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## **Meta-analysis of Digital Consumption in the Contemporary Media Ecosystem: Key Factors and Emotional Implications**

### ***Metaanálisis del consumo digital en el ecosistema mediático contemporáneo: factores distintivos e implicaciones emocionales***

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#### **Abstract**

Two of the characteristic features of contemporary society are the overabundance of information and the speed of communications, which takes place in a scenario marked by people's hyperconnectivity. This intense use of technology arouses emotions in users and serves as a channel for the expression of affection. Therefore, this paper contains two objectives: (1) To identify general factors that are distinctive of digital consumption in the current media ecosystem and (2) to describe the connotations that said consumption has on human beings' emotional dimension. The article finally concludes that the development of a critical and conscious media consumption, which is associated with emotional management, is a recommended practice.

#### **Keywords**

Digital Technology; Emotions; Media Consumption; Meta-Analysis; Multiscreening; Digital Users

#### **Resumen**

*Dos de los elementos característicos de la sociedad contemporánea son la sobreabundancia de información y la velocidad de las comunicaciones, desarrolladas en un escenario marcado por la hiperconectividad de las personas. Este uso intensivo de la tecnología despierta emociones en los usuarios y sirve además como cauce para la expresión de sus afectos. Con todo ello, el objetivo de este artículo de corte teórico es doble. Por un lado, identificar y presentar los rasgos distintivos del consumo digital en el ecosistema mediático actual. Por otro, describir las implicaciones que dicho consumo tiene en la dimensión emocional de las personas. Entre las conclusiones aportadas se destaca la conveniencia de que el usuario digital desarrolle un consumo mediático crítico y consciente, al que va asociado una necesaria gestión de las emociones.*

#### **Palabras clave**

*Consumo mediático; emociones; metaanálisis; multipantalla; tecnología digital; usuarios*

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over recent decades, great progress has been made in the area of research into emotions, not only in disciplines where an interest in such matters is to be expected (such as psychology, medicine or neurology) but also in more general sense within the realm of the humanities and social sciences (González, 2013a). As a basic component of human nature, emotions have been conceptualised and explained from both neurobiological and sociocultural perspectives. In this respect, on the one hand the progress made by neuroscience is noteworthy; it has put the focus on the role played by emotions in mental processes and their central role in the development of brain function (Ferrés, 2014). On the other hand, as it is not possible to extend the existence and expression of emotions without taking into account the social context within which they are manifest, one of the most fruitful theoretic approximations is that developed from the 'sociology of emotions' (Turner & Stets, 2007). The complexity of the emotional dimension of mankind makes it very much an interdisciplinary area of study, but around which there is still no comprehensive vision, capable of integrating on common ground all of these diverse disciplines. Nor is there conceptual or terminological consensus around the phenomena encompassed herein, such as affection, emotions, feelings or passions. This, however, is one debate that goes far beyond the objective of this work (cfr. Batson, Shaw & Oleson, 1992; Shouse, 2005). It is sufficient here to point out that the affect is related to pre-individual and unintentional aspects, while emotions are considered personal, but conditioned by social and cultural conventions and therefore susceptible to being subject to strategies of emotional labor and control (Hochschild, 1979).

This growing interest in the academic world is widely linked to the boom in people's emotional dimension in their social life, in which the expression of emotions can be identified in both the private and the public spheres (See the growth in emotional culture in the fields of education, medical therapy and business management, the proliferation of "self" narratives, changes in consumption, etc.).

In parallel to this enhancement of the affective dimension in the ambit of science and society, over the last two decades we have also witnessed the growing social inculcation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Digital devices have been widely adopted among the population and their omnipresence and ubiquity add to the possibility of permanent connectedness that these devices provide. This therefore, is an "era of hyperconnectivity" (Reig & Vílchez, 2013) in which technology is clearly integrated into our day-to-day life, to the stage where it is now impossible to separate it from most of our daily activities. Individuals are interconnected through networks –the "new social operating system" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012)–, in the internet they have their platform for contact and exchange of information and can access in a way that is constant and ubiquitous, thanks to mobile communication. At the same time, the digital environment has provided an explosion in "Mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009), a new social form of communication that although mass, is produced, received and perceived individually, and a good example of which are the many social media platforms. As Deuze (2012: XIII) points out, "we do not live with, but in, media."

