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***Sharing Media Content in Social Media  
The Challenges and Opportunities of UDC  
(User-distributed Content)***

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Article

**Published as:**

Villi, M. & Noguera-Vivo, J.M. (2017). Sharing Media Content in the Social Media Environment. The Challenges and Opportunities of UDC (User-distributed Content), *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 6(2), 207-224.

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## **Abstract**

The article explores the distribution of mass media content by the online audience that connects by using the different social platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The focus is on the new and developing concept of user-distributed content (UDC). From the viewpoint of media organisations, UDC is a process by which the mass media converge with online social networks through the intentional use of social media services and platforms in an effort to expand the distribution of media content. UDC does not have a long trajectory as a study object in media studies. The study suggests that practices related to UDC can be more strongly incorporated into management and journalism in mainstream media organisations, and that the distribution of media content can rely increasingly on the communication structures among the online audience. In the review of the UDC practices, complimented with interviews with Spanish and Finnish journalists, practitioners can find keys for a better understanding of audience management as part of the content distribution process.

**Keywords:** social media, online audience, user-distributed content, social consumption

## Introduction

The online social networks provide a setting for an on-going flow of interpersonal communication that offers new possibilities especially for the *distribution* of content produced by media organisations. In fact, several media scholars have argued that for media organisations, engaging, encouraging and assisting the audience in the circulation of media content is more important than having them participate in content production (Hermida, Fletcher, Korrell, & Logan 2012; Singer et al. 2011). Yet, although social networks are now an important source of media content for many Internet users, there exists only a preliminary understanding of the importance of social media services and platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, as sources of media content and the extent to which people use them to find content (Kleis Nielsen & Schröder 2014). As the Internet changes the way consumers gather information and relate to each other (Pérez-Latre, Portilla, & Sánchez 2011: p. 69), the need for research on these changes – especially regarding media content distribution – underlines the need for a new approach. In this article, we review precisely such media practices that are focused on supporting content distribution by and within the audience. As the framework for this review we utilise the concept of *user-distributed content* (UDC).

From the viewpoint of media organisations, UDC is a process by which the mass media converge with online social networks through the intentional use of social media services and other platforms in an effort to expand the distribution of media content (Villi, Matikainen, & Khaldarova 2015; see also Napoli 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar 2012). UDC describes the role of horizontal, intra-audience connections in disseminating media content; the audience takes part in the distribution processes of media organisations by enclosing the content with social relations (Villi 2012; Villi & Matikainen 2015). UDC is about *sharing as distribution*. We understand UDC as the sum of all the intentional activities of the audience (linking, recommending, sharing, tweeting, messaging) that serve in amplifying the extent, visibility and impact of *existing* online media content. In this sense, we can draw clear boundaries between UDC and other related concepts, such as citizen journalism and user-generated content (UGC), which are pronouncedly about producing *new* content.

Currently the most essential tools for UDC are interpersonal means such e-mail and IM (instant messaging), as well as social plugins<sup>1</sup> such as the Facebook Recommend, Google +1 and Twitter buttons that the media have integrated into their web pages (Villi et al. 2015). According to a cross-national study (Newman & Levy 2014: 70), Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp are by far the most important online networks for news. About half of Facebook (57%) and Twitter users (50%) say they find, share or discuss news stories online (ibid.). UDC is an emerging conceptual terrain, and it does not have a long trajectory as a study object in media studies. UDC does not appear as a topic of study on its own, but rather connected to other issues such as copyleft licenses and their possibilities to amplify cooperation and dissemination of information. Neither has UDC been conceptually developed within the research on journalism, which has rather been more focused on UGC (van Dijck 2009). The studies on or relating to UDC (e.g. Bechmann 2012; Hermida et al. 2012; Napoli 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar 2012; Villi 2012) do not provide a firm or generally acknowledged theoretical framework.

