

# *Sharing* **News** **ONLINE**

*Commendary Cultures and Social Media News Ecologies*

Fiona Martin and Tim Dwyer



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Commendary Cultures and Social Media News  
Ecologies

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*For Ruth, Jim, Jamilla and Rosie who all know the power and delight of  
social news sharing.  
For Susan*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# In the Suicide Forest: How Social Media News Sharing Is Affecting News Journalism

*Fiona Martin*

On New Year's Eve 2017, popular US YouTuber Logan Paul's New Year message to his more than 15 million subscribers featured a crass encounter with an apparently dead man. The video shows Paul discovering the man's body hanging from a tree in Japan's Aokigahara park, otherwise known as the 'Suicide Forest' (Paul 2017). The vlogger later argued his post, which started by showing an apparently comedic attempt to camp with friends in the eerie location, was designed to create awareness of suicide. However Paul's video was internationally condemned for exploiting his macabre discovery to gain views and subscribers.<sup>1</sup> YouTube did not remove the post, even though it clearly violated its community standards but, after 48 hours of backlash, Paul deleted the offensive footage, posting several apologies (Paul 2018). Other YouTubers however created reaction and attack videos which reposted edited segments of his post in disjointed iterations. The public debate about Paul's dubious media ethics and the consequences of his vlog spilled onto Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Reddit, with users translating each other's messages from English to Japanese and back and subtitling the footage in other languages. Days afterwards, the world's major legacy media—New York Times, BBC and

<sup>1</sup>Paul says he did not 'monetise' the post due to its sensitive content. However, he did enable ads to run against his subsequent apology and clarifications.

News Corp publications—caught up with the scandal, reporting Paul’s belated attempts to say sorry and his temporary withdrawal from vlogging.

The backlash saw YouTube remove Paul from its Red streaming project, temporarily cut his ad revenues and suspend him from its Google preferred ads programme, which previously allowed him to place ads with the top 5% of YouTube influencers. Yet, a year on, he remained in the top ten of the highest earning figures on the platform (Robehmed 2018).

This moment starkly illustrates the new networked political economy and cultural politics of social media news sharing. In the last decade, the consumption, production and distribution of news has been radically altered by the dynamics of social media use and industry development. More people are discovering news on social media. In 2017, the Reuters Digital News survey indicated that social media platforms have become the primary news source for 33% of people under 25 in most developed countries (Newman et al. 2017). In the latest survey, 53% of young people reported accessing news on social media during the previous week (Newman et al. 2018). While much of that news content still emanates from legacy brands, the old news business is virtually hostage to the new, with social media sharing driving anywhere between 7 and 50% of traffic to major news websites depending on their business model. ‘Dark social’, web referrals via email, apps or messaging systems, made up much of the rest. In 2015, social sharing from Facebook exceeded Google search as a source of that referred traffic (Ingram 2015), although this dynamic has since reversed following Facebook’s demotion of news media content in its feeds.<sup>2</sup>

More users also report recirculating digital news than creating it, making online news ‘sharing’ a more significant form of cultural production than citizen journalism. For example, the 2014 Pew Research Center *State of the News Media* report notes that half of the US social network users surveyed (50%) had shared or reposted news content and 46% had commented on the news, while only 12% posted videos of newsworthy events that they had created and only 11% of online news consumers had submitted original content such as photos or stories to news websites or blogs (Pew Research Center 2014: 5). Overall, 24% of the participants in Reuters’ 2016 world survey said they share news regularly on social media (Newman et al. 2016: 11), although this figure varies by country and

<sup>2</sup>In 2018 Facebook decreased the level of professional news visible in its feeds in favour of family and friend posts (Facebook 2018).

platform. Sixty-six per cent of US Twitter users said they shared news regularly with their followers (Rosenstiel et al. 2015). In countries like Turkey and Hong Kong where social media is censored, messaging services like WhatsApp and WeChat increasingly allow users to share news privately (even though news sharing on the latter platform is often censored). During Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution', pictured on the cover of this book, protestors' use of the mesh networking app FireChat enabled them to share information and mobilise despite government surveillance (Anthony 2014; Lin 2016).