In this sense, and if looked at from an historical perspective, the relation between the western world and technological innovation has always been heavily emotionally loaded. Given that technology is always situated in the realm of the novelty, its irruption opens up the question of how the new flows within the old and the familiar. It is a process that "is played in a binary way between the pole of curiosity, rarity, new risk and uncertainty on the one hand, whilst on the other it includes old habits, stability certainty, security and safety" (Fortunati & Vincent, 2009: 6).

Thus, the ever greater importance of the affective dimension in social life, on the one hand, and on the other, the role acquired by digital technologies in everyday interaction has facilitated the appearance of a field of study where both realities intersect (Serrano-Puche, 2015). It is fertile and complex as it shows a broad variety both on the level of theoretical frameworks and methodologies used, such as in that of issues, social groups or specific digital devices that have been covered in the many research papers published to date.

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También se enmarca en las investigaciones que desarrolla el autor dentro del Proyecto "Cultura Emocional e Identidad", perteneciente al Instituto Cultura y Sociedad (Universidad de Navarra).

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

This article presents research of a theoretical and exploratory nature. For this it uses bibliographic review, comparing theoretical and empirical studies relating to the object of study. Thus, the general objective of this paper is to develop a meta-analysis of the research on digital consumption in the current media ecosystem. The materials taken into consideration include monographs, collective works published by scholarly publishers, indexed journals papers and conference proceedings mainly from the period 2010-2015.

More specifically, on the one hand, this paper seeks to identify general factors that are key to digital media consumption. On the other, the objective is also to describe and analyse the implications this consumption has for people's emotional dimension.

In summary, with extensive analysis of the existing academic literature on the subject, it is sought to offer an adequate theoretical framework that can help with understanding how the acquisition of information and other content on the part of digital users is configured on a macro level, and the consequences of this on the emotional level.

## 3. Analysis and Results

When we speak of media consumption we refer to use and habits associated with different media and, given the process of media convergence, much of this is consumption through the internet (where contents associated with media such as television, newspapers, magazines and radio, as well digital-only outlets, are all accessible). This combination of information and entertainment acquired by the user is conditioned by factors relating to the status and situation of each person (age, sex, nationality, occupation, personal preferences, needs and expectations, etc.) and is reflected in the specific ways they consume, relating to the type of media and content, frequency, time, patterns of consumer behaviour, etc.

Nevertheless, it can be stated that there exist in the contemporary media ecosystem some general elements that frame and characterise online consumption, with repercussions in turn for people's affective dimension. These key factors are a) the overabundance of information available to the user; b) the speed of interactions in the digital sphere; c) the emergence of one's attention as a unit of currency; d) the multiplicity of screens; and d) the socialisation of consumption. The first three are exogenous factors and belong to the sociological-cultural order of our time, while the last two allude to intrinsic characteristics of digital media consumption. In the pages that follow we will describe each of these, signalling the impact on the emotional side of digital users.

### 3.1. Swamped in Information

That information today, unlike periods in the past, is no longer a scarce resource, is beyond all doubt. Its relevance is such that it has become common to call this current era "the Information Society," albeit that the term has no precise definition and has generated controversy (Trejo Delarbre, 2006: 31-73), making way for other concepts such as "the Knowledge Society" or "the Network Society" (García Avilés, 2016). In any case, as Castells indicates, there is "a specific form of social organization in which information generation, processing, and transmission are transformed into the fundamental sources of productivity and power, due to the new technological conditions that arise during this historic period" (1996: 46).

At present, all users are subjected, to a greater or lesser degree, to different information flows (Díaz Arias, 2015). Added to this information peddled by mass media is personalised information (which one voluntarily selects based on one's tastes and concerns) and social information (given that consumption of information has been socialized as will be explained later), in addition to strategically directed information, such as advertising.

