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**Online News Websites:
How Much Content Do Young Adults Want?**

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Abstract

Usability and user satisfaction are important in an online news site's adoption by users at all skill levels, but particularly for experienced users, who have developed expectations for their online news experiences. This study examined one related facet—the level of detail. How much content do users of Internet news sites really want? A focus group of online news readers and a talk-aloud protocol study revealed themes of variety and control as keys to news site success. Young adults strongly preferred pictures and slideshows to videos. They also liked it when other users or friends rated the interest of particular stories. Ability to interact through comments or other means was not considered useful.

Keywords: online news, usability, user control, user satisfaction

Introduction

In the face of declining newspaper circulation, news websites are widely seen as the future of media organizations.¹ The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, spurred growth in online news sites, sending millions to the Web that day in search of news. Many news consumers made this a permanent part of their media routine.² The 2010 State of the Media report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism states that more than 60 percent of Americans use the Internet for news in a typical day. Because of this large audience, Internet

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news sites possess viability and importance as an advertising source, with tremendous actual and potential advertising revenue.³ Forecasters predict that in 2011 “nearly 25% of all media consumption will be online, drawing 15% of the advertising dollars.”⁴

Still, the Internet is an evolving medium, and its developers are learning what works and what does not, often through trial and error.⁵ Their challenge is to develop online news services (ONS) into a viable medium that people will adopt permanently. Editors receive a variety of advice toward this end: Publish early,⁶ emphasize storytelling,⁷ go hyper-local,⁸ create searchable databases, supplement articles with multimedia and evergreen packages, and find other ways to engage readers in the context of the site.⁹ Usability and user satisfaction are two of the major factors influencing a site’s adoption. This study examines one facet of both factors—level of detail. How much content do ONS users really want? Using a focus group and think-alouds, the researchers attempted to gain a better understanding of young users’ desired level of content. This study explores user opinions on topic variety, article length, multimedia, and interactivity. The subsequent qualitative analysis should prove insightful for Web producers and Internet researchers who need to know how much content users want.

Literature Review

Usability and user satisfaction are two major factors that figure prominently in explaining why people adopt certain sites. Genuis defines usability as “the extent to which a product can be used by specific users to achieve designated goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context.”¹⁰ *Effectiveness* is the user’s ability to achieve a desired end. *Efficiency* is the amount of effort required to achieve this end, and *satisfaction* is the user’s attitude or perception of the site after using it. Satisfaction is achieved when a user finds relevant content quickly and easily. This means a user could be satisfied with a site that lacks usability, so long as he or she achieves the ultimate goal of finding the desired content. An example would be adoption patterns in statistical analysis software, which might have a steep learning curve that users accept because the instrumental value of using the software is sufficiently high.

Usability

According to Peng and Logan, usability “refers to the ease of use, or navigability of the website.”¹¹ They argue that website usability should be gauged by the user’s subjective perception: Does the user believe the site is usable? Because perception is difficult to ascertain, usability can be difficult to measure.

Fu and Salvendy divide usability into two categories.¹² The first, *inherent* usability, includes “learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors and satisfaction.” The other, *apparent* usability, relates to the site’s aesthetics. The primacy of either depends on the user’s task. Someone simply browsing is more influenced by apparent usability, while a user conducting a specific task is more influenced by the site’s inherent usability. After conducting a usability

test, Fu and Salvendy concluded that inherent usability contributed to satisfaction more than apparent usability did when users were both searching and browsing.

Scholarship supports the notion that visual organization can improve usability. According to Lindgaard, “visual stimuli is closely related to both user satisfaction and perceived usability.”¹³ Usability hinges on “experience,” starting with the user’s first impression, and continuing if the experience continues to be pleasant. Other studies have linked format, or page layout, to perceived usability. Vaughan and Dillon examined the genre and structure of a Web-based newspaper, concluding that “humans seek order and patterns in trying to make sense of incoming textual information.”¹⁴

Another important consideration is speed of access. Jacko, Sears, and Borella focused on usability in terms of network delay: “Perceived usability will be influenced by the delays users experience.”¹⁵ Patience for network delay depends on the type of content—text, graphics, or a mix of the two—the user wants to access. The researchers concluded that users’ “perceptions of the quality of the information at a site were significantly influenced by the interaction of delay length and document type.”

