hard news such as political and societal news that users are not so interested in.

2. DATA COLLECTION

We conducted the study with news stories from The New York Times, the newspaper account with most followers on Twitter, and the third newspaper in the United States by circulation¹. The New York Times archives online all the stories that constitute each day's newspaper, with headlines and URL pointers to all the stories both in the front page and inside². We gathered all the URLs for newspapers from January 1 to December 31, 2012, as well as whether the stories were part of the front page or not. This included 56,836 news stories, of which 2,150 (3.8%, 5.87 per day) were part of one of the 366 front pages. We extracted the category for each story, which is part of the URL in the form of *nytimes.com/date/category/headline*.

Having collected all the news stories contained in the newspapers, we also gathered the number of times each of those links were shared sitewide on Twitter and Facebook. For Twitter, we used the Topsy API³ to collect the number of times each URL had been tweeted. On the other hand, we used Facebook API's *links.getStats* method to retrieve the number of times each URL was posted on the site. Both Twitter and Facebook share counts include the number of different messages containing a certain URL, and do not consider retweets, likes, etc. Thus, these counts represent the number of people who considered a news interesting, and posted it themselves, instead of resharing what others posted. We treat Twitter and Facebook counts separately for the purposes of this study.

3. ANALYSIS

Having the post counts for each news in the newspaper (both front page and inside), we create two rankings (one for

¹<http://accessabc.wordpress.com/2012/10/30/the-top-u-s-newspapers-for-september-2012/>

²<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todaypaper/>

³<http://code.google.com/p/otterapi/>

Facebook and one for Twitter) of the top social stories each day. From these rankings, we choose from the top as many stories as the front page had that day. We then compare, for each day, the top stories according to users and the stories in the front page –namely the top stories according to editors. Table 1 shows the average results of editors’ accuracy when choosing front page stories as compared to popular stories on social media. The overlap between editors’ and users’ popular stories for both social media sites is very low in both cases, even lower for Facebook. Less than a third of news selected by editors would have actually made it to the front page according to Twitter, and less than a quarter according to Facebook. In fact, the most popular story of the day on Twitter only appeared on the front page on 147 of 366 occasions (40.2%), and the most popular on Facebook only featured on the front page on 73 of 366 occasions (19.9%).

	MAP@5	P	R	F1
Twitter	0.356	0.315	0.311	0.313
Facebook	0.227	0.231	0.227	0.229

Table 1: Average MAP@5, precision, recall and F1 scores measuring accuracy of stories selected by editors, compared to socially popular stories.

Next, we look into more detail at categories of front page stories by editors, and front page stories by users. Figure 1 shows the ratio of editor to user stories for the top 20 categories of the newspaper, where right bars represent more editor than user selected stories, and left bars represent more user than editor selected stories. Both Twitter and Facebook coincide in most disagreement cases with respect to editors, with a few exceptions. Although only Twitter users would like to see more news on *Technology* and *Media*, users from both social media sites express high interest in news related to *Fashion*, and *Science*, and to a lesser extent *Music*. On the other hand, editors select for the front page more *US politics*, *Economy* and *Society* (e.g., *World*, with subcategories *Middle East*, *Africa*, *Asia*) news than users would like to see. This suggests that editors choose more news than users on topics that can be categorized as hard news. However, users are expressing that they are rather into softer news topics including science, music, fashion, or technology.

4. DISCUSSION

A comparison of front page stories selected by The New York Times editors over the period of a year, and the social media popularity of stories contained both in the front pages and inside the newspapers shows that today’s front pages are far from representing the main interests of the crowd. Despite careful selection of news through editorial conferences to catch the attention of a large number of potential readers, an analysis of daily popularity of news on social media questions the effectiveness of such selection. While the daily circulation of newspapers continues to decline [4], the voice of social media users cries out for modernizing the selection of front page stories to attract a greater number of passers-by that will potentially become readers. Our study suggests that such modernization should consider fewer hard news such as political, economic, and societal news, to make way for softer news such as fashion, science, and music.

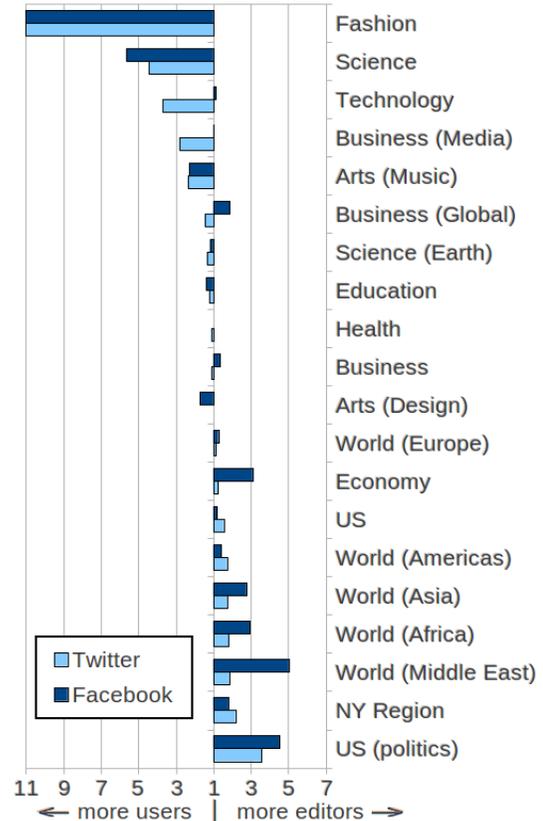


Figure 1: Ratio of editor to user stories selected for the front page by category.

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