This extraordinary abundance of information is very advantageous on the one hand, for people who find more information available to them and which is very often available instantly and free. However, it also results in situations of disinformation or information intoxication. Such is the case of "astroturfing," a form of covert public relations that seeks to distort the perception of public opinion on a certain issue, developing forms of social mobilisation that simulate that they are spontaneous and grassroots (such as the use of certain hashtags on Twitter for example), when, in reality they are directed strategically (Caro Castaño, 2016). At the same time, the overabundance of information can also lead to certain cognitive or psychological problems. In his book *Future Shock* (1970), Alvin Toffler alerted us to the information overload as a specific drawback of this new social context, when the individual lacked the tools and skills to correctly assimilate excessive volume of information. Since then, many authors have looked at the question,

describing the phenomenon using a number of different metaphors: "data smog" (Shenk, 1997), "torrent of images and sounds" (Gitlin, 2003), "infocasion" (Cornella, 2008), "flood of information" (Gleick, 2011), "infoglut" (Andrejevic, 2013), etcetera.

Although the overabundance of information is a phenomenon that pre-dates the popularity of the internet it is with the new digital ecosystem that the challenges and problems that come with this reality became more evident and more complex. Moreover, thanks to the popularisation of mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones, access to information, which has in the internet its main area of development, has become constant and ubiquitous. This condition of uninterrupted connectivity has strong emotional implications in itself. As many studies indicate, an excessively intense use of digital technologies can provoke in people a tension between the desire to be connected through technology while feeling trapped by it at the same time (Baron, 2011; Hall & Baym, 2012). It is a form of "perpetual contact" that offers many potential opportunities for communication, which bring with them contradictory feelings: proximity, intimacy, security on the one hand, and on the other obligation (the risk of social exclusion) and anxiety (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016). In this sense, other investigations point out that, especially among young people, the risk of suffering from so-called FOMO syndrome (Fear Of Missing Out) is common: being unable to disconnect from digital technologies for fear of missing out on something important (Przybylski et al., 2013).

On the other hand, it is worth considering how the proliferation of screens, associated with increased information consumption, is displacing and reducing the importance of the traditional printed book in the acquisition and generation of knowledge. In the digital era, knowledge is no longer understood as a finite series of precise and reliable contents ordered in depositories, but an unlimited network of discussion and reasoning (Weinberger, 2012). The information itself has become a continuous flow, disrupting an essential component of informative professions, which have gone from temporal regularity as the basis of their work to having to confront the realisation of "a journalism without periods" (Martín Algarra, Torregrosa & Serrano-Puche, 2013). Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that knowledge is not synonymous with unlimited access or greater circulation of information, but the "interpretation, critical understanding and even recreation of this information within a determined spatial, temporal and cultural context;" and in this sense "the speed of networks and new technological platforms is not always an ally of the new generation of true knowledge. On the contrary, it usually tends towards the configuration of a short-term, thoughtless and ahistorical fragmentary consciousness" (Barranquero-Carretero, 2013: 429).

For all that, one of the greatest challenges of digital literacy is to offer the internet user guidelines and effective strategies with which to tackle the overabundance of information (Serrano-Puche, 2013). In this respect, among the new skills which digital users must have is the search for and filtering of accurate and quality information, the capacity to analyse and visualise data and flexible thinking as "to connect ideas, to give meaning, to know how to contextualize the multiple information inputs we receive will be much more important issues than accumulating information." (Reig, 2013: 43). On the contrary, there are multiple pathologies that the overabundance of information may cause in people and that occur again in the emotional dimension associated with working with technology: "technostress" (Brod, 1984), boredom (Klapp, 1986), "information anxiety" (Wurman, 1989) or saturation and emotional insensibility (Dias & Jorge, 2016), among others.

### **3.2. Hypervelocity and Inflation of the Present**

One of the most important transformations associated with the consolidation of digital technologies is that which refers to the experience of space and time coordinates. However, as we said before, in relation to the overabundance of information, this is a phenomenon that can be traced back to the final decades of the last century and which, therefore, pre-dates the popularisation of the digital sphere as a space for social relations. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* David Harvey highlighted the "time-space compression" "as a distinctive characteristic of our time, "characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us" (Harvey, 1989: 240).

In this process, digital technologies have historically contributed to moulding - and at the same time are the best examples of - the "culture of speed" of this age, in which, as Virillo notes, "our societies have become arrhythmic. Or they only know one rhythm: constant acceleration" (2012: 27).