Until now, UGC has been the most recognised form of audience participation (Noguera, Villi, Nyirő, De Blasio, & Bourdaa 2013), and also the strategies of media organisations concerning the participation of the audience have focused largely on UGC (Napoli 2010; Singer et al. 2011; Thurman 2008). It is possible to find typologies of UGC (see e.g. Harrison 2010; Wardle & Williams 2010), but the research on UDC lacks such approaches. Considering the

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<sup>1</sup> The social plugins (Kontaxis et al. 2012) have also been referred to as ‘social bookmarking tools’ (Messner et al. 2011) or ‘social buttons’ (Gerlitz & Helmond 2011).

five stages of the news value chain (Domingo et al. 2008) we can state that the UDC processes add value to the content during the two final stages: distribution and interpretation.

This article examines how mainstream media organisations can tap into the communicative dimensions of the participatory online audience and take advantage of the connections and interpersonal networks within them. The main interest is on the utilisation of UDC as a journalistic practice, and how media organisations and journalists are facing the challenge of collaborating with the audience in disseminating media content. The key argument is that UDC as a concept is crucial in assessing the role of the participatory audience in the practices of media organisations, especially in a time when the organisations themselves have begun to recognise the importance of UDC, as recent studies (Hermida et al. 2012; Himelboim & McCreery 2012; Newman 2012; Villi 2012) indicate.

The object of study in this article is narrowly connected to the uses and gratifications theory. The notion of active audiences has promoted research from this perspective (Ruggiero 2000: 8). The uses and gratifications theory is a useful framework for analysing how specific forms of media consumption (such as sharing) are connected to 'digital gratifications', such as the adoption of new roles in online communities or the recognition of the value of the active users by the media. In relation to the scope and aim of this article, if media organizations can improve their knowledge about the kind of gratifications the audience members are expecting in the online context, they could develop better strategies for the social distribution of their content. According to Ruggiero (2000: 14), 'As new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis.' Audience analysis is strongly determined by how people are distributing media content (Hermida 2014).

### **UDC as Social Consumption of Online Media Content**

Imperative to the success of UDC is the interest in one another among the audience, possibly even more so than publishers' ability to create interesting content (see Anderson, Bell, & Shirky 2013: 9). In connection to this shift, Jenkins (2006: 20) uses the concept of 'affective economies', which refers to how 'the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked'. To motivate such an ideal consumer, Jenkins and Deuze (2008) encourage media organisations to accelerate the flow of media content across different delivery channels; thereby they can expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce consumer loyalties and commitment. However, it should be noted that this ideal consumer is not necessarily the most common profile in the online audience. Following the typology of Nielsen (2006), most of them are more probably 'lurkers'.

An important context for UDC is 'socialised media' (Jenkins & Deuze 2008: 5), which represents the many shifts in contemporary (online) communication, such as participatory culture, connected communities of interest and fluidity across platforms (Boyd 2008). According to Castells (2006), socialised communication beyond the mass media system is one of the main characteristics of the network society.

Terms and concepts that closely relate to UDC are 'superdistribution', the forwarding of media through social networks (Anderson et al. 2013: 14) and 'social curation', which illustrates the networked distribution of media content by adding qualitative judgement and imbuing the content with personal and social significance (Villi 2012: 615; Villi, Moisander, & Joy 2012). Hermida (2010) has labelled the contribution of the users to the creation, dissemination and discussion of news via social media services as 'ambient journalism'. Singer (2014) has coined the term 'user-generated visibility', which is very close to UDC. The idea of 'friendcasting' (Lee & Cho, 2011) is implicit in these approaches to social media

use. Practices related to UDC (although not using the UDC concept) have also been discussed by Bechmann (2012); Glynn, Huge and Hoffman (2011); Hermida et al. (2012); Himelboim and McCreery (2012); Jung and Moro (2012); Lee and Ma (2012); Kleis Nielsen and Schröder (2014); and Weeks and Holbert (2012).