Along with speed of access and layout, the user’s intrinsic characteristics also influence usability. Becker and Mottay define usability as “allowing the user to manipulate the site’s features to accomplish a particular goal,” but perception of that usability is influenced by both demographics, skills, and acculturated expectations.¹⁶ The researchers claim to have identified more than 100 such factors, including page layout, navigation, design consistency, and information content.

User satisfaction

Content—the information available on a website—is an important facet not only of usability but also of user satisfaction. Although usability plays a role in overall satisfaction, a user can be satisfied with a site and motivated to use it despite poor usability. Merely providing the desired content could be enough to satisfy the user. Even difficult-to-use applications can be satisfactory if the interface is standardized.

“‘Content,’ or ‘information,’ is the main product” of an ONS, and it is the primary determinant behind a user’s selection and satisfaction.¹⁷ Media users “are motivated by their desire to fulfill certain cognitive and affective needs.”¹⁸ Nielsen emphasizes the difficulty of creating suitable online content, as content written for print media does not always translate well to the Web: “To get optimal usability, you’ve got to write purely for online.”¹⁹ Two aspects of content figure highly in a user’s satisfaction: the desired content must be available, and it must be trustworthy. Quality of content, or at least the user’s perception of its quality, contributes to user satisfaction.²⁰

Often left out of the discussion is the question of how much content is ideal. Professionals might assume that more content is better than less—that the value of an Internet source lies in its ability to deliver seemingly limitless amounts of information. As

Steve Jones of ABCNews.com said, “The great thing about the Internet is that we don’t have to exclude content.”²¹ MSNBC.com was built on the assumption “that there can never be enough information on any one story.”²² Providing so much information in one place keeps “the user glued to the site, rather than forcing them to migrate to other sites for additional facts.”²³

Another important aspect of the user experience is control over the presentation of information. Wang examined the relationship between a user’s perceived locus of control and his or her perception of technology, finding that respondents with a more internalized locus of control expected to be able to use and incorporate technology into a task.²⁴

But for media content providers, is more really better? How much information do users really want? Faster Internet service, more sites, and the growing ability of tech-savvy users to multitask all suggest that speed and ease of access are more important than information volume. This might be considered particularly true of young adults, the future readers of news sites.

While educators often assume that members of younger generations are digital natives innately capable and comfortable with interactive communication technologies, studies suggest otherwise. Researchers have found that many young adults do not take advantage of online interactivity options. Rather, consistent with other studies, they have found that willingness to interact is related to socioeconomic status.²⁵ Comfort with technology is also a factor.²⁶ One study even suggested that the television remote control has created news grazers who skip from story to story in search of things that interest them.²⁷

Also important are social factors like referral, where a friend or other trusted source recommends a story. Although interactivity was a dream of early Web developers, the first sites were one-way conduits of information. Research suggests that getting people to contribute or interact is largely a function of social culture.²⁸ Social pressure increases the use of computer-mediated communication. For young adults, creating content on sites like MySpace, although perhaps difficult for older generations to appreciate, is a creative mode of self-expression.²⁹

Online news reading is an exercise in media choice. Reeves and Nass developed a model of computer-mediated communication that includes the user’s perception of the computer as a social actor, as well as the user’s perception of others as mediated by the computer.³⁰ Contrary to notions of medium richness, users have multiple dimensions of information capacity.³¹ Donabedian suggests that two processes determine media choice: optimization (in the rational-choice sense) and social influence.³² As decisions become ambiguous, the agent relies more heavily on social influence.