This book investigates the potent nature of social media news sharing, why so many have embraced it so enthusiastically and so quickly, how it has been commodified and what impact *commendary culture* is having on the news media internationally. It will explore aspects of corporate and technological interdependence that characterise the news sharing ecology, and the role of second wave automation and social analytics in the redistribution of news on social media platforms. Importantly, this book will query common assumptions about the types of stories that trigger news sharing, drawing on research into what news genres and topics people share and what motivates their sharing behaviours. We demonstrate, for example, that politics is still a more important subject worldwide than celebrity or sports. We also reveal that news sharing is not simply driven by egocentric objectives but also by affective, emotional relations to story content, a finding that offers fertile territory for our discursive analysis of most shared stories, the language they employ and the news values they embody. Our chapters on the policy and political implications of social news sharing then show how this activity is shaping our social and cultural worlds.

*Sharing News Online* concentrates on the fate of news journalism, but our work will be of interest to lobbyists, activists, marketers and communications practitioners—anyone with an interest in what goes viral, or who hopes to influence others to exchange information online. All of these actors have a stake in the future of digital journalism, its shifting boundaries, and its historic claims to legitimacy, authority, privilege and—most significantly—public trust. They depend on news media to credibly amplify their messages. Yet the 2017 Cambridge Analytica scandal, where researchers acquired Facebook user data and provided it to a third-party company which then tried to manipulate political processes in the US and UK, alongside subsequent, widespread instances of social media misinformation campaigns (Allcott et al. 2019; Chadwick and Vicari 2019), have reduced trust in both the platforms and the media more broadly (Edelmann 2018; Knight Foundation 2018).

Critically, this damage comes on top of social media's economic destabilisation of the legacy news media and the historic financial model for news journalism. Using personalised, behaviourally targeted advertising models, social media platforms have appropriated much of the old media's advertising revenue—already diminished by the migration of classifieds to specialised web services like EBay, Envato and Craigslist. Social media advertising is finely directed to individual users based on analyses of what they talk about, view, search for, like, buy and repost from other media, as well as metadata about their location, the time of day they choose to interact and on which device. The platforms also sponsor digital influencers like Logan Paul, whose lifestyle commentaries attract millions more subscribers than would pay for traditional news publications. Through these paid vloggers, or digital influencers, the platforms gather even more data on users' interests and their relationships with those celebrities, who in turn promote brand engagement in ways that traditional news has eschewed. As a result, in 2017, Facebook and Google had reportedly captured half of the world's online advertising revenue and around 20% of its total advertising spend (Kollewe 2017; Reuters 2017). The drift of advertising income to social media platforms has left legacy journalism in economic freefall, with news organisations restructuring operations and cutting staff, bureaux and publications across the globe. While subscriptions, native advertising, events and sales are beginning to fill the gap, platform engagement is essential to ensure audience reach (Küng 2018). Meanwhile Alphabet, the parent company of Google, Instagram and Snapchat, has become the world's largest media company by revenues, with Facebook ranked ninth, China's Tencent Holdings fourteenth and Microsoft eighteenth (Institute for Media and Communication Policy 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The popular turn to social platforms for news consumption and distribution has also had significant impacts on journalism processes, practices and pay. Inside newsrooms, social sharing of news has affected the types of stories that are commissioned and reported, the timing and placement of their publication and the measurement of their worth. Social media analytics services such as Chartbeat and [Parse.ly](https://www.parse.ly/) provide tools that assess which stories are shared, where, with what audiences and what extent of reach. Headlines, images and story structures are reworked, with the aim of making stories more shareable, or 'spreadable', as Jenkins et al. (2013) term it.

<sup>3</sup>Digital media businesses Apple, Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook also made up the top five of the largest companies in the US by market capitalisation.

Journalists can gauge their work's appeal in social mentions—shares, likes and tweets—and in the mounting page views that accompany news virality. Their pay may include traffic bonuses for attracting significant attention or encouraging certain types of user engagement. Their engagement with audiences may boost their personal profile beyond their publication and make them marketable brands.

Yet, while much research has probed why news stories might go viral on social networks, and under what conditions, little is known about what we share in the everyday, what types of narrative forms we prefer and what added features, videos, interactives or comments might boost the scale and scope of our information exchange. Similarly, journalists and editors might be curious about how shareable news correlates with traditional markers of newsworthiness, the news values that guide editorial decision making. In light of debates about the dangers of social media metrics driving editorial decision making (Petre 2015), and shaping news agendas based on popular tastes rather than diverse information (Bruns 2018: 230–236), it is critical to analyse what information sharing signals convey to journalists and how they then might shape the news. We need to consider how social media news sharing differs between individuals and platform cultures, to explore what people think they are doing when they share stories, and add their personal evaluation of the contents, and to critically analyse how their actions are guided by human and machine processes.