While the dissemination of media content through social interaction has always played a role in the diffusion of media, a growing body of work suggests that sharing is becoming central to the way people experience media content (Hermida et al. 2012: 7). Sharing is a word that describes well participation in social media in general; it can be both an act of distribution, communication and consumption (Belk 2010: 730; John 2013). Sharing in the digital age is about social exchange on the one hand, and about distribution and dissemination on the other (Wittel 2011: 3, 8). The sharing of news, or what we can call the social consumption of news, is becoming an important part of news consumption.

### **Guidelines and Journalistic Practices**

In this section, we discuss UDC practices and guidelines for mainstream media organisations. Many media outlets launched online sites already in the latter half of the 1990s, but for a long time their online practices were rather a matter of performing one-way mass communication, without engaging much in participatory processes with the audience. It is only now, during the last several years, that in particular the development of social media tools and platforms has cultivated new forms of relationships between the producers and consumers of media content.

Journalists often have to deal with social media guidelines in order to find a balance between individual and institutional strategies and models for UDC. In this sense, Twitter as ‘a holistic media system’ (Noguera 2013: 97), where messages and interactions form an entity with its own media logic, shapes and structures (Hermida 2010: 300), is a suitable environment for analysing the interactions surrounding the distribution of media content. The sharing of content is a strong component in Twitter, and the platform has been defined to be more an information-sharing network than a social network (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon 2010). For example, during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, ‘journalists and activists served primarily as key information sources, while bloggers and activists were more likely to re-tweet content and, thus, serve as key information routers’ (Lotan et al. 2011: 16).

According to Bechmann (2012), the most important aspect when addressing multi-platform strategies is whether or not the media have ownership and control of the channels and traffic generated by their content. The channels (i.e. social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook) that UDC is in a way is outsourced to, are most often independent from the legacy media organisations, owned by other companies that can be more or less regarded as their competitors. As a consequence, media organisations might need to give a thought to creating their own UDC outlets that could act as semi-journalistic middlemen between the media and the audience. On the other hand, the traffic from the competitors often leads back to the realm of the legacy media, such as when a recommendation on Facebook takes the interested reader to a newspaper’s website. Full control over media content is not possible in social networks, and thus it is better to focus on the management of content than the ownership of content.

Linking, recommending and (re)tweeting are redefining traditional journalistic notions such as gatekeeping. However, journalists, due to corporate social media guidelines, do not usually act as major routers of external content in networks like Twitter. Even when journalists are not more afraid of using external links in Twitter than internal links to their own media (Noguera 2013: 111), their daily job is not fully integrated to the Twitter routines. The question that actors in the industry need to ponder is should both media organisations and

individual journalists adopt an equally active attitude with regard to distributing content in social networks and nurturing and facilitating communication in audience communities.

Online discovery and sharing patterns are playing a growing part in customer acquisition and monetisation in media organisations (Newman 2012: 15). The creation of guidelines on the use of the social networks in many media organisations has taken place mostly in order to protect their brand and credibility than to experiment with new narrative clues or ways of dissemination – self-regulation and protection rather than innovation (Herrera 2013: 47). A recent research (Herrera 2013) on eleven U.S. mainstream media and their social media guidelines for journalists indicates an absence in the guidelines of explicit advices on how to take advantage of social networks in terms of journalistic production and distribution. It seems that many strategies related to UDC, such as those concerning acting on networks like Twitter, originate from the personal initiatives of individual journalists with their community of followers or contacts – in which case they are rather operational models than strategies.

The premise for engaging the users in participation with media organisations is that the participation is meaningful for most of the users (Mørk Petersen 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010: 21–22, 25). Advantageous for UDC is that it is not a very time consuming activity for the users. UDC represents in many ways ‘easy participation’ (Newman & Levy 2013: 70), consisting of simple, everyday actions (Jenkins et al. 2013: 199) that represent a ‘light’ version of participation - or better, ‘participation lite’. Pressing the Facebook Recommend button placed next to a news item or other story is a less demanding task than writing a comment, tweet or a Facebook post. Chung (2008: 673) states how ‘It appears that the news audience does not actively engage in various uses of interactive features on news websites, especially the features that facilitate communication and the expression of ideas—features that require more effort to be utilised’.