Research Questions

How much control and interactivity do online news consumers want? According to Chen and Corkindale, the ONS user “demonstrates greater ‘activeness’ and purpose-oriented

behaviors in the consumption of online content than users of conventional media.”³³ Editors are exhorted to “make sure your paper isn’t a monologue, but a dialogue.”³⁴ Young users are both the present and future audiences for news, and, as such, their experiences and opinions are of interest. This study attempts to discover what young ONS users want by asking the following usability questions:

- 1) **How much control do young users want in online news articles?** What is the optimal article length? Do users want every possible article to choose from, or do they prefer some editorial selection?
- 2) **How much multimedia do young users want?** Do users want video, pictures, and slideshows with articles? Does multimedia influence whether users choose to read certain articles? Do users prefer to read text or watch video? How often do they want both?
- 3) **How much interaction do young users want?** Do they want referrals from other readers or viewers to help them choose? Do they want to post comments after articles, and do they read other users’ comments? Do they participate in forums and polls? Do they want the ability to post their own news with tools like CNN’s iReport, and do they read and watch what others post?

Methodology

Many ONS studies use technologies such as eyetracking to determine where users look and for how long.³⁵ Such studies have clear value in providing subconsciously generated data about use patterns. However, the scanning patterns of users who are expected to visit a particular site do not predict which sites will attract voluntary repeat visitors—a crucial question for media management.

To learn what users want in addition to what they do, researchers must ask the users themselves. “For judging the quality of a user experience, you absolutely have to do an observational study where you look at a small number of people in great detail and see how they use the products,” said usability expert Jakob Nielsen.³⁶ This study attempts to do this by using a focus group and think-alouds to examine a small group of college students as they use the Internet. The focus group gave participants a chance to share their thoughts, perceptions, likes, and dislikes regarding ONS content. The think-alouds allowed the researchers to observe participants as they used ONS, and then record, through simultaneous conversation, the cognition behind the behavior. The two methods gave the researchers a better understanding of what Internet users want on news sites.

Participants. The study involved fifteen participants recruited from two college classes. In both classes, volunteers were offered extra credit for participating in the study. Outside of this, the participants were not compensated, but they were offered candy at the sessions. All fifteen students—thirteen undergraduate and two graduate students—were enrolled in journalism classes. Although they represent a convenience sample, it was our hope that the journalism students’ media literacy would benefit the study. Material on news

websites that does not engage them is not likely to engage students who are not as attuned to news. Further, as Web-savvy college students, they all reported using the Internet regularly. Most of them are members of the first generation to grow up with the Internet, meaning they are the future audience for online news.

Focus group. After a pre-test of a convenience sample of three volunteers, the researchers conducted one focus group with seven female participants. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 30. The participants gathered in a computer lab, where each student had access to an Apple computer. Participants visited three news websites—CNN, Yahoo! News, and Salon—for five minutes apiece. They were told to browse each site and access any content they liked. The websites were chosen because they vary in important ways. CNN produces original text and videos but also includes Web 2.0 features, such as user-generated content. Salon also presents original content, but includes more opinion and long-form feature articles. Yahoo! is primarily an aggregator for news generated elsewhere. Some of the participants had previous experience with CNN and Yahoo!, but none with Salon.

Afterward, the participants and a moderator gathered in a circle to discuss the participants' Web use during the session and their opinions of the sites. Another researcher in the room took notes. The moderator used standard focus group techniques to lead a dialogue about what the users thought of these sites in particular and ONS in general.³⁷ The discussion lasted about 30 minutes. A second researcher attended the focus groups and made observations for the analysis. The sessions were also recorded, and the recordings were transcribed for analysis.