The need to better understand our information sharing habits, their significance and impacts, has always been central to media or communications research—but research on social media news sharing has far wider implications. As Director of the Tow Centre, Emily Bell (2016) has said “Social media hasn't just swallowed journalism, it has swallowed everything ... political campaigns, banking systems, personal histories, the leisure industry, retail, even government and security.” The barriers to obtaining business information, to entrepreneurship, marketing and public communications, have all been lowered via social media publishing. DIY creativity is celebrated and commercialised. Social networking is reinventing the way we seek finance, buy and rent goods, manage healthcare and respond to disasters. From Donald Trump's tweets to Narendra Modi's Instagram pictures, politics is increasingly being played out in symbolic exchanges, to global audiences, and power plays fought using ‘fake news’, troll armies and issues-based advertising campaigns.

*Sharing News Online* aims to explore the fundamental dynamics of that power shift. It draws on a two-year multidisciplinary project with an Australian news start-up called Share Wars and one of the country's most popular news services, ninemsn (now [Nine.com](https://www.nine.com.au/)). Together we have charted the rise and domination of social media services in the news business using insights drawn from digital media and cultural studies, computing science, linguistics, sociology and political science. Much of our empirical research analyses data captured from Facebook and Twitter, but we will also explore case studies from other platforms and start-ups, as well as co-created phenomena such as hashtags. Finally while other studies have envisioned the future of news as a co-production with global audiences and transnational platforms, shifting political and cultural power away from national legacy news media, we also consider the way in which social sharing has national characteristics and triggers national regulatory responses.

Finding a framework to ground this type of multidisciplinary enterprise is never a simple task, and is only partially realised in this collaboration. Since mid-last century at least, scholars have been working to transcend the limitations of disciplinarity and its tendency to fragment academic vision (Osborne 2015). Yet, at some moments, particular disciplinary expertise, such as the computational science that underpins our news sharing analysis in Chap. 4 or the corpus linguistics in Chap. 5, is essential to our methodological hybridity. Here, we are trying to repurpose the very same tools used by the platforms to inform their commercial strategies and build their ecologies, to probe less obviously profitable aspects of social sharing.

As a whole though, the book projects a systematic overview of social media news sharing, which connects aspects of structure and agency, regulation and autonomy, adaptability and stasis. It connects the macro interests of political economy (ownership, competition, labour and regulation) with the more micro concerns of critical cultural media studies, which aim to understand how our cultural activities construct, contest and transform power relations in society.

The name we give our approach is *critical media ecology*. In the coming chapters, we set out to explore several aspects of the online news sharing ecology:

- the factors that bring together the many and diverse actors in our internetnetworked information, communication and representational systems, which are now integrated into so much of our work, home life and play, and our political, economic, social and cultural worlds.

- the historic, situated interdependencies between these actors that come about as a result of user goals and motivations, cultural identity and allegiances, business models and missions and specific social contexts.
- the way those relationships are shaped by the economic, legal and ethical parameters of different social media platforms, apps, websites and internet providers and by black boxed algorithmic processes.
- the extent to which these associations respond to, and are influenced by, structural factors in the news media and information technology industries, regionally or globally.

As critical media ecologists, we share an interest in the evolution of media technologies with the US schools of media ecology, based on the work of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong. However, unlike them, we are more concerned with the political and economic implications of social media use and platform operations, the actors who have built networked power through their corporate and social alliances and the ways in which corporate uses of social media data affect the character and quality of independent, public interest journalism. Where the North American media ecologists have a sociological focus on the systemic ways in which technology impacts on human cognition and behaviour, we investigate how social media business and cultural relations are constructed around news journalism and how they affect the news media's pursuit of collective, normative ideals such as democracy, social inclusion and cultural diversity.