Media organisations can keep in step with the audience and facilitate the distribution of their content through the major online communication platforms the audience members are using. There the online audience can be provided with shareable content and ‘spreadable media’ (Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013). This allows media organisations to reach new audiences and keep their existing audience connected – even if not on their own site (Himmelboim & McCreery 2012: 429, 432). News consumers engage increasingly in ‘multi-reading’ (Dillon 1992), the concomitant use of print and electronic media. ‘Trans-readership’ is another term used to describe the consumption of news on more than one platform (Fortunati, Deuze, & de Luca 2014: 135). In parallel to this, the journalists in mainstream media organisations often need new knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of the participatory online environment and the multiplatform users (Noguera et al. 2013; Villi & Matikainen 2015).

In addition to the tools and the platforms provided to the audience, the content in itself can have an effect on the magnitude of UDC. Thus, media organisations can – complementing search engine optimisation (SEO) – practice social media optimisation (SMO), or, in this case, more accurately ‘UDC optimisation’, in an effort to encourage peer-to-peer distribution of their content. (Villi 2012: 620). UDC optimisation is exemplified, for instance, in how the media can try to avoid publishing on their Facebook pages such content that is not ‘likeable’ (i.e. cannot be liked on Facebook). Studies have shown that the social media users prefer to distribute content that is funny and positive (Berger & Milkman 2011; Matikainen & Villi 2013; Newman 2011; Ridell 2011). News stories targeted for UDC can be ‘light’ news, which do not concern major news events or hard news (Zeller et al. 2014: 222-223). Mainstream media organisations can also practice UDC optimisation by creating headlines that act as ‘hooks’ that encourage dissemination. In this, they can learn from such online services as *Upworthy* and *Buzzfeed*.

Importantly, in UDC optimisation the overall visibility of the media outlets and their content does not concern only the marketing department, but journalists as well. Naturally, the above-mentioned demands for mainstream journalistic practices are controversial and debatable, especially if UDC is regarded mainly as being connected to content marketing, brand promotion and customer engagement.

Platforms such as *LinkedIn* and the various instant messaging applications are growing in importance in the distribution of media content. It is feasible to think that in a multi-platform context each social platform offers a specific setting for the social consumption of media content. Thus, the media can manually select and optimise headlines for specific social networks (Newman 2011: 26), for example, by using Twitter for breaking news and delivering such news to Facebook that can generate debate.

In April 2013, *The New York Times* created a new team within its newsroom, dedicated to studying statistics in order to understand better how their content is consumed. The responsible for that team, James Robinson, underlined during the International Journalism festival in Perugia, Italy: 'We know next to nothing in the newsroom about how people consume our content (...) the only way you can do that is through analytics, understanding how people are interacting, what they're doing with your content' (McAthy 2013).

In relation to this challenge, another practice that utilises and enhances UDC is using the audience as 'radar' (Villi 2012). Journalists can observe which stories and content circulate the most in social media. The UDC radar provides possibilities for better analytics (Napoli 2012; Taneja & Mamoria 2012) on content consumption, especially compared to word-of-mouth recommendations among those who consume media on conventional platforms, such as read exclusively the printed newspaper. It can be assumed that media organisations are interested in analysing the reasons for why certain content goes viral, as well as the use of social networks not just as an amplified content dissemination channel but also as a way to listen the audience. Audience interests have always influenced journalists but that influence has never been as direct, explicit, and immediate as it is now (Singer 2014: 67); sometimes the audience can be even considered to be too direct and influential (Villi 2012: 624).

