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TEXT 1

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New Media & Society

The right-time web: Theorizing the kairologic of algorithmic media

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Abstract: Facebook’s goal for their “News Feed is to show everyone the right content at the right time so they don’t miss the stories that are important to them.” In a mediated environment obsessed with real-time – of near instantaneous content production and delivery – the question of what constitutes right-time has curiously been overlooked. In this article, I argue that the notion of right-time presented in the above mission statement is reflective not just of Facebook’s algorithmic workings but also of a new temporal regime produced by an increasingly algorithmic media landscape. The article draws on social theory, media studies, and rhetoric, as well as a variety of empirical materials such as patent documents, media industry documents and public discourse to argue for the existence of an “Eigenzeit” of algorithmic media that hinges on the classic Greek notion of “kairos,” understood as an opportune time, timeliness, or indeed, “right-time.”

Keywords: Algorithm, Facebook, kairos, media, real-time, right-time, time

Introduction

It used to be that most social media feeds were organized in a reverse-chronological order and that the web was generally thought of as a real-time medium. Today, however, most social media platforms are more concerned with delivering

information at the righttime, not necessarily as soon as something has been posted. Just consider Facebook’s goal for their News Feed, which is “to show everyone the right content at the right time so they don’t miss the stories that are important to them” (Kacholia and Ji, 2013). Or, Twitter, the once instantaneous feed, which now features a “While you were away” section at the beginning of the timeline, an algorithmically generated “recap of some of the top Tweets you might have missed from accounts you follow” (Twitter blog, 2015). Like many other social media platforms that try to make particularly important content more visible amid the stream of ever-changing updates, Twitter also has a feature called “Moments,” curated stories showcasing the most popular and relevant topics. How can we understand this apparent shift in emphasis, from the real-time web discourse that used to dominate how the temporality of the Internet was largely framed, to a greater technical and rhetorical emphasis to what I am going to call the “right-time web”?

In this article, I argue that the notion of right-time presented in the abovementioned Facebook mission statement and Twitter’s different temporal features is reflective of a new temporal regime produced by an increasingly

algorithmic media landscape. More specifically, this article contributes to a long-lasting debate on various “media times” (Kaun et al., 2016), suggesting that what has long been characterized as the temporal regime of new media and the web — real-time — has been replaced by the logic of “righttime” characteristic of algorithmic media. The contribution this article makes is mainly theoretical and conceptual, but it will draw on a variety of empirical materials such as patent documents, media industry documents and public discourse to support its argument. This article draws on conceptualizations of time from social theory, media studies, and rhetoric, to argue for the existence of an “Eigenzeit,” understood as the specific temporality (trans: own or specific time, Ernst, 2013; Nowotny, 1994 [1989]) of algorithmic

media that hinges on the classic Greek notion of “kairos”— an opportune time, timeliness, or indeed, “right-time.”¹ In what follows, I discuss different notions of media time that have been important for an understanding of various media forms from Raymond Williams’ (2004) famous notion of television as flow, the notion of liveness in research on broadcasting (Scannell, 1996; Van Es, 2017) through to the notion of “real-time” and related terms to describe the characteristics of the web. The article then proceeds to propose that real-time might no longer be the most adept descriptor of the temporality of the web in a time in which most platforms explicitly seek to deliver content, not so much as it happens but at the right-time. Drawing on different data sources and the concept of kairos, the article ultimately argues for a renewed understanding of right-time in an age of algorithmic media.

Note 1. Verbatim, the German word Eigenzeit means “self-time”. Eigen means “belonging to the self,” and Zeit means “time.” Although this article hinges on the ways in which German media theory, especially the work of Wolfgang Ernst, has utilized the notion of Eigenzeit as the specific inner temporality of media, the idea of Eigenzeit does not originate with Ernst. Here, it is also important to acknowledge the work of the Austrian sociologist Helga Nowotny (1994 [1989]), whose book *Eigenzeit. Entstehung und Strukturierung eines Zeitgefühls* was later translated into English simply as *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*. For Nowotny Eigenzeit means “in ones” own time and the book is concerned with the acceleration of time, and the totality of a person’s or group’s ideas and experiences of time.

Considering the Text 1, please, answer the questions 1-5

1. According to the author's argument, the meaning of “the right-time web” corresponds to:

- a) real-time
- b) the time of everyday life
- c) instantaneous time
- d) the opportune time**
- e) simultaneous time

2. Butcher's approach considers the meaning of *Eigenzeit* based on an understanding of:

a) the specific and distinct temporality of each platform

b) the time of the selfie

c) the experience of time in a specific media landscape

d) an algorithmic atmosphere

e) the temporality mediated by non-human devices

3. According to the text, the classical Greek notion of Kairos contributes to understanding algorithmic media time because:

a) the notion of time in digital spaces is determined and measured

b) algorithmic temporality is closely related to calculated, physical and chronological time

c) algorithmic temporality is related to lived time and what is relevant and timely

d) the time of the digital platforms corresponds to the time spent on social media

e) none of the above

4. "News Feed is to show everyone the right content at the right time so they don't miss the stories that are important to them."

Considering Facebook's statement above and the arguments presented in the text, Facebook's goal for its News Feed most appropriately relates to which of these sentences:

a) "a mediated environment obsessed with real-time"

b) "near instantaneous content production and delivery"

c) "the temporality of the web in a time in which most platforms explicitly seek to deliver content, not so much as it happens, but at the right-time"

d) "a reverse-chronological order and that the web was generally thought of as a real-time médium"

e) "famous notion of television as flow"

5. The article is characterised as:

a) a theoretical-methodological approach to analysing algorithmic temporality

b) an analytical approach to the temporal dimensions of digital media in comparison with broadcasting media

c) a case study of timelines on Facebook and Twitter

d) a theoretical-conceptual and empirical approach to algorithmic temporality

e) an empirical survey

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TEXT 2

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THE GUARDIAN | OPINION

MARGARET SIMONS

Nov. 3, 2024

Can democracy work without journalism?