It must be noted, however, that this constant acceleration, that the speed of real world itself and that of the online world are different. Traditional social life is slower, more localised, as opposed to digital social life which is quicker and uprooted. There are, therefore, two space-time regimes and each is accompanied by its corresponding emotional regime, but "the coexistence of both emotional regimes generates

interference between the emotional logic of each (González, 2013b: 13-14). The traditional emotional regime is, above all, a regime of emotional qualities, while technology is principally a regime of emotional intensities, in which the quantity of emotion matters (quantifiable in the numbers of likes, retweets, views, etc.).

On the other hand, the enormous speed of the experience of time (Wajcman, 2015) has brought with it changes in the processes of production and consumption, the organisation of work, lifestyles and the manner in which the brain processes information (Carr, 2010). One of the consequences of that, as pointed out by Byung-Chul Han, is that we live in a reality that suffers from a "poverty of interruptions, intermediates and gaps in which hyperactivity leaves no room for the attention of the skill of listening, qualities necessary for fostering critical thinking, creativity and social bonds" (2012, p. 55-56). Time has lost narrativity, breaking down into a mere succession of atomised presents (Han, 2015). This inflation of the 'now' which Rushkoff (2013) calls "presentism," also influences media consumption, often characterised by "neophilia" which leads to overvaluing what occurs in every instant and a desire for the new, privileging trivial novelties over valuable, older information. In this sense:

the overflow of information has been able to drive, in some cases, a type of media bulimia, a compulsive consumption in real time, which exhausts itself and does not resolve the needs of cognitive sedimentation (...) Today, in some sectors of the population, there can be observed a dependency on the instant, the anecdote, the eccentric comment, through a succession of variable stimuli that magnify the ephemeral, like chemical magnetism for attention, to the detriment of bigger questions (Díaz Nosty, 2013: 137).

Against this tyranny of immediacy of information in real time, there emerge voices that advocate "cultural sustainability," associated with a broader and deeper temporal plain that offers durability of culture "against the ever-faster obsolescence of the market - everything is produced so that it lasts less and less time" (Martín Barbero, 2008: 13). From the prism of the temporal dimension, which at the same time must be reflected in the patterns of media consumption, this would consist of finding a balance, of knowing "to be fast when it makes sense to be fast, and be slow when slowness is called for; to seek to live at what musicians call the *tempo giusto* -the right speed" (Honoré, 2004: 15). Also on the part of the media it can be detected a growing interest to explore this deceleration in the rhythms of information production, in what has been referred to as "slow journalism" (Le Masurier, 2016).

### **3.3. The Attention Economy**

A third element that helps us understand how media consumption is configured today is the response that, in developed societies, peoples' attention is scarce. We live in the "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997; Davenport & Beck, 2001), where content producers (and, in general, anyone who wants to communicate anything) compete to capture the interest of people seeking to occupy their free time. Thus, a broad offer of new media pursues possible users throughout the day at any time and in any place. In the digital environment in particular, the bombardment of images and cognitive stimuli at people who have submitted is evident.

Given that technology allows for more information to be sent in less time and there are more actors broadcasting to potential receivers, the "bandwidth" of information received by the user increases continuously. However, in parallel, the time one can dedicate to the information received becomes ever shorter. Definitively, the problem is that "both variables are inverse to one another, the greater the "personal bandwidth", the lower the capacity for "personal attention" (Cornella, 2008: 21).

From the point of view of media editors, the challenge involves achieving an efficient modulation between information flow and effective capacity for absorption on the part of users. If we look at it from the perspective of the consumer's experience, it helps to note the convenience of developing strategies and habits to reduce the informational noise we receive and manage our capacity for attention appropriately. It is important to establish a good system of filtering information, which operates at different levels, as the problem is not so much the overloading of information but the failure to filter it (Shirky, 2010). The capacity to cultivate concentration and focus on essential elements, of navigating the torrent of information following the "principle of relevance" (Lucchetti, 2010) is a necessary skill to avoid succumbing to the avalanche of information. Moreover, according to other authors (Goleman, 2013; Crawford, 2015), exercising the practise of mindfulness, paying full attention to the present moment, helps reduce stress and increase personal productivity.