### **Perceptions on UDC in Mainstream Media Outlets in Spain and Finland**

The concept of 'news as a process' has been broadly developed in media studies, but the social platforms require new perspectives (Lotan et al. 2011). We move on now to examine the perceptions on UDC of journalists from Spain and Finland – two European countries with high penetration of social media use.

Finland is an advanced society in terms of the diffusion of ICT. The Finnish news media have been slow to change because they have done so well in a protected market (Lehtisaari et al. 2012: 53). However, recently, the Finnish news media have been increasingly channelling content toward online platforms. In Spain, in early 2014 the daily access to the Internet reached 60 per cent of the population (AIMC 2014). The Spanish media industry is facing hard times and is searching for viable business models in the digital landscape. In 2013, more than 4.000 journalists were fired and 73 media outlets closed down. There is a positive side as well, because in the period 2008-2013, 300 new media outlets were created (mostly small and online) and according to surveys 67 per cent of Spanish journalists think that the Internet will help to develop better journalism (APM 2013).

Surveys conducted in Finland show that 17 per cent of Finns consume media content distributed by others online on a daily basis (Matikainen & Villi 2013), and 24 per cent share a story via social media or email every week (Newman & Levy 2014: 31). In Spain, the level

of social consumption of news is very high, as 38 per cent find news via social networks and 12 per cent via email (Newman & Levy 2014: 14-15). Spain differs from many other countries in that a significant portion of the users identifies social networking sites as an important gateway to news on the Internet (Kleis Nielsen & Schröder 2014).

### *Data and Method*

The Spanish sample is composed of five innovative and strong online Spanish media. They are web-native in the sense that they have no print edition. The studied media are the Spanish edition of *The Huffington Post* ([www.huffingtonpost.es](http://www.huffingtonpost.es)), *El Diario* ([www.eldiario.es](http://www.eldiario.es)), *El Confidencial* ([www.elconfidencial.com](http://www.elconfidencial.com)), the scientific publication *Materia* ([esmateria.com](http://esmateria.com)) and the publication for young people *Gonzoo* ([www.gonzoo.com](http://www.gonzoo.com)). The interviews with one journalist representing each news media were carried out in 2013-2014. The positions of the interviewed journalists were related to the management of online communities (social media editor, product manager) and/or top-management in the newsrooms (co-founder, director, editor).

In Finland, the studied four news media are major mainstream newspapers, including the leading newspaper in Finland *Helsingin Sanomat* ([www.hs.fi](http://www.hs.fi)), and three important regional newspapers *Kaleva* ([www.kaleva.fi](http://www.kaleva.fi)), *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* ([www.ess.fi](http://www.ess.fi)) and *Turun Sanomat* ([www.ts.fi](http://www.ts.fi)). All of the newspapers have also a strong online presence. The interviews took place in 2013-2014. The four interviewees consisted of journalists in the middle and top-management of the newspapers.

The dialogue in the semi-structured interviews with the Spanish and Finnish journalists was staged according to a thematic, topic-centred structure focusing on two main thematic blocks: the UDC approaches of the media organisations and the UDC-related practices of the journalists in social media. These themes also formed the basis for the thematic analysis of the interview material. In order to identify the quotes from the interviews we will use the first letters of each medium: HU, ED, EC, MA and GO (Spain) and HE, ET, KA and TU (Finland).

