

# Chapter 1

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## Uses and effects of online news: An introduction and summary

### Introduction

The growing importance of online news challenges the public sphere. On the one hand, the Internet offers a great quantity and diversity of political and socially relevant information for public scrutiny and opens possibilities for deliberation. But, on the other hand it could also fragment discourse by allowing great control to customize the available information. Critics fear that the growing options to filter the content may facilitate disengagement from news and public affairs. Sunstein (2004, p.58) argues that “unanticipated encounters, involving topics and points of view that people have not sought out and perhaps find quite irritating, are central to democracy and even to freedom itself”. Sunstein and others warn that a media consumption that is increasingly dependent on personal interests might hasten the erosion of the common good and cast a shadow over the long-term health of democracies by dangerously reducing the common core of topics for the public discourse (e.g., Andersen & Nørgaard Kistensen, 2006, Bohman, 2004; Mindich, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Prior, 2005; Sunstein, 2002; 2004, Tewksbury, 2003).

The extent to which media contribute to the public discourse is largely determined by the extent to which they succeed in informing their users of public affairs issues. In new interactive media environments, user interests and content preferences may be more crucial indicators than ever of what people actually get from the media. Research suggests that individual control over the information consumption reduces unexpected *chance encounters* and accordingly *passive* or *incidental learning* about topics beyond individual interests.

These worries received some attention in communication research, but evidence is scarce and primarily based on experiments with limited external validity. This dissertation aims to add to our knowledge from a non-experimental, real life setting. It studies the contribution of online news to the public agenda in comparison with traditional media, among which traditional printed newspapers in particular as printed newspapers have often been proven to successfully enrich the public agenda. Given that online news consumption is far from stable yet, the patterns of change and consequences thereof are also taken into consideration.

The studies in this dissertation are based on two surveys. The first survey was conducted in December 2002 and funded by the Netherlands Press Fund. The Dutch Institute for Public Opinion and Market Research (TNS NIPO) carried out almost 1.000 interviews representative of the Dutch adult population<sup>1</sup>. The second survey was conducted in January 2005 and sponsored by the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR). For this second wave, over 400 respondents were selected from those who participated in the first wave. Veldkamp, a research company affiliated to TNS NIPO, carried out the interviews

### **Dissertation outline**

The dissertation consists of five self-contained contributions, of which four are published and one is submitted for publication. The degree of refinement of the analyses increases with the contributions. The first contribution (De Waal, 2003) is a book chapter aimed at a diverse readership and can be considered a general theoretical introduction to the empirical investigations that are covered in the successive chapters. It briefly describes the issues involved with learning about public affairs from the Internet and speculates about future scenarios for online newspapers and their effects for democracy.

The next four contributions are journal articles, all examining different aspects of the uses of online news and their effects on (a) exposure to other media and (b) the public agenda. The article presented in chapter three (De Waal, Schoenbach & Lauf, 2005) addresses the uses of online-newspaper editions and the effects on the exposure to other media channels in late 2002. The articles presented in chapter four and five (Schoenbach,

De Waal & Lauf, 2005; De Waal & Schoenbach, 2007a) both deal with the effects of exposure to online newspapers on the perceived public agenda in 2002. First the effects of online newspapers and different types of quantitative exposure measures are considered. Thereafter, also other types of news sites (such as news sites of radio or TV stations and online-only news sites; in this dissertation referred to as “other” and/or “non-paper” news sites) and more qualitative measures of exposure are included in the analyses. Finally, the article in chapter six (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2007b) investigates patterns of change in the use of online news and other communication channels and displacement effects among them between 2002 and 2005.

The following paragraphs summarize the chapters.

### **Learning about public affairs from the Internet: A prologue**

The second chapter addresses how changes in the media environment, such as increased interactivity and user autonomy, affect learning about public affairs issues. Discussed are the differences between the early online-newspaper editions and traditional newspapers; the theoretical implications of these differences for information selection and processing; the consequences for knowledge acquisition in practice; and finally prospects for online newspapers and their role in democracy. Although early web editions of newspapers typically do not fully exploit the online possibilities, and although research suggests that the online format hinders learning beyond individual interests, it is argued that online news is not doomed to fail. At least for motivated users, mature online news editions can enclose a wealth of information and stimulate deliberation.