In this context marked by the overabundance of information and the reduction of attention time, it is precisely through emotions that the path is opened for many contents most consumed by users. "Memes"

acquire an increasing weight in the media diet (Rodríguez; 2013), that is, contagious images, videos and ideas that spread virally by internet mobilising the emotions of users both horizontally (through blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) and vertically, when traditional media (television, radio, newspapers) also echo the emotional resonance that they acquire. To understand and attempt to predict the process of the spread of this type of content is the objective of academics (Shifman, 2013; Spitzberg, 2014; Ash, 2015). It is a phenomenon that has been investigated in particular in the ambit of advertising, where authors agree that for a video to be shared in the digital environment, it must awaken emotions, among these, surprise and happiness above all (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Dafonte, 2014).

### **3.4. One User, Multiple Screens**

The proliferation of technological devices, whether fixed (such as desktop computers, Smart TVs) or mobile (smartphones, tablets, laptop computers, wearables) has diversified consumption across multiple screens, each of which offers certain characteristics that influence digital media habits, and reflects on aspects such as time, frequency of use, level of interaction with other users or type of contents accessed.

At the same, the use of digital technology arouses emotions in people: more or less intense, more or less positive or negative. In the popularisation of its use, it has become a constant presence alongside the person; in such a way that sensory contact with devices is the first step in kindling an emotional relationship. As Garde-Hansen and Gorton affirm (2013: 42), "ICTs and media technologies are more than ever touched, felt, held, worn, caressed, pressed, thumbed, dropped, scratched, protected, stolen, remembered, and forgotten within the affective economy of pervasive and ubiquitous computing".

We previously noted how the digital emotional regime is principally a regime of emotional intensities. That said, these are not given equally in all uses of digital consumption, as each of the technological devices, applications or channels of communication has a specific "affective bandwidth," that is it allows for the transmission of a determined quantity of emotional information. On the other hand, the Internet covers socio-technical environments that facilitate the arousal of emotions to a greater or lesser degree (a blog, social media platform and chat are not the same, nor are every one of each, for example). Ultimately, the affective dimension is not revealed equally in all communicative interactions and situations that take place in the digital sphere.

In parallel, one of the consequences of the proliferation of mobile devices is that, in some users, the simultaneous checking of several devices while performing an activity is increasingly common. One of the most frequent is the use of mobiles or tablets while watching television; a phenomenon christened "second screening" (Doughty, Rowland & Lawson, 2012) where mobile devices play a secondary, supporting role to the domestic "big screen". According to "The Digital Consumer" (Nielsen, 2014), in United States, 84% of Smart TV and tablet owners recognise they use them while watching television, as they need at least two devices simultaneously to satisfy their social interaction, information, entertainment and workplace productivity requirements.

From the above it can be concluded that multi-screen consumption is becoming increasingly complex and diverse. For example, Smith and Boyles (2012) point out that the use of mobile devices is not always related to that being viewed on TV but may have its origin in ensuring that the television content does not reel in the users (during commercial breaks, for example) and that they turn to these devices as a distraction, without leaving them entirely to one side. Thus the second screen, in reality, frequently becomes the first (Días & Teixeira-Botelho, 2014) because it is the person's focus of attention, whether to interact with others, search for information, check email or check social media.

### **3.5. The Socialisation of Consumption**

From the point of view of media consumption, mobility represents a disruptive factor, as the use of media has been ripped from the domestic environment and now, with every user possessing their own digital device, access is eminently individual. However, and paradoxically, at the same time consumption has been socialised more, given the prominence of interconnection through networks and interpersonal contacts in the online sphere. We can also add to this the culture of convergence (Jenkins, 2008), in which the same content can move through different media, where the recipient assumes the role of prosumer, in such a way that they not only consume contents, but also produce them (thus increasing the overabundance of information mentioned above).