With the US election upon us, we may be about to find out

Most serious news organisations are not serving the politically disengaged, yet it's these voters who will decide the next president

* This article was edited

It is commonly claimed that democracy can't work unless you have journalism, and a free media at that. How are people to decide how to cast a vote if they don't access independent, reliable information?

With the US election upon us, we may be about to find out.

Because, more than ever before, the people who decide the election will be those who are least engaged with professional news media – the kind of researched, fact-checked content that you are likely to find in the New York Times or, for that matter, the Guardian.

Forty-three per cent of US citizens avoid the news, according to the latest Digital News Report – a worldwide survey of media use conducted by the Reuters

Institute for Journalism at Oxford University.

Most of these people nevertheless encounter some news – not because of loyalty to a brand or because they actively seek out a preferred outlet, but because it comes at them, so to speak.

And what comes for free is either partisanly motivated, or funded by advertising – which means heavy with content pitched to draw eyeballs – sensationalism and clickbait.

All the controversies, among the politically engaged, about whether mainstream media are “sanewashing” Trump, or whether or not outlets such as the Washington Post or the Los Angeles Times publish editorial endorsements of a candidate, won't affect the election result.

The citizens who will decide the election probably don't even know about these controversies, and if they did they probably wouldn't care.

Traditionally, the journalistic mission has included making the important understandable, seeking to engage the disengaged. But while this still forms part of the rhetoric of the profession, the truth is that most serious news organisations publishing political news are not serving the politically disengaged.

Instead, with so much advertising having disappeared from media outlets to online platforms, the path to financial sustainability for serious journalism outlets lies in trying to get people who already read the news to spend more time with the outlet, and to convert them into paying subscribers.

This is essential to survival, for serious media. Yet also represents a failure of the journalistic mission.

All this challenges our conventional ideas about the connections between democracy and journalism.

It is true that democracy and journalism grew up together, and that each strengthens the other, but they are not as indivisible as the journalism profession suggests. Ancient Greece had democracy (though not for slaves) but no journalism.

Al Jazeera provides journalism, but has its headquarters in non-democratic Qatar.

And, in today's western democracies, we now have political journalism that risks no longer being mass media, but elite media.

And then on top of that, playing to the mass, we have content. All kinds of content, much of it partisan, distorted and sometimes straight-out lies.

Now, increasingly, it is podcasters and vodcasters and influencers who reach new audiences on social media. And they have at least some chance of reaching the disengaged and persuadable. That is why both Trump and Harris have been spending time with them.

Solutions? I don't have any easy answers, and the problems are fast-moving targets. By the time of the next US election, many citizens may be consuming news written by artificial intelligence. If we are lucky, or if governments have been smart with their regulatory responses, the robots will be aggregating reliable sources.

But we have been neither smart nor lucky so far.

In the meantime, with the sands shifting beneath us, if we want voters to be well informed, we have to find a way of financially supporting and reinvigorating the journalistic mission – beyond internal chatter among an elite.

Considering the Text 2, please, answer the questions 6-10

6. The article was published a few days before Trump's victory in the 2024 US Election and sheds light on people who in fact helped to decide it: the ones who avoid the news. Which sentence below has a true statement on news avoidance?

a) According to the Digital News Report, 14% of US citizens avoid the news.

b) Most of these people are loyal to a brand.

c) Most of these news avoiders encounter journalism sometimes, but incidentally.

d) According to the Digital News Report, political journalism risks becoming mass media instead of elite media.

e) News avoidance in the US is not a huge problem as it doesn't represent the majority of Americans.

7. Regarding journalism and democracy, the author argues that:

a) they are no longer related to each other since the rise of social media platforms and the circulation of fake news.

b) they are related but not inseparable, as there are examples of non-democratic countries with professional journalism.

c) they are no longer related, and the 2024 US Election proved that.

d) they are related because Ancient Greece had democracy but no journalism.

e) none of the above.

8. According to the author, what is the conflict between the journalism tradition and the most common strategy of current news organisations?

a) It represents a failure of the journalistic mission to engage the disengaged. Nowadays, the path to financial sustainability lies in getting readers to spend more time with the outlet.

b) Traditional journalism wants voters to be well-informed, but current news organisations' most common strategy is to do the opposite.

c) News outlets are trying to convert readers into paying subscribers, while in the past, the journalistic mission was selling newspapers.

d) Current news organisations fail to engage the disengaged because this represents a conflict in the traditional journalistic mission.

e) Engaging the disengaged has been central to the journalistic mission, while nowadays, news outlets are trying to convert people who already read the news into paying subscribers.

9. According to the author, both Trump and Harris have spent time with podcasters and influencers. Why?

a) Because podcasters and influencers know how to talk to and reach the disengaged and persuadable.

b) Because podcasters and influencers reach new audiences on social media, but professional journalism does not.

c) Because there are no reliable podcasters and influencers in professional journalism.

d) Because podcasters and influencers can't reach new audiences but engage them.

e) None of the above.

10. Which sentence below has a false statement on the author's solutions to the future?

a) Governments must be smart with their regulatory responses.

b) By the following US election, as many citizens may be consuming news written by artificial intelligence, it is crucial that the robots aggregate reliable sources.

c) Voters need to be well informed, but this depends on finding a way to support journalism financially.

d) Chatter among an elite can contribute to reinvigorating the journalistic mission in the future.

e) Supporting and reinvigorating the journalistic mission is essential to make voters well-informed.