### **Online newspapers: A substitute or supplement for other media channels?**

The third chapter explores whether online newspapers substitute or supplement printed newspapers and other media channels. Survey results (N=986) show that visiting online newspapers negatively relates to using print newspapers *at all* among young respondents. Moreover, more *time* spent on online newspapers seems to reduce the time spent on television watching among males and low educated respondents. But visitors of online

newspapers perceive printed newspapers and television still as better sources for their information needs than online newspapers. Furthermore, online newspapers supplement some other media channels, non-paper news websites in particular. The results support earlier findings that online newspapers complement rather than replace print newspapers, but also reveal burgeoning displacement effects among particular groups of respondents.

### **The impact of online newspapers on the extent of perceived topics**

In chapter four the impact of online newspapers on knowledge acquisition is compared to the impact of print newspapers. Printed newspapers effectively make their readers aware of a wide range of public affairs issues. Supposedly, offline newspapers typically guide and surprise their readers. Online, however, personal customization is assumed to hinder learning about a wide range of issues. The findings of the survey (N=986) indicate that it is more complicated than that. Both on- and offline newspapers in fact contribute to widening the agenda of their users. But whereas online newspapers show this effect in the highest-educated group of respondents only, print newspapers are able to expand the horizon of those who are not particularly interested in a wide variety of topics. The results confirm the ability of print newspapers to integrate marginal groups into a community, and additionally reveal that online newspapers serve an information-elite.

### **A further elaboration of the impact of news online on the extent of perceived topics**

The fifth chapter further elaborates on learning from newspapers and online news. It differentiates between the more quantitative, *generic exposure* and the more qualitative, *theme-specific exposure* to print newspapers and the online editions of newspapers, but also to other, non-paper news websites. Moreover, it explores - next to the overall number of perceived topics - the number of perceived political topics in particular. The analyses of the survey (N=986) reveal that printed newspapers effectively increase the overall number of perceived topics and the number of political topics, but only if readers rely on newspapers for information on a wide range of topics and political information respectively. Online newspapers show no effects

whatsoever, but other, non-paper news sites, do: Simple generic exposure to other news sites widens the overall and the political horizon of their users. This study reconfirms that printed newspapers are more effective than their online counterparts, but shows that other news sites are effective too. The findings imply that the format alone (online or offline) cannot explain the differences (neither between on- and offline newspapers nor between online newspaper sites and other websites). Users' perceptions and motivations seem crucial factors too.

### **Changes over time in the profile of online news users, users' perceptions and displacement effects**

In chapter six changes in the profile of online news users, shifts in their uses and perceptions of online news, and displacement effects between online news and other media channels over time are studied by means of a two-wave panel survey (N=411). Findings show a mixed picture as to the changes in the socio-demographic composition, interests and media-use-'diets' of the online news users: They have become more mainstream in some ways but also more distinct in others. Moreover, the analyses reveal differences between perceptions of online newspapers and other news sites on the Internet. For instance, *non-paper news sites* have increasingly been valued for political information whereas *newspaper websites* have gradually lost appreciation in this regard. On the whole, changes in uses and effects are most evident among particular socio-demographic groups, among which young people. The first signs of media-use displacement appear in some of these groups: Under specific conditions online news gradually substitutes printed newspapers, free local newspapers and teletext. Moreover, non-paper news sites seem to replace the web editions of newspapers.

## **A summary and discussion of results**

Based on the studies in this dissertation, we can draw the following main conclusions.

1. Users of online news sites are (still) typically younger, higher-educated and more often male than "non-users,"

the socio-demographic composition of online news users is becoming gradually more mainstream though. In terms of the *Diffusion of Innovations* theory online news users still have the characteristics of the *early adopters* or the *early majority*.

2. Online news attracts people that are above average interested in politics. Remarkably, online news users distinguished themselves even more from non-users in this respect.