### *Perceptions of UDC*

The views of the interviewees are in line with observations elsewhere. As globally the most popular social media platform, Facebook seems to be the first one really driving audience traffic to the mass media. Facebook has emerged as an important channel for distributing media content, almost as a mass medium in itself (Gerlitz & Helmond 2011; Ma et al. 2012; Newman 2012: 15; Olmstead et al. 2011: 2; Sasseen, Olmstead, & Mitchell 2013). However, a current challenge for UDC practices is that the social media audience is becoming more fragmented. The status of Facebook as the 'place where everybody is' or the 'last mass medium' is slightly eroding, as especially teens are connecting increasingly on other platforms, such as *Instagram* or *Snapchat*. In many ways, Facebook has been the last remnant of the common cultural media outlet (Glynn et al. 2011: 119). Nowadays, a lot of content distribution takes place on the channels and platforms of the 'dark social' (Madriral 2012), for example, when users send links to content by using e-mail or such instant messaging services as *WhatsApp* (see for data on this in Newman & Levy 2014: 70), *LINE*, and *iMessage*, which cannot be as easily analyzed as the traffic on Twitter, for example. Notably, in Spain, messaging apps are being used actively for UDC. WhatsApp is used by over half of Spaniards (60%) and over a quarter (26%) say they use it for news. (ibid. 2014: 71.)

However, in both Spain and Finland the online sites of established media brands are still the main gateway to content (Newman & Levy 2014: 14). In general, for the time being, social media recommendations are not as significant a driver for online media consumption as search or the reputation or brand of media outlets (Chyi 2012: 237; Mitchell, Rosenstiel, &

Christian 2012; Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel 2011: 7). While undoubtedly an important driver of attention and traffic online, social media is somewhat less frequently used specifically as a way of finding media content than is assumed (Kleis Nielsen & Schröder 2014; Zeller et al. 2014: 222).

Nevertheless, Finnish interviewees (KA, TU) noted how the presence in social media is important for the visibility of the media brand, its image and audience traffic. A Finnish newspaper (HE) proactively distributes its content in online communities. For instance, if the newspaper has made a feature article about a pop singer, then a member of the editorial staff can visit the singer's online fan community pages and provide there links to the article. They can also try to spot 'alpha distributors', such users that have a large following and ample presence in social media, and thus can act as key nodes in disseminating content. Following increasing collaboration and open journalism (Aitamurto 2014), it can be considered important that the journalists themselves are social in social media and include UDC in their daily work processes, e.g. acting as such messengers that inform online communities about content the newspaper has produced. This change to 'social journalism' has happened during the last couple of years and is nowadays already very 'programmatic' in the newspaper (HE). For them the 'findability' of content is critical. In this, the 'social media leverage' can 'propel' news stories to a much higher level of popularity.

The individual behaviour of journalists in social networks is a growing field of study, which sheds light on the many tensions between collaboration with the audience and the control of information. For the audience the act of sharing content is related to the new social ways of consumption of content, positively labelled 'distribution democracy' (Malik 2011). Users are choosing content not only for their own consumption but also for the consumption of others (Singer 2014: 68). However, for journalists and mainstream media organisations the sharing of content forms a challenge that requires better judgement of how the content is being consumed. This implies understanding that journalism is an on-going process, an open activity to many actors – mainstream media outlets, activists, journalists and bloggers.

According to the Spanish interviewees, the self-perception of journalists is indeed shifting away from the traditional and hierarchic model of journalists (top) versus audiences (down) toward journalists engaging and acting with audiences: 'We like to see ourselves as just one more actor in the horizontal communication landscape of the web, and not at the peak of the classic journalistic pyramid' (GO). There is a growing demand of 'having stronger teams of human resources focused on the social networks' (ED).

However, not all of the news media that we studied share the same enthusiastic view. For example, in one Finnish newspaper (TU), the attitude toward UDC is more bipartite. The newspaper needs to attract readers to its online edition, but the online traffic is not an end in itself. The newspaper has not adopted a paywall, and thus the online visitors are in a sense 'free riders' for them. The newspaper does not want to maximise the number of online visitors, as they 'take away' from the print readers, i.e. subscribers. The newspaper aims to find a 'suitable number' of online readers, who do not cannibalise the print sales too much, but at the same time they need the online readers because of the sales of online advertisements. Their strategy is in fact quite complicated and indecisive, and still based very much on print-first thinking. The circulation of their content in social media (for free) is good 'up to a certain limit', but UDC is not exclusively a good thing.