Think-alouds. Think-alouds were conducted individually with eight participants also in their 20s. These six males and two females were not involved in the focus group. In each session, one participant sat at an Apple computer in a computer lab. The moderator sat next to the participant as he or she visited the CNN, Yahoo!, and Salon news sites. Participants were given about five minutes at each site to browse and access any content that interested them. Initially, the researchers planned to give them exactly five minutes at each site, but after the first session, the moderator decided to let the conversation dictate the time spent at each site. Participants were asked to describe their actions as they used each site. To encourage this thinking aloud, the moderator asked participants to explain the thought processes behind their choices, as well as what they liked and disliked about the content. For example, the moderator often asked, "Why did you click that link?" or "How much of that article did you read and why?" The process was fluid. Many of the questions were unscripted responses to the participant's choices.

The think-alouds captured ONS users' thoughts in real time. While the presence of the moderator created an artificial environment, the moderator maintained a conversational tone to promote a frank, comfortable dialogue. For each participant, the moderator altered the order in which the three sites were viewed to minimize any effect the order might have. These sessions were also recorded and transcribed.

Both techniques—the think-alouds and the focus group—were flexible data collection methods that permitted conversations to flow freely. As a result, the researchers gathered important insights they might otherwise have missed. The researchers who conducted the focus group session kept notes on both the content and the conduct of the session, writing a memo detailing the session and noting their initial impressions of their findings, using the methodology detailed by Corbin and Strauss.³⁸ The researcher who conducted the think-aloud sessions did the same. Researchers identified categories of content from the session transcripts, then assigned content to these categories to build as detailed a description as possible of the users' impressions and experiences while using the sites.

Findings

The data gleaned from the conversations in the focus group and think-alouds covered a wide range of ONS topics that can be classified in three broad categories: control, desire for multimedia, and desire for interactivity.

Control

The participants showed an overriding desire for control, which comprised several areas: *variety of content*, such as world news, sports, entertainment, and weather; *temporal control* by being able to choose the length of time spent learning about a topic; and *facilitated control*, including features such as consistent page organization, short summaries, and listings of popular stories.

Variety of content. All participants liked having a choice of news. All wanted to know what was going on in the world, and most expressed at least a cursory interest in international and national events, politics, and economics. While the amount of hard news that each user preferred varied, users expected hard news to form the core of ONS. Even so, participants felt that the tone and mix of articles should vary. As one participant said, "I don't like it when it's all doom and gloom. I like to have some light stuff." For most of them, entertainment news provided the "light stuff." Although respondents recognized that entertainment stories might not be perceived as having a high news value, most liked reading about celebrities. One participant said readers shouldn't "confuse it with real news and stuff that matters," but then she added, "OK, if it were Paris Hilton, I would probably click for curiosity." Another said that even though she resented it, she would still "usually go check out the entertainment section."

Other news categories were less important to the participants. The few who followed sports explained that they get most of their sports news from sports-specific sites, not from general ONS. One participant with an interest in local sports sought that information from local newspaper websites. Many checked the weather on news sites. Although other categories, such as travel, were not discussed in detail, the positive responses to questions about variety and entertainment news indicate that people enjoy a variety of content. Users wanted a variety of subject matter, including humor and odd news, breaking news, local and practical stories, and human interest.

As expected, participants indicated they wanted *news* on a news site. Before visiting anything else, they checked the leading stories and at least scanned the hard news headlines—all elements of grazing behavior.³⁹ Many expressed a preference for the most current breaking news. Focus group volunteers liked time-stamped updates and preferred the most current articles. This suggests that timeliness is an important news value for ONS.

Users also liked drama and action in news stories. They were interested in reading about big events. Some admitted that violence drew their attention. After visiting an international political article, one user quickly navigated away. She had expected action in the story, she said, only to find that the article was just about government leaders “postulating.” Conflict and oddity were similarly attractive news values, with controversial and unusual topics grabbing users’ attention.

Users wanted ONS to be entertaining as well. Many participants were attracted to headlines that were humorous or suggested a funny story. Sarcasm helped, one participant said. Another was drawn to an alliterative headline. Every member of the focus group liked to watch news on Comedy Central. Not surprisingly, stories that poked fun at the foibles of politicians were popular. Participants liked articles that left them shaking their heads and saying, as one participant put it, “Oh, my gosh. People are so stupid.” This is also what drew their attention to gossipy entertainment stories about celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears.