News is a commodity wrapped in ideology, mythology and contest, so studying how it is being shaped by social media companies, uses and users requires we first position our understanding of its social and political purpose, before we delve into its changing meaning and value in the digital era. Emeritus Professor Melvin Mencher, renowned Western journalism educator, tells us that news is the reporting of information that breaks with the normal flow of events and helps people make sound decisions about their lives (2011: 56). However, we think of news journalism more critically as a normatively conceived system of producing publicly useful information that is driven by a mix of commercial imperatives, ideological interests, professional ideals and social and cultural expectations. It is differently configured from country to country by historical events, markets and political interventions. Political scientists tell us we should be concerned about the quality and diversity of news journalism, as it monitors

the operations of government and business and informs citizens about issues of public interest so they can make more informed choices about how they act in society. This is the normative ‘watchdog’ or fourth estate imaginary of journalism’s social purpose.

Yet, as sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) revealed when he studied how news was made by US television networks, it is most often about the doings of elites—celebrities, politicians, business tycoons and public officials—and shaped by institutional forces such as government and market decisions. The lives of most ordinary people “never come into the news except as statistics. How ordinary people work, what they do outside working hours, in their families, churches, clubs and other organizations and how they relate to government and public agencies hardly ever make the news” (1979: 15). Researchers have since continually verified this status bias and highlighted other biases of the mainstream news media: its Anglo ethnocentrism, masculinist and heteronormative tendencies, and its tendency to marginalise social activism, as well as its common resort to mythic figures and narratives to affirm dominant beliefs and values. Some scholars suggest that audiences themselves are complicit in the commercial news media’s focus on entertainment and sensationalism, as they are more interested in celebrity and lifestyle news than the worthy forms of political and civic journalism that reporters value (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013). In the last decade though, social media sharing has enabled ordinary people to show the diversity of what interests them in news’ cavalcade of power, scandal and fame. They can now promote what matters to them among their social networks, ostensibly lending some degree of democratic intervention to journalism’s elite bias. For that reason, one of our interests in this book is to examine how online news sharing incorporates everyday preferences, tastes, ideas, attitudes and emotions and what impacts this is having on institutional media agendas and operations.

Our focus on news as the exemplar of socially valuable journalism is symbolic rather than exclusive of other forms of journalism. In the account that follows, we will talk about the social sharing of many forms of factual reporting, short and long form, from the informative and investigative to the editorial and analytic. Curiously, as we will reveal, the widespread industry predictions that online audiences, in the face of proliferating information, will demand more analysis and more long-form, deep dive reporting does not necessarily relate to what they share most on social media platforms. As Chap. 4 indicates, what we share online may have

more to do with participating in everyday public debates and alerting our networks to key issues as a means to educate others about what we think is important and to express our opinions about world events.

News sharing, as the platforms have recognised, is now a daily ritual of social and cultural participation that gives us visibility, connection and belonging in an increasingly noisy, mediated world—where our communications contexts have converged and, as Zizi Papacharissi argues, “socio-cultural, economic, and political tendencies and tensions are collapsed” (2015: 117). Paying attention to news is a metre of our engagement with the social world. Sharing it with others is both an act of self-actualisation and a bid for relevance and relatedness.

Given the platforms’ apparently tight grip on the future of the news media, there are contrasting views on the possible long-term outcomes of social sharing for factual journalism. Optimists tend to foreground the ways in which sharing has democratised news distribution and diversified flows and consumption. As our Share Wars colleagues have noted, in the last century at least, journalistic agendas have been determined by a narrow set of professionals, with the final say on what is published going to those ‘alpha male’ editors that tended to run legacy newsrooms (Crawford et al. 2015: 10–14). Online, however, we share news that defines both our professional and private worlds and those of our friends, family and colleagues—and this spread of subject matter may be more pluralist than the broadcast bulletins or front pages of traditional news media, depending on the composition of our social networks. It is also possible that social media use incidentally exposes users to news sources that they wouldn’t normally encounter and provides them with more political diversity in their media consumption (Fletcher and Kleis 2017). In their book, *All Your Friends Like This*, the Share Wars team argue that studying what the audience wants to share generally makes journalism *better*. It helps journalists determine the subject matter that people publicly identify with and what they value, enabling them to deliver more timely, relevant, diverse information to their audiences. Social media metrics, based on real time monitoring of consumption and sharing, have brought valuable insights to commissioning and reporting, with a Reuters Institute report (Cherubini and Kleis Nielsen 2016) noting that they inform story discovery, production, revision, release time and promotion. Digital-born companies such as *Buzzfeed*, *Upworthy* and the now defunct *Gawker* have based their business models on crafting content that increases measures of user attention and interaction.

