Exploring News in the Digital Age: An Overview

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ABSTRACT *The nature and pace of technological change is mind boggling. The world wide web is exponentially expanding and so are the choices for the user. The speed of Internet has changed the way people receive the information. Contemporary society has been revolutionized by the rapid growth and development of communication technologies. The proliferating convergence of the media has brought about a transformation in the process of communication and transmission of information. This present era of transition from traditional newspapers to digitally produced news offers both opportunities and challenges. New thinking and new methodologies are needed to cope with the challenges of digital news production and distribution. The impact of the internet on the news content is more visible. As the number of online newspapers is increasing, it becomes pertinent to assess the dimensions of the new media due to which nature of the new content is in a constant state of flux*

Introduction:

There is no denying the fact that in the contemporary times, journalism has undergone unprecedented and profound transformation. Before the printing press, exchange of information was limited to the elites. From the Gutenberg to the era of internet, journalism has traversed a long journey and in the process undergone many extraordinary variations in its development and growth. With the changing technology, there is no stopping to the access to the information and news at a global level. In 'The Elements of Journalism', Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel put forth that each time there has been a period of significant social, economic and technological change, a transformation in news occurred. This happened in the 1830s-40s with the advent of the telegraph; the 1880s with a drop in paper prices and a wave of immigration; the 1920s with radio and the rise of gossip and celebrity culture; the 1950s at the onset of the Cold War and television. The arrival of cable, followed by the Internet and mobile technologies, has brought the latest upheaval in news. And this time, the change in news may be even more dramatic. Kovach and Rosenstiel explain, "For the first time in our history, the news increasingly is produced by companies outside journalism, and this new economic organization is important. We are facing the possibility that independent news will be replaced by self-interested commercialism posing as news." Kovach and Rosenstiel argue that new technology, along with globalization and the conglomeration of media, is causing a shift away from journalism that is connected to citizen building and one that supports a healthy democracy.

News organizations have been quick to adopt online versions of their print newspaper. This exponential growth of online newspapers and online news consumers might be cited as being provoked by the shrinking newspaper audience and the loss of credibility for the mass media in the U.S (Jones, 2004). According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, more people now go online to get their news than read the newspaper. To make the Internet a news medium, journalist must fully exploit the medium's basic properties (Fredin, 1997). "The internet is redistributing the news audience in ways that [are] threatening some traditional news organizations," observed Harvard researcher Thomas E. Thompson in a study of 160 news-based Web sites. The features that distinguish Web sites from other media are: multimedia, speed for updating information, horizontal distribution, decentralization, accessibility, no hierarchy, no censorship and interactivity (Lasica, 1996). Interactivity is the primary characteristic of new technologies and it has caused

a considerable reassessment of communication research (Rice and Williams, 1984: 35; Heeter, 1989: 221; Morris and Organ, 1996; Pavlik, 1996; Rafeli and Sudweeks, 1997; Ha and James, 1998: 459). The ability of online journalism to adapt the paramount facets of newspapers, magazine, radio and television and package it into a particular new item for consumption with all the potency of the existing media has grabbed the attention of media scholars and practitioners. Online newspapers have emerged as an encouraging platform for dissemination of news and information to a global audience. Traditional journalism was limited by geographical boundaries and confined by spatial propensities. But the world wide web has opened up new vistas for the flow of information with the availability of web resources. The potentialities of the Web have been recognized and accepted by the media industries. The changing global economic dynamics, regulatory forces driven by the change in technology are converging to bring about a massive shift in the nature of journalism. News is now created and produced digitally and provide access to it as well. The present era of transition from traditional newspapers to digitally produced news offers both challenges and opportunities. Internet is far pervasive and accessible and has ushered in dramatic experiences in the contemporary world.

Characteristics of Online Newspapers:

Moving newspaper online "facilitates immense archival capabilities, and these archives, along with tools for quickly and conveniently searching and retrieving from them, are assumed to be attractive to the online audience."(Mings n.d). Some scholars insist that moving newspaper online reduces "the cost associated with newsprint and distribution" and "removes traditional space restrictions, allowing for greater in-depth coverage of items of reader interest."(Hume n.d). Online newspapers are edited in the cyberspace and stored in server computers. The space of server computers is almost unlimited. Millions of articles of several letter size pages can be stored in a small hard disk, and a server computer has much more capacity than a common hard disk. However, in spite of such impressive possibilities and benefits of online newspapers, there are difficulties to deal with. One of these is the financial problem. People do not usually intend to pay money for the articles on the Web (Caruso, 1997). They are accustomed to free information on the Internet. On the contrary, the developing and maintaining cost for an online newspaper is high if it is not filled with 'shovelware' of the print counterpart, i.e., print stories reproduced on

the Web pages. In addition to the financial burden attributed to audiences, moving online requires the extra cost to the media. Some online newspapers use audio and video clips to deliver issues more vividly than their print counterparts, and many of them provide online communities which are designed to attract online readers.