Users wanted stories with salience—they wanted to know how the topic affected them. For instance, after coming across an economic article about Ford Motor Company, a think-aloud participant said, “Ford is going to have a hard time this year. Well, I don’t have a Ford. Does that affect me?” Other popular stories with salience included those that offered practical advice on topics such as health, weight loss, and cooking.

Participants also found proximity important. Stories that pertained to the user, either geographically or personally, were popular. The websites of local television news stations are becoming more community-oriented, acting like small-town newspapers by providing not only coverage of major news but also hyper-local content with pertinent, practical information. The data from the focus group and think-alouds support this trend. While many participants did not actively seek out local news, most were drawn to stories about their hometown or state. For example, several participants from the same southern U.S. city expressed an interest in stories about hurricanes in that area. Another participant explained that she clicked on stories about topics such as “the top ten cities with the worst traffic” to see if any cities near her hometown made the list. Several participants said they made an effort to follow local news, including one who regularly visited his hometown newspaper’s website.

Human-interest stories were consistently popular. Like local news, these stories allowed users to more easily identify with the story’s subject. As one participant explained, a human-interest angle takes a news story and “gives it a more personal side.” These stories put a face on the news, elicit emotional response, and give readers a better understanding of the

subject. This need seemed secondary to consistent coverage, at least in brief, of the news itself, which is essential to getting users to visit a site. A human-interest angle on stories helps keep readers on a site. Again, control is important. A summary presentation of the facts lets users decide if they want to continue to a more human-interest presentation.

In essence, the underlying desire of each participant was that a story be *interesting*. All the participants sought engaging stories that captured their attention. The challenge for ONS developers, then, is to provide universally interesting content. Unfortunately, what users deem interesting varies from person to person, and the stories selected often correlated with previously held interests. Sports enthusiasts clicked on sports headlines. Political junkies went straight to the politics section, while others expressed a dislike for politics and avoided such articles. In the think-alouds, two participants selected stories about Somali pirates because they found pirates interesting. “I would have clicked on that because it’s, like, cool,” one said. “You know, pirates.” This suggests that user-controlled content limitation, such as the ability to set alerts or user preferences, would not meet the news grazer’s desire either.⁴⁰

Temporal control. A major reason respondents said they chose to use ONS is the temporal control the Internet offers. How the participants used news sites was a function of how much time they had—which, in most cases, was very little. One participant lamented that she wanted to read more news online but just did not have the time. Another said she rarely commented on an article, but she might do so when she is no longer a college student and has more time.

Page design also affects how users manage their time on a site. Many participants scanned the headlines and scrolled quickly through the front page of a site or section. One participant explained that she would “usually just jump on [the Internet] ... and jump off.” These time-strapped users get their news quickly and move on. Of course, scanning and scrolling do not always reflect a time constraint but can sometimes be based on interest or habit. One participant reported always scrolling down a site’s home page so as not to miss anything. Another said she rarely scrolled down, figuring that all the important stories were at the top. But most conveyed the sense that lack of time forced them to skim. Features such as the “most popular” story section helped users who were pressed for time. One respondent said she goes to this section first because it lets her quickly see the big stories.

Article length is also an important consideration in temporal control. Although the Internet theoretically offers limitless space for stories, the data collected in this study support the idea that online articles should be shorter than articles in print media. This is a function of both limited time and limited interest. Many participants said they wanted only the basic facts. Conversations revealed that short articles were nearly always preferable for certain topics: breaking news, entertainment, politics, and economics.