Pessimists and sceptics have questioned the impact of the news media too closely following, and replicating, what does well on social media. They highlight the limits to consumer sovereignty and giving people what they want, warning that algorithmically defined echo chambers and the proliferation of clickbait are evidence that editors need to maintain a critical mindset about using social sharing metrics to determine editorial agendas. As the US Congressional inquiry into the 2016 US election confirmed, the social media news sharing business has also ushered in an era of paid mis- and disinformation, where partisans, propagandists and hoaxers play to our prejudices and undermine our capacity to make effective, informed political and economic judgments. Just as search usurped the gatekeeping authority, verification and legitimation practices of journalism (Carlson 2007), so too has social sharing enabled any user to circulate bogus narratives globally without the expert scrutiny or interference of editors and reporters. Reporters too, working under increased pressure to churn out copy, are potential recyclers of this misinformation (Wardle 2017). Claire Wardle's typology of fake news reminds us that even genuine news can be misleading if it's circulated in a false or altered context. The intensification of fake news circulating on social media in recent years, exposed during Craig Silverman's (2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016) investigation into the rise of pro-Trump sites in Macedonia, has opened a lively debate about the extent to which social news sharing can be manipulated for political and economic gain. Others highlight the tendency for news sharing to reinforce sender and receiver confirmation biases, reducing the likelihood that they will post on topics they don't agree with and fostering echo chamber effects.

Our book explores these rugged, often unpredictable contours of news transformation via the evolution of the social media news sharing business. In doing so, it surveys the differing motivations for and uses of sharing exchanges and their cultural consequences.

Chapter 2 connects the value we derive from sharing news, including characteristics of information gifts and the moral economies of web 2.0, with the logic of the attention economy and its exploitation of news consumers' affective relations with story content. It introduces two sides to sharing commodification—the commercial development of recommendation technologies for signalling taste, promoting choices, redistributing and contesting ideas, and the evolution of analytics tools to collate and categorise data on our topical preferences and consumption activities, which then influence reporting, agenda setting and newsroom resource

allocation, alongside news production and placement, distribution and redistribution.

Rather than interpreting users as informational or affective labourers, we see them as evaluative intermediaries—in an unequal but interdependent relationship with the platforms that shapes their development and focus. This chapter explores how social media platforms provide access to communicative affordances and simultaneously use automation, notification technologies and reward systems to trigger and promote social sharing of news and information, in order to collect intimate, personalised user knowledge that they can commodify. The commendatory signals we send when sharing news, via links, likes and favourites, emojis and hashtags, are aggregated and analysed to demonstrate the specificity and scope of audience interest to advertisers. Through individual profiling and aggregate profile patterning, social media companies and their analytics partners can then provide advertisers and publishers remarkably fine data about human behaviour online. Automating this process, so that platform users willingly input that data and build an everyday culture of commending news, allows social media companies to provide audience metrics at a scale never before possible.

However, as we discuss, the reasons we share news are complex, and the ways diverse, that *commendatory culture* varies greatly across different news sharing platforms and social phenomena. Chapter 1 considers how it is structured around diverse means of quantifying and commodifying, as well as building, rewarding and managing, social relations—with a focus on Twitter’s follower status and Reddit’s karma points system. We then explore how tools for measuring and interpreting commendatory activity have been adopted and implemented by news journalists, with a case study from our research partners Nine News and Share Wars, whose Likeable Engine was a prototype for integrating social media analytics into the routines of news gathering and production.

Chapter 3 explores how social sharing is analysed, measured and valued, and how it impacts on journalism work. It charts the evolution of social media metrics, the industry development undertaken using public application programming interfaces (APIs) and the wars over the development of new digital audience measurement standards. In this chapter, we also outline a new form of information commodification which underpins the value of social media news sharing, and shapes the corporate entanglements of digital media companies. Alongside the traditional news and audience commodities, we chart the rise of the *metadata commodity*, and the trade in data about news use and usage contexts.

In investigating the metrification of journalism, we question the clarity, stability and transparency of platform metrics such as Facebook's 'like' and consider how commendary signals have come to represent such potent indicators of audience approval and journalistic worth. Problematizing the accuracy and reliability of sharing measurements allows us to critique the techniques of control used by the tech giants to transform the news business, and to explore their lack of openness about how they manipulate sharing activities manually and algorithmically. Worldwide, as this is written, there is a growing public push for algorithmic transparency as a human rights issue in order to force corporations to reveal the ways in which their programming assumptions embed social disadvantage, surveillance, unfair competition and other negative social outcomes.