This process of socialisation of media consumption is reflected in different ways. On the one hand, new intermediaries have emerged in the information process that, while not communication professionals,

operate as opinion makers before other users over whom they exert influence. Moreover, the overabundance of information has brought with it people that trust more in their social media contacts as a filter that makes sense of this overwhelming quantity of information (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Nevertheless, this response - logical given human sociability - may have a pernicious collateral effect. If, in seeking refuge from the avalanche of information of thousands of contradictory voices, the reaction of certain people to focus their attention on only a few like-minded media outlets and surround themselves on social media by people of their own ideological group they run the "danger that, instead of a cohesive society, the Internet is transformed in closed off islands in bubbles of convictions, rather than open spaces for the exchange of ideas" (Doval, 2012). Alongside this echo chamber effect (Del Vicario et al., 2015), there is also the personalisation of contents to the measure of the recipient by platforms like Facebook and Google (almost always without drawing attention to this), which can result in a "filter bubble," depriving the user of a more holistic and integrated vision of reality and the information of the day (Parisier, 2011).

On the other hand, there is a warning of the growing socialisation of media consumption in the motivations and frequency of multi-screening as indicated above. It is common that the reason for turning to mobile devices and tablets while watching a television programme is to comment and/or read comments of other users on the content (Giglietto & Selva, 2014), whether through social media, especially Twitter or through applications such as WhatsApp.

In more general terms, the social dimension of digital consumption is supported by the atmosphere of emotionality that develops in the online sphere, where interacting with others often fails to bring with it a relevant exchange of information but the development of phatic communication in order not to lose social contact (Miller, 2008; Jarrett, 2015). The very "emotional architecture of social media" contributes to this, the best example of this being Facebook's "Like Button" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). As Grusin points out (2010: 4-5), "interacting with such sites is made pleasurable or desirable in part because they work to produce and maintain positive affective relations with their users, to set up affective feedback loops that make one want to proliferate one's media transactions". Thus, the interactions the user carries out impact upon their emotional state and even on the construction of their identity; on marked by interconnectivity and where the person cannot re-affirm their identity if not visible to others. The online environment offers a continuous process of recognition and negotiation of status, in such a way that "the more someone links to you, likes you, thumbs up your postings, and comments on them, etc., the higher you will be ranked and listed in the different SNS, news feeds, and tables of suggested links and readings (...) That increase in status is linked to feelings of satisfaction and well-being. Indeed, positive emotions emerge when individuals are able to reaffirm their self-conceptions" (Svensson, 2014: 22).

On the other hand, and with respect to following the latest information, it is easy to check that emotions are at the heart of the act of sharing content and news in the digital environment (Hermida, 2014). Although the emotional dimension has always been present in the use of media, and in the citizen's processing of different media messages, whether informative or fictional (Döveling, von Scheve & Konijn, 2010), what is new is that today, on media such as Twitter, the timeline for certain events of a political or social nature is an amalgamation of information, opinion, interpretation and emotions, repeated and amplified by the network itself, giving rise to what Papacharissi (2015) calls "affective news streaming".

#### **4. Conclusions**

Throughout these pages, several general factors have been pointed out that, whether externally or internally, configure contemporary media consumption. At the same time, an approximation from the prism of emotions reveals that, given the affective baggage that comes with the use of mobile technologies, digital habits for the acquisition of information and being in contact with other users always present an emotional component. This is also marked by complexity, covering both positive feelings (increased connectedness with family and friends, sense of belonging to a social group...) and negative ones emotion (dependence on the mobile, anxiety and information saturation, etc.).

The first of these factors is the extraordinary quantity of information that user has available to them and which requires an efficient system of filtering information, so as not to succumb to the avalanche of information. The second is the acceleration of short-term living, which brings with it the over-evaluation of immediate and close-range information. An appropriate management of the cognitive and attention load, which has been converted into a currency of exchange in social interaction, emerges as a necessary skill in the process of media education. This is a challenge, taking into account the distinctive elements of media consumption through several devices, frequently converging simultaneously, turning digital activity into a multi-screen experience. In this sense, the growth of the so-called Internet of Things, where information is accessible on many devices and elements of everyday life, suggest that the media diet will become ever more fragmented and diverse with the impact this will have for emotional complexity, as has

been discussed. Finally, digital consumption has acquired a growing importance in the social dimension, awarding greater weight to access through platforms such as Facebook or Twitter and to the recommendations of other users, to the detriment of traditional media.

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