Participants’ descriptions of how they read articles reflected a desire to control the volume of content. Reading patterns were similar to the news-grazing habits of television and print media.⁴¹ Many just read the first few paragraphs of a story, and skimming was common. One participant’s description of her reading habits was representative: “I’d say I

read about—probably about this chunk [indicates first several paragraphs]. Just get the drift. And then I'll just skim through, go to the end, and read the last two or three sentences.” Another said she read “generally only the first five paragraphs and anything that they bold [hyperlink].” And yet another said, “I usually scan it. If it's interesting, then I'll read it.”

As in print, interest can overcome a skimming habit, so short isn't always paramount. Nearly all respondents agreed that if a story grabbed their attention, length became less of an issue. They were happy to read, not just scan longer stories that held their interest. A few were adamant that they did not want to read a multiple-page story, but most said they would click through to another page if the story was interesting. As one participant said, “I won't read two pages about economics. I probably won't read two pages of politics either, unless it's something major happening.” Participants agreed that the most interesting articles, the ones for which longer lengths were permissible, have a human-interest angle.

Though users preferred short, skimmable articles with some longer human-interest stories mixed in, they also indicated that user control was optimal—that they always had the option to click to something else. They had no sense of commitment to an article or video. If it failed to engage them, they moved on. Several participants navigated to articles or videos that appeared interesting based on the headlines, but when they found the content either uninteresting or not what they expected, they simply clicked away. One participant expressed a common sentiment when responding to a question about whether she found the articles she was reading too long or too short: “Oh, they seem to be fine. I mean, it's just a matter of clicking back and forth. If something is too long, then I just click back.” With this control, the user manages length and can cut short a long article. This suggests that these young adults are indeed news grazers.⁴²

Facilitating control. Usage of news sites—how much of a story users read, whether they use blurbs, if and when they watch videos—is determined by the amount of perceived control they want and expect. But users need some help exercising this control, which ONS can facilitate with things like clear organization, blurbs, groupings of “most popular” stories, links to related content, and interactivity. Convenience, quickness, and ease of use are important to ONS users, as is the ability to perform multiple tasks in one place: A number of participants said they get their news from the same site that provided their e-mail account.

An easily navigable news site has a clean layout and clear organization. All participants insisted that site layout was fundamental to their satisfaction. When asked which sites were their favorites, most started talking about which sites had the best, cleanest, easiest-to-use layout. Salon.com was denigrated for being too busy. One participant explained that she liked to watch the Fox News Channel on television, but she “can't stand [the Fox News] Web site because it's ... so scrambled together.” Clutter was distracting and frustrating, another said. Good layout can make “the site really easy to navigate” and facilitate pleasure and control. The focus group participants unanimously praised CNN.com for being very well organized.

Regarding specific design elements, several participants highlighted tabbed browsing as a helpful feature. Tabs, especially with drop-down menus, kept the layout clean and uncluttered but still gave the user quick, easy access to a variety of news categories. Advertisements that affected the layout and presentation of the site were unanimously deplored, especially those that moved out into the page or preceded a video story. Participants felt that obtrusive ads violated their sense of control.

Since most participants preferred short articles, the researchers expected that participants would like article descriptions under headlines. But reaction to these blurbs was mixed. Most participants liked them. Some said that reading blurbs helped them decide whether to select an article to read. Others, though, did not read them at all. “I didn’t look at any of the ones that had descriptions,” one focus group participant said. “I just found stuff [headlines] that was interesting to me and read that.”

Salon.com articles often feature a blurb at the top of a story, and CNN places a bulleted outline of the story in the article’s top right corner. But the participants tended not to notice them. Once they clicked on a story, their eyes went straight to the picture and text. When the moderator pointed out the CNN outline, participants said they liked the feature. But either because they did not see it or because clicking on the story implied they wanted to read it—and therefore did not need to waste time on an outline or abstract—participants did not use the blurbs or outlines accompanying the articles. Generally, participants spoke favorably of blurbs attached to headlines, but whether they actually read them is questionable. Clear, enticing headlines were non-negotiable, however.