3. Visitors of newspaper websites perceive these online editions less suited for their information needs than traditional printed newspapers.

However,

4. exposure to online newspapers is increasingly at the expense of exposure to traditional printed newspapers, particularly among young people.

This suggests that young people use online newspapers as a *substitute* for traditional newspapers, but apparently not so much for informational reasons. Possibly, they use the online editions for more convenience related reasons, like the (nearly) free access, the constant availability and convenient *news alerts*.

5. Other or non-paper news sites (such as news sites of TV and radio stations and online-only news sites) have become more popular in terms of use.

6. Non-paper news sites are increasingly valued for information about politics whereas online newspapers lose value for this type of information.

7. Non-paper news websites are increasingly used *complementary* to printed dailies.

There are indications that other news sites gradually become more popular at the expense of newspaper websites. Especially high-educated people seem to have 'migrated' from newspaper sites to other news sites on the Internet. Possibly this group is seeking a complement to traditional newspapers online for informative reasons.

8. Turning to a printed newspaper *frequently* expands the number of societal topics one is aware of, particularly for those with minimal interests.
9. Printed newspapers effectively expand awareness of public affairs and political topics if people *rely* on them for this type of information (i.e., readers are interested in these topics and consider printed newspapers an important information source for these type of topics).

These seemingly contradicting results regarding interests suggest that frequency of exposure (like measured in the first analyses) is an indication of how much readers rely on printed newspapers as an important information source (like measured in the subsequent, more refined analyses). The result that particularly those with few interests profit from reading printed newspapers frequently can be explained as follows: their minimal interests are sufficiently compensated by the importance they attach to printed newspapers as an information source.

10. Online newspapers effectively expand awareness of societal issues; however this goes for higher educated people only *and* under the condition of prolonged exposure to online newspapers.

This was true in 2002, but the analyses of the 2005-data reveal no effects of online newspapers on the public agenda. In the 2005-analyses “duration of use” has not been analysed separately; instead duration *and* frequency of use have been consolidated into one generic exposure variable. Possibly, the effects of online newspapers are that specific - that is, only the duration of use matters - that they are blurred in a more general context. Another option is that online newspapers do not effectively expand awareness and that the 2002-findings can be explained by a reversed causal relation between exposure to online newspapers and awareness: High-educated people who spent considerable time with the websites of newspaper in 2002 may have been typically well-informed people who were curious about online newspapers.

11. Exposure to other news websites expands awareness of public affairs and political topics.

Apparently, simply being exposed to non-paper news websites suffices; users do not have to be particularly interested in public affairs issues and to

consider news sites important sources for public affairs information in order to learn about a wide variety of topics. This implies that these online news sites can function as an efficient “overview medium” and expand awareness of issues beyond users’ individual interests.

In conclusion, traditional printed newspapers, online newspaper editions and other types of news websites shape the agenda of their users in different ways and are effective for different people. Printed newspapers are more effective than online newspapers in expanding the agenda of their users, even in a real life setting. But unlike the websites of newspapers, non-paper news sites *do* successfully expand the public agenda. The format alone (online or offline) cannot explain the differences. Users’ perceptions and their individual motivations for use seem crucial factors too.

### **Suggestions for future studies**

This dissertation contributes to existing perceptions and knowledge of the uses and effects of online news in different ways. The natural research setting adds to the existing knowledge that is primarily based on experiments. These experiments have shown that under the same conditions people learn more from the print format than from the online format. But in reality, this difference appears not to be so clear. As the uses of online news and the effects of use are analysed on different levels this dissertation also provides insight into the circumstances under which different news sites are effective or not and helps clarifying underlying processes.

The empirical results lead to theoretical considerations, for instance about the differences in the uses and effects of both types of online news (newspaper sites and other news sites). Future research should take into account the motives of use. The reasons to use the websites of newspapers or other news sites (like *nos.nl* and *nu.nl*) may differ. Perhaps the former are used to get background and in-depth information on specific topics and the latter for quick and up-to-the-minute overviews of what is going on in the world.