This example shows how media organisations have to carefully consider the effect of strict paywalls on the ability and willingness of the audience to distribute their content on the different social media platforms (see Kinstler 2013; Chyi 2012). In order to facilitate UDC, media organisations can choose to let such users through the paywalls for free who are following the recommendations of their peers (to consume those individual media items

recommended to them), in addition to offering better chances for micro payments and à la carte consumption, instead of requiring subscriptions or purchases of entire newspapers or magazines from those occasional visitors (see Villi & Hayashi 2015).

### **Implications of UDC for Mainstream Media Organisations**

This article argued that a key approach in how media organisations can incorporate social media features into their online practices is to facilitate the audience to share and distribute media content in the online social networks. Christensen, Skok and Allworth (2012: 15) maintain that in ‘Where new value can be created, the next area that news organisations can address is the mechanisms used to deliver their products’. It is important that media organisations get better at working with their users to filter and pass on relevant material (Anderson et al. 2013: 108). Most users are especially interested in news and other content that they receive from family, friends and other close acquaintances, and thus the efficient use of social media platforms can make it easier and more likely for them to follow the media (Enda & Mitchell 2013; Matikainen & Villi 2013). In fact, users are highly likely to encounter media content even if their primary intention in using a social media was to connect with friends (Glynn et al. 2011: 114). Importantly, engaging the audience in UDC offers individual audience members a more implicit and effortless mode of participation than creating and producing new content (i.e. UGC), and thus can lead to increased audience participation within the media industry.

Media organisations can consider ways how to be actively present in social media, being part of the social bustle. In all, acknowledging the importance of UDC means that content delivery can change from an enabling process to a strategic process (see Aris & Bughin 2005: 31). Now, media content spreads seemingly arbitrarily on the different social media platforms. We suggest that media organisations focus on investigating the mechanisms and nodes of content distribution in social media and make their content both spreadable and findable. It is not reasonable for media organisations to assume that the users find their way to their sites only by following media brands or by the help of search engines. UDC is an approach to deliberately outsource content delivery to the multi-platform narrowcast networks formed by the audience communities. However, the UDC strategy may not be related to just the ‘MOST data’ – the most shared, the most linked, the most re-tweeted – but also to how mainstream journalism itself is changing when issues such as relevance or credibility are determined by the social consumption of media content.

The advice for the incumbent media outlets is to carefully plan how to manage the complex, multi-platform social media context. We believe that understanding UDC as a process helps media organisations take advantage of the audience communities that network, communicate and share content by using the different social media services. It is also useful that the media integrate social media tools, such as social plugins like the Facebook Recommend and Twitter buttons to their content, making it more readily available for horizontal distribution among the audience (Villi et al. 2015). Because of the fragmentation of both platforms and devices in the multi-platform environment, media outlets could consider opening up and offering content API (application programming interface) for the distribution of their content, such as *The Guardian*<sup>2</sup> newspaper has done.

As also our study with the Finnish and Spanish journalists indicates, we are beginning to increasingly find journalists who acknowledge that in the online environment influenced by social media the journalistic work does not finish when the story is published. Examples of this are the search for key nodes of content distribution (the ‘alpha distributors’) and the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/open-platform>

active engagement in online audience communities (Malmelin & Villi 2015a; Malmelin & Villi 2015b). The journalists look for new stakeholders in the quest for amplifying the impact of content and with that amplifying the content itself. We argue that in the social media environment, promoting content distribution is as relevant as publishing the content online in the first place.

Based on the research on UDC, the practical UDC guidelines for mainstream media organisations and individual journalists include, in their most simple form a) providing and exploiting such social media tools, delivery platforms and services that facilitate the audience members to distribute media content, and b) producing and optimising such content that the audience eagerly distributes within their online communities. However, learning to actually nurture audience communities and manage relationships in the communities is a much more demanding and difficult task for media organisations.

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