Because the Internet offers access to vast amounts of information, users sought advice in determining what was worth their time. Referrals from sources to which the users ascribed authority had a strong effect on story choice. Participants gave primary authority to the editor, suggesting that the role of a professional gatekeeper is still important in ONS. Participants accepted without question that top stories or home page highlights were important to read. This is similar to the trust in editorial gatekeeping held by print readers. Other media sources were a strong referral for some participants. Seeing references on the televised versions of *The Daily Show*, the History Channel, and ESPN’s SportsCenter were specifically mentioned.

Desire for multimedia

In addition to traditional articles, some news sites offer Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs, comment sections, and multimedia (videos, audio, photos, and slideshows). When it came to multimedia, this study found that less was more.

Videos. Online news videos were not popular with the participants. In fact, all but one said that given the choice, they preferred articles to videos. Most watched video from time to time, especially if it was about something unique—“something like a freak thing,” one said—but would read the story first. If the story provoked enough interest, they might

watch a related video. Others indicated they would watch a video if someone told them about it—the viral effect.

Participants offered several reasons for their indifference and even antipathy toward videos. They take time to load, and respondents disliked having to wait for them to buffer. Participants also disliked the commercials that preceded videos. The amount of information received for the time spent was broached, with one participant describing videos as being generally less informative than articles. Another participant's comment represented a majority opinion: "I hardly ever watch videos.... I think it's just kind of a waste of time. I'd rather read something—get facts and see."

Podcasts. The researchers did not address podcasts or other audio media with every participant, but respondents who discussed podcasts expressed little interest in them and felt that such media were not useful.

Pictures and slideshows. Visuals were a different story. Users expected pictures with major news stories. A number of participants suggested that the pictures influenced them to click on particular headlines, as has been suggested by eyetracking research.⁴³ As one participant said, "I'm more inclined to read stories if they have a picture next to it, or I'm more inclined to look at and read the headline if there's a picture or something next to it." Users want pictures to accompany the article. One participant, in expressing her disappointment with an article that lacked a picture, said, "Without any pictures, I don't want to pay attention to it." Slideshows were popular, especially those depicting dramatic events or interesting scenes. Participants also liked slideshows that presented pictures from a variety of news topics, giving the viewer a glimpse at the news in general.

Desire for interactivity

Interaction and referral. Much of the participants' article selection related to topics with which they were already familiar, and personal referral was a strong force. Internet news supplemented information about issues they had already heard about from friends, family, TV news, and even Facebook. For example, one participant clicked on a story related to something he had heard about on the History Channel. Another chose an article about an issue she had talked about with her father. Still another picked a story based on a recent class discussion. A documentary film influenced one participant to click on a related piece, suggesting that cross-promotion in other media, such as print and broadcast, could drive users to a website.

But authority also came from other sources facilitated by online media. Transcripts suggest a crowd-referral effect, with participants ascribing authority to the masses, especially peers. Participants said they watched videos and read stories based on peer recommendations, similar to the effect posited in Chawner and Lewis.⁴⁴ Articles posted on Facebook were mentioned as creating interest. The stories that users chose reflected individual characteristics, interests, and experiences, and matching these to a variety of popular story

topics, content categories, and multimedia poses a difficult but vitally important challenge for ONS developers.

“Most popular” articles. Another aspect of facilitated control is the grouping of articles into categories by popularity. All the participants said they read these headlines, although they might not necessarily click on them. Users liked “most popular” links for two reasons: Users can quickly see what the biggest stories are, and people want to know what is popular. One participant expressed a common sentiment: “I just want to know what other people are reading, too.... I want to know what’s popular and what’s going on.” Another added, “Those are usually the most interesting ones.” Users want to know what is important, interesting, and popular, and sites with “most popular” or similar categories on the home page or section front help them do so.