From examining how social news sharing is organised, operationalised and monetised in different cultural settings, we move to mapping its industrial planes, networks and nodes. Chapter 4 analyses the political economics of news sharing, investigating how social media companies and analytics services are transforming journalism, news production and distribution. Just as social networking and media services are co-constructed with their users, so too have these platforms relied on the interdependencies of start-up culture, and vertical integration of small, interlinked companies in order to consolidate their capacities to track our actions and interests.

This raises questions about the activities of the companies that control and exchange this information, and their strategies for exploiting it. The chapter then explores their business activities and alliances through the notion of *critical media ecology*, examining the complexly imbricated business models, ownership patterns and industrial power of key players such as Facebook, YouTube, Reddit and Giphy. It examines the variety of smaller actors that support what Nardi and O'Day (1999) would call the 'predator' species of the social media ecosystem, the major social sharing platforms. These intermediary companies include news analytics firms, identity management companies, native advertising or content placement services and dialogic media and community management services, alongside bookmarking and link shortening operations. Each of these plays a role in facilitating the easy, personalised, monitored and analysed use of social media news sharing platforms in a relatively open, if proprietary, ecosystem of digital intermediaries. To contrast this, we offer a glimpse into the more closed ecosystem of China's social media market, where

the government and platform corporations work hand in hand to ensure social surveillance and control.

Finally, in light of Facebook's dealings with Cambridge Analytica, we consider the lack of public information about which businesses platforms share our information with, and on what terms. This leads to a broader discussion of algorithmic culture, and the extent of its influence on news distribution and visibility.

The lack of transparency about how platform algorithms work to curate and place news in people's feeds has invited researchers to reverse engineer their actions (Diakopolous 2013; Gehl 2014) and to explore aspects of their operation and meaning that lie outside social media's commercial imperatives. In our case, we have been interested in using data analytics to discover what types of news people shared most, what topics they preferred, what forms of commendatory action they engaged in and how this compared to previous studies of digital news consumption.

Chapter 5 details the findings of a genre and topic analysis conducted of most shared news on Facebook and Twitter. The data was captured by Share Wars' Likeable Engine from these platforms' then-public application programming interfaces (APIs) and matched to stories from over 100 English language news sites internationally. The final list of shared stories was then hand coded for story form, social purpose, style and keyword topic, as well as the presence of multimedia comments, other forms of participatory features. The resulting analysis explores which story genres and which topics trigger high-volume news sharing and what constitutes everyday low-volume sharing. It also considers whether interactive, multimedia and participative features increase the likelihood that stories will be shared. Importantly, this study questions the so-called news gap theory, which posits that audiences favour light, lifestyles stories over the more serious hard news journalism that the legacy news media promote as their *raison d'être*. Instead, we make the case that what we share, we care about—and that include politics and current affairs.

Digging deeper then into the packaging of most highly shared news, Chap. 6 demonstrates what corpus linguistics can tell us about the language of these stories. Given that the social media era has been characterised by the search for a virality formula, it is surprising that more public attention hasn't been paid to the syntax and semantics of highly shared news. There are certainly some industry studies that look at aspects of story construction, such as the headline phrases that gain most Facebook

engagement (Rayson 2017). Analysing 100 million news headlines shared on Facebook over a two-month period, Buzzsumo concluded that the words “will make you” comprised the most engaging headline phrase based on cumulative shares, likes and comments. This phrase, director Steve Rayson argues, “promises that the content will have a direct impact on the reader, often an emotional reaction”, picking up on earlier research that shows sharing is often triggered by emotional reaction and physiological arousal (Berger and Milkman 2010, 2012). Yet this study, which also explores the worst performing phrases, the top headline starters and ends and the optimum length of headlines, tells us nothing about the rest of the stories that prompted users to signal their approval on Facebook. Rather, it is designed to promote the corporation’s services.

By way of contrast, our colleague Monika Bednarek’s analysis reveals the variety and contextual complexity of what we share. She also draws on quantitative and qualitative analyses to underscore the significance of traditional news values like eliteness, superlativeness, unexpectedness and negativity in most shared stories. These findings suggest the types of story framing that might attract attention on social media and the local contexts that can affect virality.