Since this dissertation is for the most part an *agenda setting* study “awareness” of topics has been gauged and not “in-depth knowledge” of

topics. The diversity of topics is based on quantitative measures: (a) the number of different topics respondents named *within* the thematic category “political issues” and (b) the *total* number of different topics respondents named - regardless this were for instance three sports topics, or, one political, one economic, and one sports topic. Future studies may also look at the more qualitative aspect of issue diversity in terms of variation *between* different thematic categories: In the example above the thematic diversity of the one who has mentioned three sports topic is smaller than of the one who has mentioned three topics of thematically different categories. To further improve our understanding of learning effects of online news, future studies could of course also examine to what extent online news contributes to in-depth knowledge of topics.

Finally, the recent developments in the printed newspaper industry deserve scholarly attention related to the research topics of this dissertation. Despite the downward pattern in print newspaper use among young people the two-wave study in this dissertation revealed increasing figures of the time spent on reading newspapers for this group. This could be the result of the popular free printed national dailies *Metro* and *Splits*. And the newspaper market (aiming at younger generations) is far from steady: In 2006 the tabloid *NRC Next* was launched and in 2007 another two free newspapers have been introduced: *De Pers* and *DAG*. The uses and effects of using these “new newspapers” and how these uses and effects relate to online news are essential for our understanding of the current developments in the news media environment.

### **Three news sources, one suggestion**

The studies in this dissertation have addressed changes in the media environment in relation to the public agenda. Printed newspapers, newspaper websites and other news sites, shape the social agenda of different users in different ways. All in all civic society still profits from traditional newspapers, but the impact of traditional dailies looks like ‘preaching to the converted’: Those who learn from printed newspapers are those who rely on these papers to get information on a wide variety of topics. The migration from readers of traditional newspapers to the online newspaper editions is concerning in that online newspapers apparently fail

to *expand* awareness of societal topics of their users. Are non-paper news websites then our hope for informing citizens about public affairs? The prospects are promising.

A possible explanation for the increasing popularity and efficiency of non-paper news sites is that these websites have exploited the online possibilities, like multimedia applications and frequent news updates, right from the start. *Google News* for instance also offers external links to the WebPages of newspapers and a feature “mostly read.” Such features may appeal to many users and may expand their horizon.

In order to maintain their important role for society and to continue it online, traditional newspapers will at least have to appeal to their current and potential readership. Possibly, traditional and online newspapers but also other news sites can profit from serving individual interests on the one hand and fulfilling the need for professional overviews on the other (see also De Waal & Schoenbach, 2005)<sup>1</sup> - a combination of the “*Daily Me*” of Nicholas Negroponte (1995) and a “*Daily Us*.” The generic *Daily Us*-part should prevent users from getting one-sided information only. Professional journalists remain responsible for the selection and ranking order of the information so that every reader encounters important news stories, stories that editors believe everyone should read. However, *in addition* readers should get more opportunities to receive information that is individually relevant from the bulk of existing (but often unpublished) material. This way, the appeal of newspapers and news sites as “total” or “functional generalistic” media can be improved. As such a “partly customized” edition is a type of *mass customization* and not of “total customization,” newspapers do not have to fear that their users will become detached from society. Human curiosity and the desire to discover what experts but also what common others find important, are the best guarantees for an information search behaviour that is oriented towards generic and not only individual interests.

“No one likes to be caught unaware, and that human tendency provides a natural behavioural check against insularity. Few readers will use customization to opt-out - or else they wouldn’t be using a newspaper.”

Crosbie (2004, p.8)

### **Note**

1. A report that was written for the Dutch Press Institute (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2005) gives an extensive overview of the 2002-study in Dutch. Next to the analyses that are described in the chapters three and four, it provides information on: (a) the gratifications that users get from both types of newspapers, (b) the type of societal topics that respondents mentioned (e.g., politic related issues, financial issues, sports issues etc.), and (c) the contribution of on- and offline newspaper exposure to awareness of topics within these separate categories. In addition, some practical recommendations are made.

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