

The Role of Online News in Mass Media

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Is the spread of Internet use helping to “democratize” mass media and the world in general? Like any technological development, whether or not the relatively new medium of the Internet ultimately contributes to human progress depends on how we use it. In that sense, it is no different from radio and television. As one media historian put it: “The age of ‘radio’ was not only the age of Roosevelt and Churchill but that of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin.”¹ Similarly, today television delivers to the living rooms of so many American households a lopsided mix of shows like *American Idol* and *The NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer.

Nevertheless, the nature of Internet technology gives online news the *potential* to be more progressive than other media. Now, almost 10 years after its development, we can begin to answer whether that potential is being realized. The Internet gives individuals greater access to information and more power to receive and deliver news. There are almost 5,000 daily newspapers available online from around the globe that any one of the over 350 million people with access to a modem can read.² Most of these newspapers, especially in the United States, are free of charge to view.

Moreover, the Internet eliminates the need for middlemen, and with them, any filters through which traditional media passes its primary sources. For example, the articles of wire services like The Associated Press and Reuters — which were recently only available to newsrooms, universities, and libraries — are now readily viewable at any time through their Web sites.³ The low physical costs of the manufacturing and distribution of online news translate into low barriers for entry into the industry.⁴ Instead of printing presses and delivery trucks, all a person needs to push the number of dailies past 5,000 is some time and Microsoft Front Page. Of course, these aspects of the Internet also create potential problems such as the questionable credibility of some online news sources. Because some online publishers have invested so little into their product, they do not have much to lose by trading off expediency for accuracy. On the whole, however, Internet users have quickly learned to recognize such dubious sites, and more and more people are using the medium’s unique advantages to take control of the news they gather, whether for themselves or for others.

The Internet's Unique Advantages

The Internet combines all of the defining features and attractions of the three traditional media—the audio of radio, the images and text of newspapers and magazines, and the animations, simulations, and video of television—all connected and accessible through the enormous network of sites and hyperlinks that constitute the World Wide Web. But the Internet is more interactive



than television, its biggest competitor, because users are not passive consumers of the richness of its multimedia. The medium demands that they do more than change the channel or Web site by choosing how and when they experiences the news. This audience control over presentation gives online reporting a “nonlinear” quality.² Instead of having to sit through the sequence of sensationalistic drivel of local news broadcasts until the weather portion toward the end of the half-hour, you can simply go to weather.com, type in your zip code, and check the five-day forecast. This does not mean that traditional media will become obsolete. People will still turn on the car radio during their morning and afternoon commutes. Just like the advent of television did not bankrupt the radio industry, the Internet will not replace but rather supplement the other ways people get their news.

This supplementary role that online news plays is best exemplified by the standard way today's journalists punctuate their “in-depth” reports in traditional media: “For more on [topic of report], visit our web site at www...” With its unlimited space and time for presentation, the Internet has become an interactive, on-demand, and vast news library. For example, the *Mercury Center*, the web site for the San Jose *Mercury News*, enhanced its 1999 coverage of the Microsoft antitrust trial online by designing an interactive virtual courtroom, an electronic version of courtroom no. 2 in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Among other features, users could tour the virtual courtroom, receive an introduction to the U.S. federal court system, read a professional biography of Federal District Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson, and view the evidence in the trial against Microsoft.² Providing such depth and context for a story is exceptional in a news-

paper or magazine but commonplace on quality online news sites, which go beyond simply reproducing the content of their traditional media counterparts for more efficient transmission. Other illustrations of the Internet's unique advantages include the MSNBC.com Web site for a 1997 *Dateline* report on dangerous roads in America. The television program naturally focused on a few dramatically threatening roads but still encouraged viewers to check out their own community streets through a fast online search of federal data — just type in your zip code to find out how many fatal accidents had occurred in your area between 1992 and 1995. In less than half a day, that particular feature received nearly 70,000 hits.²

Online News Users

Being relatively young, I find it natural to use the Web for many things, including getting news, even though the Web itself is barely 10 years old. For younger people, life must seem unimaginable without it. On the other hand, some members of older generations, who understandably have not adjusted to the technology as quickly, see Internet use (and computer use in general) as harmful and antisocial. They point to it as a source of civic apathy among many young Americans today, who appear uncaring about what is happening in the nation or the world in general. At the same time, others across generations view the technology of the Internet as an indisputable blessing to the world for its facilitating the realization of a “global village.”

So is the Internet good or bad for society? The answer is not as simple as either side of the debate might lead you to think. It is true that some young people spend too much time on their computers and sacrifice developing richer social relationships with members of their own community and learning about the world outside their town or city. And yet, if you stop to compare this to other laudable pursuits, excessive reading is no less antisocial. Furthermore, more young people are turning to the Internet *for news* rather than to traditional media. From 1996 to 2000, the fraction of Americans in their 20s and 30s who regularly used online news sources increased from 10 to 25 percent.² More recent studies have shown a slight shift upward in the demographic base for online news to people in their 30s, but clearly the audience is still dominated by younger Americans.⁵

A Global Village

Although the Internet brings people together, it is not always for the better. For example, it has helped racists find and recruit other racists by giving them a forum for presenting and spreading their hate online. While a public domain for the masses always risks being used for wrongdoing, the Web seems to have had more of a positive effect by promoting the growth of good communities for people with similar interests and concerns, particularly when it comes to their objections to the state of the mainstream media today.