Related content. Most participants indicated they liked sites that provided links to related content at the end of an article or as a sidebar, which fits with the idea of computers as a social actor—in this case, as the actor that makes referrals.⁴⁵ Several participants were interested in reading analysis after a news story and appreciated links to related columns. Not everyone wanted to read more, however. Still, the researchers’ findings suggest that links to related content are valuable, even if not everyone uses them.

Interaction and personalization. Other facilitators of control offer opportunities to interact and personalize, including polls, comments, reader-submitted content, and RSS feeds. The participants in this study had mixed opinions about such tools. Few participated in polls. Some reported reading the question and perhaps looking at the results, but they seldom took the poll. The participants were not inclined to post comments after a story, although most said they occasionally read the top few comments. While a controversial topic might induce some of them to check the comments, most claimed they were turned off by “childish” and “ignorant” conversations on comment boards. One participant said she commented only when other commentators provoked her to anger. When she did comment, it was in response to another comment, not to the article itself.

CNN’s iReport lets users upload videos and stories. Many of this study’s participants were unaware of this feature. While most liked the idea, no participants said they would use the feature, either to upload their own content or look at content posted by others.

Using technology to personalize online news consumption with tools such as RSS feeds was relatively unpopular among the participants. One received specific sports scores via e-mail, and another had customized her iGoogle home page to include recipes. But only one participant reported using an RSS feed for news—in this case, from the BBC’s website. Though control is clearly important to users, this research indicates that personalized, aggregative content is not. Perhaps the ability to navigate quickly through a site, view the headlines, and select what they like is personalization enough, provided that the content is varied enough to allow selections. It is also possible that users do not want to miss important stories, as they might with an aggregator, and instead prefer a human editor to make those decisions.

Conclusion

The theory of ONS use that emerges from these data focuses on control. Users want to control how they use a news site, what content they access, and what they do with that content as they graze the various ONS that comprise their news diet. They want a variety of news that both informs and entertains, so content needs to be engaging and interesting. Pictures, slideshows, and good writing are musts. In addition, users want to find and consume all this varied, interesting content quickly and easily.

This research indicates that users are not committed to any one source. If one site fails to satisfy, they simply navigate elsewhere. The same is true of content. If a user does not like an article or video, he or she can just click to something else. What seems apparent is that news websites must provide engagingly written stories accompanied by pictures—a mix of short, factual news stories with referrals to articles that offer further information and analysis, along with longer human-interest stories. A variety of topics is mandatory, with entertainment, humor, and odd news complementing hard news.

But users also want to control how they view this content, so website producers must find ways to facilitate this sense of control. A pleasing, well-organized layout is fundamental. This includes tabs that offer quick access to a variety of news categories, as well as articles grouped into “most popular” categories. Less important are elements such as interaction, personalization, videos, and blurbs. These elements are good insofar as they offer users more options, and therefore more control, but they are not essential. If the mandatory features are missing—the tools that put interesting, varied stories at the reader’s fingertips—the rest is insignificant.

Limitations and Future Research

As an example of qualitative research, this study’s findings are not intended for generalizing, but rather for capturing the experiences and attitudes of the participants, who were mostly young females. As present and future consumers of online news, the opinions and actions of these participants are noteworthy. However, the limited sample size and demographic profile preclude interpreting these findings for other groups. Therefore, future research should consider similar studies that may be salient to different age groups and genders.

Despite these limitations, this study sheds light on some of the challenges ONS developers face in building effective websites. It also raises some additional questions, perhaps the most pressing being what constitutes *interesting* content and whether that term can be defined in any useful way. The participants said they wanted interesting and engaging articles, yet defining such content proved problematic. This research offers some insight, but more is needed, specifically to study perceptions of article length, videos, site organization and layout, local news, advertisements, and the effects of social media in driving choices of online news sources and stories.

The Internet is still evolving as a news source, and it is clear that it will continue to play a major role in how people get their news. Although the elements that make it useful and enjoyable are debatable, this study demonstrates that a variety of content and user control are two of the most important features of ONS usability and satisfaction.

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