These issues are taken up again from an audience research perspective in Chap. 7. Here, we report on a study of [ninemsn.com.au](http://ninemsn.com.au) news consumers, the audience for one of Australia’s most popular news services. It explores the critical role emotional or affective responses play in shaping their news sharing decisions and reflects on differences in these responses across demographic groups. It explores two key questions: what motivates people to recirculate the news they find online, and what feelings are involved in their decision to share a story?

This study indicates variations in triggers to sharing and the importance of pedagogical and caring impulses in motivating action, rather than the desire to amuse, inspire or amaze—although there are marked gender and age differences in sharing motivation. Findings suggest that emerging social media editorial strategies need to closely consider cultural differences in user interests, and less sensationalist motivations for sharing than might be signalled by click-driven metrics.

Chapter 8 looks at how online news sharing is affecting policy thinking about media pluralism and control of the media in Western democracies. We re-examine the proposition that news sharing is able to produce a democratising effect on the news media, in giving ordinary people the capacity to recommend and redistribute the news they find socially signifi-

cant. The chapter explores how policy makers and media researchers might assess the veracity of that claim against historic notions of media diversity, and the central role of that concept in media policy. It revisits and expands on some of the questions raised throughout the book about the power of social media platforms to control political news sharing and to influence political agenda setting. In doing so it further investigates how *news intermediaries* are reshaping the mediascape and provides new resources for exploring the measurement of voice plurality and information quality questions in digital news.

Chapter 9 then considers how viral news differs from everyday news sharing, and how it impacts on the formation of public opinion in different political, social and cultural contexts: China, Australia and the US It explores how the undifferentiated notion of virality can be differently conceived of, and analysed, using case studies of the Tianjin port explosions of 2015, the Queensland floods of 2011 and the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013. This chapter investigates different government responses to these disasters, the dynamics of control and coordination around social media news sharing, and how these shaped interactions with social media users and platforms.

There are several fine books about media sharing that inform our discussion throughout, and which are central to our argument about the politics of commendary culture and its intersection with the transformation of news. Nicholas John's *The Age of Sharing*, Graham Meikle's *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility* and *Spreadable Media* by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, all traverse social and cultural territory that informs our analysis of the social media ecology, its industry relationships, labour models, preoccupations, values and ideologies.

We also owe a great deal of thanks to our Share Wars partners, Hal Crawford, Andrew Hunter and Domagoj Filipovic, for great discussion and generous access to the Nine newsroom and their Share Wars research. Hal's investigation of fake news purveyors in the US and Australia (Crawford et al. 2015) predates many of the debates that emerged around the Trump election, and reveals a range of financial and creative rationales for peddling misinformation that emanate from dot-com libertarianism.

The account that follows investigates the impacts of popular digital redistribution on the news media. It has entered its own spooky realm of uncertainty, dire predictions and despair thanks to the rise of social media and influencers like Logan Paul, and the gravitation of audience attention to platform feeds. Outside the film and television industries, media

distribution is a sorely under-researched cultural activity, partly because the print, radio and music sectors had relatively stable contours during the analogue media decades during which media studies developed. However, the coming of internet, web, mobile and social media technologies has enabled every connected person to be a global publisher, disrupting historic methods and measures of media dissemination and creating opportunities for the rapidly evolving information technology industry to capitalise on its internetworking expertise.<sup>4</sup>

Since around 2008, the social media platforms have established a parallel media distribution system; one which relies on their users finding, assessing and recommending stories to others. Each of us in this scenario is a potential critic and taste maker, or *cultural intermediator* in the Bourdieusian (1984) sense. Our power to influence others' news consumption is determined not only by our own social and cultural clout, but also by our interest in pursuing others' attention, within and beyond our social circles. Combine our capacity to quickly rate and recommend news with the ability to recirculate it globally, without the regulatory constraints of analogue media, and it is easy to see how the platforms have enabled their users to assume a greater degree of control over how journalism is seen, interpreted and valued than in the previous century. At the same time, the platforms benefit through the aggregation and trade of data about our cultural preferences. It is this commendatory dynamic, the dialectic of gifting and accumulation, that we will explore as a prelude to analysing the business of news sharing.

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<sup>4</sup>Except where this appears to violate traditional legal principles of copyright, for example, peer to peer networking.