According to a 2001 report by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, only 13 percent of top executives of media, telecommunications, and e-companies are female.⁶ As a result, Internet news services like Women's Enews have been launched to focus on stories particularly relevant to women, which are often neglected by a media increasingly dominated by corporate news outlets run by men. At the same time, Women's Enews tries to influence the media from the bottom up by making its reports available to them for free and listing female experts on more than 150 topics as a resource for their journalists.⁶

Similar alternative press sources exist online for political interest groups on the Left and the Right, such as AlterNet.org, TomPaine.com, NewsMax.com, and WorldNetDaily.com.⁷ Particularly popular among conservatives are sites that attack the alleged liberal bias of the media. Former president of the *Harvard Crimson*, Ira Stoll has created a site called SmarterTimes.com that is devoted to criticizing the *New York Times* for what he often considers to be slanted news articles.⁸ On the other hand, the news sites of nationally known conservative papers like the *New York Post* and *Washington Times* have attracted more readers to their online versions.⁵

In this particular case, the Internet seems only to be limiting people's exposure to alternative perspectives by providing them with news that is not necessarily objective yet conforms to their ideology. (The problem of selective reading will be addressed later in this essay.) There is additional evidence, however, that suggests the Internet really is inching us closer to something resembling a "global village." Access to international newspapers online has exposed some Americans to multiple perspectives on current

events outside the United States that are often not covered in the same depth or at all in the mainstream American media. The desired information, analysis, and commentary can range from less serious topics like European soccer (unless you are a true fan) to the most serious like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Internet users have also been able to tap into the news of communities that are not their own. For example, Good



Morning Silicon Valley, a special section of the local online news site Mercury Center based in San Jose, covers the valley's high-tech industry but attracts 70 percent of its visitors from areas outside Silicon Valley.²

The Internet and Democracy

Aside from the state of online journalism today in America or from an American perspective, what about the rest of the world? The sad fact is that dwarfing the millions of Internet users in the United States are billions of people in the developing world on the other side of the "digital divide" who do not even have access to a computer. Obviously, their poverty undermines the feasibility of a true global village for years, if not decades to come. Nevertheless, we can still compare ourselves to other large and relatively prosperous countries like Russia to see if their growing Internet use might have a similar positive impact, particularly in terms of supporting democracy.

Only 7 percent of the Russian population use the Internet compared to 60 percent in the United States and 39 percent in Europe.⁹ This clearly limits the extent to which the new medium affects the average Russian. Given President Putin's recent war on the private press that has claimed the voice of major independent television stations like TV-6 and the Internet's rapidly expanding audience, it may have an increasingly important role to play in sustaining freedom of the press in the country. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is doing its best to undermine this potential source of government opposition by seeking greater access to Internet communication like e-mail for the FSB, Russia's security service, and even recently sponsoring a privately

owned, proadministration news site called Strana.ru.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Strana.ru's semipropaganda has been reasonably successful: The site is visited significantly less than other private online news sites but is vastly more popular than the official government site, Gov.ru.⁹

Correcting the Media

The media in the United States is not under attack from the government as in Russia, but it is not immune to criticism, particularly from members of its audience. After lawyers, journalists are perhaps the most detested professionals in America, because it seems so many of them favor sensationalism over substance in their stories. But until recently, those with complaints about inaccurate or biased reporting could only try to end the industry's lurid streak by resorting to questionably effective tactics like writing a letter to the editor or ombudsman. The Internet has helped to change all that by allowing individuals to spread their objections more easily and cheaply to certain traditional media coverage. The amount of media criticism on the Web recently motivated the creation of a gateway site called Mediachannel.org with links to the vast majority of that commentary.⁸ Often, this online forum is ignored by corporate news outlets, but sometimes a well-organized online campaign against an inaccurate story can succeed in correcting the media. In 1998, a group of outraged veterans with little funds relied on the Internet to publicly protest what they showed to be a blatantly false CNN report about American Green Berets nerve-gassing traitors in Laos in 1970. Directed by its parent company Time Warner, CNN eventually retracted the story and fired some of the producers of the program.⁸

Selective Exposure

Online news itself has been far from immune to criticism. In particular, detractors—usually traditional journalists—have claimed that the personalized filter that users develop in getting their news from the Internet is not much better for society than any filter that is imposed on the content of mass media.¹¹ If a user only confirms his own bias when he sees his preferred version of the news online, is he really more informed as a citizen? The problem with this argument is that it already happens with traditional media—every time you pick up a newspaper or magazine or even when you watch a television news show. You

probably do not approach them “objectively,” making sure that you play the role of an informed citizen by paying attention to all of their content and commentary. You look for the stories that interest you and ignore the rest because you do not have the time or inclination. Sometimes a report will catch your eye that normally would not, but this could also happen on the Internet. There are very few people in the world savvy enough to restrict their exposure to the news only to content that conforms to their ideology.