Since people do not need to wait for delivery of newsprints, the way people read online newspapers is different from that of print counterparts. Some readers visit online newspapers more often to update information. Moreover, many of them read more than one online newspaper because the access to online newspapers is easy and usually free of charge. The new reader group consists of young people who are familiar with the Internet and use it almost every day.(Mings n.d) The adoption of interactivity through the use of interactive features has affected journalism practice in numerous ways and is changing how news is being presented, delivered and perceived. The use of interactive features allows for immediacy of information, increased communication with and among readers, personalized journalism that is tailored to one's liking, and non-linearity of information (Rich, 2003). The convergence of media online also allows audiences to experience news stories through multiple channels. However, while the potential of interactivity for journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze, 2003; Fogg et al., 2002; Outing, 1998) and online news publications' incorporation of interactive features (Chan-Olmsted & Park, 2000; Chung, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Li, 1998; Massey & Levy, 1999; Schultz, 1999) have been independently examined, little has been done to shed light on the audience that is actually making use of the interactive features. Furthermore, research regarding online news audiences' motivations for using interactive features is nearly absent in the literature.

Exploring news in the new mediascape:
Newspaper industry has made significant strides in understanding how users read and use their news products. Evidence suggests that readers (particularly young readers) both access and read news differently (Vahlberg et al, 2008) and expect news to be available 24 hours(Tapscott,2008). The new media are influencing how news content is created, delivered and managed. An online newspaper, also known as web newspaper, has been defined as a newspaper that exists in the World Wide Web or Internet, either separately or as an online version of the printed publication. Online newspaper has emerged as a very distinct and divergent source for millions of readers everyday. The online version offer diverse choices to the reader in accessing the newspaper of their choice. Customization, multimedia, hyperlinks, interactivity has enhanced the uniqueness of online newspapers. The impact of these features is evident in the news content. As people get news in real time, news is in a constant state of flux. Emerging fluid nature of news embraces broad spectrum of the capabilities of the new media. The potential of interactivity has motivated scholars from various disciplines to explicate the concept and has recently made its mark in the communication field. The use of interactive features on the Internet has the potential to trigger a shift in the communication direction. With the multidimensional flow of messages, the audience can now actively choose the information they want and even participate in the production of information.

Online media permit news reports to provide layers of content that can include text, audio and video as well as graphics and animations, permitting readers to access news content in considerably greater depth than traditional news stories can provide. (Albarran and Goff, 2000) . The 'contextualized' journalism offers textual, multidimensional news reporting than stories told in print and broadcast media (Pavlik,1997). Online newspapers have ushered in a transformation in the reading behavior and simultaneously necessitated a new paradigm for journalism. The rapid changes and development in technology have been dramatic and the changing audience has also necessitated the presence of large and medium newspapers to have an online presence.

The steady increase in Internet news consumption has let to worries about the demise of traditional mass media news in the near future. While traditional news media have been quick to move their content online in order to capture Internet audiences, media scholars are especially concerned about the self-selective nature of online news consumption, which could accelerate audience fragmentation. While the newspaper industry continues to be criticized, the Internet has become one of newspapers' key strategies in regaining readership and circulation (Erlindson, 1995; Fulton, 1996).

The exponential growth of the Internet has expanded the applicability of the uses and gratification approach because this medium demands a higher level of interactivity from its users compared to other traditional media (Ruggiero, 2000). While individuals can attempt to gratify television needs through simply switching channels and clicking the remote control, the inherent interactive nature of the Internet technologies, such as e-mail, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and blogs, require audience members to become active users. Similarly, Internet users actively search for information by clicking on links or using search engines, suggesting the Internet is a more goal-oriented medium (Eighmey,1997) than traditional media and that Internet users are aware of the needs they are attempting to gratify. Furthermore, due to the wide range of interactive features available on the Internet, those who use any of its functions should be able to satisfy a variety of needs (Eighmey, 1997).

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