Moreover, the selective-exposure argument misses the point that online news is not replacing but rather supplementing other sources of news for the vast majority of its users. These people will still read the headlines on the front page of their daily or watch the eleven o'clock news every night. In contrast, most still only go online for news once a week. Even among the young, only 17 to 18 percent of those under the age of 49 check sites daily.⁵ Ultimately, the Internet has the potential to engage more people by allowing them to adapt the news they get to their needs so that they do not give up on the mainstream media altogether.

Credibility

A more powerful argument that critics lob at online news sites focuses on their credibility. It is so much quicker, easier, and cheaper to publish a story on the Web that in the race to be the first to break the story online, many journalists, with little to lose by way of reputation, have loosened their requirements for verification and reliable sources. The classic example is an erroneous report by the online edition of the *Dallas Morning News* during the 1998 Clinton-Lewinsky scandal that a secret service agent had seen Monica Lewinsky and President Clinton alone together. In response, ABC quickly broadcast the story to millions of people before the news site retracted it later that day.⁴

Nevertheless, such sloppy reporting is unusual on the more prestigious online news sites. The online edition of the *San Jose Mercury News* once erred in presenting a series called “Dark Alliance” by Gary Webb about his discredited investigative report linking the CIA to the cocaine epidemic in the United States;² however, this was the same site that created the virtual courtroom for the Microsoft trial and that has made numerous other positive contributions to online journal-

ism. The Internet is a breeding ground for rumor and conspiracy theories that only rarely infect reputable news sites.

Users are usually smart enough to separate the sensationalism from the substance. Gossip sites like the Drudge Report are popular, but most people accept that they are as accurate as super-market tabloids.¹² The evidence for this user intelligence lies in the unparalleled success of large and well-known news sites like CNN.com and MSNBC.com. A recent study by the Online News Association found that users felt such sites were as reliable as traditional media. For example, more than 78 percent of those polled called cable-television operated Web sites credible compared to 82 percent for cable news.¹¹ These major sites' superior credibility and resources, particularly when it comes to their coverage of national and international events, have made them by far the most popular sources for online news in general.⁷ Users seem to be coping quite well with the credibility problem by turning to recognizable and trusted brands for the bulk of their news online while looking to smaller international or local sites for alternative perspectives or coverage on issues that tend to be neglected in the mainstream media.

September 11: A Case in Point

The use of online news sites in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks illustrates the important role they have come to play in the way Americans get their news. On the day of September 11, major news sites were flooded with visitors, some receiving over ten times the usual number of page views: CNN.com had 162.4 million hits in 24 hours compared to its average 14 million. In the 48 hours after the attacks, the percentage of Internet users who visited news sites increased from 22 to 33 percent.³ In the month after, the fraction further rose to more than half, the highest ever in the Internet's history. Throughout that month, the most visited sites were major national ones like CNN.com with percentage changes in hits for the top five ranging from 66 percent (MSNBC.com) to 315 percent (Time.com).¹³ A few months later, traffic to these sites was still at a level two to three times as high as it was before September 11.⁷

Beyond the statistics, people seemed to have used the Internet for what traditional media could not adequately supply. Some people relied on it as a source for breaking news, particularly when they did not have access to television;¹⁴ however, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, only 3 percent of users polled considered the Internet to be their primary news source soon after the attacks compared to 81 percent for television.³ Yet nearly a third of them said it was still helpful in providing information about the attacks.¹⁵

It follows that online news served mostly as a supplement to traditional media, more like a resource than a source. People turned to the Internet for on-demand lists—lists of passengers, companies, closures, donation centers, community events, and of course, of people missing or dead.¹⁶ In addition, major news sites like MSNBC.com served millions of video feeds in the days following the attacks.¹⁷ The Internet also provided direct access to the world's reaction to the events. Through online versions of international newspapers, Americans could read about the different perspectives of people everywhere from Europe to the Middle East.¹⁷

The Future of Online News

The coverage of the September 11 attacks was obviously a defining moment in the history of online journalism; however, it has only been one among several turning points for the industry in the past five years. Other events of national significance like the release of the Starr Report during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in 1998 and the voting problems during the presidential election of 2000 have led to a peak in Internet use during the crisis, followed by an overall higher plateau of traffic to the news sites.⁷ This trend of audience growth and response clearly suggests that online news has a secure future as a legitimate and important new part of mainstream media in America and other parts of the world with growing Internet access. After Internet users recognize the unlimited resources of the medium, few decide not to take advantage of that information to enrich their understanding of the news. ■

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