Online news: patterns, participation and personalisation

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Abstract
It is an understatement to say that the internet is changing the way people gather and consume news. While newspaper circulations are generally falling in most parts of the world and television news ratings are sliding, more and more people are accessing news online (Conley & Lamble, 2006, p. 299). The immediacy and scope of online news are two of the main drivers of its popularity, with portals such as the UK’s NewsNow searching over 27,000 sources every five minutes. Interaction and personal engagement are also very important reasons why many people – especially young people – are attracted to online news.

The following article analyses the use of the internet as a source of news and current affairs, and investigates the online news phenomenon, using recent data from US and Australian internet projects. It also presents original research from a pilot study undertaken by the author.

The article is essentially focused on factors such as sources of online news, levels of interest in certain genres of news and the impact of the emerging online phenomenon of personalised news – something also known as tailored or customised news.

Introduction
Australians are ranked in the top five nations globally in the rate at which they have embraced the internet (Internet World Statistics, 2006), and this is being reflected in changes to how they access news. The Internet World Statistics website estimated that 70.7 per cent of Australians had internet access in September 2006, compared with 69.3 per cent of people in the US1 and 62.5 per cent in the UK (Internet World Statistics, 2006). Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden and Portugal2 were the four countries that had a higher percentage of internet penetration per capita than Australia (Internet World Statistics, 2006).

But despite the popularity and uptake of the internet in Australia, patterns of use and online behaviour remain under-researched areas. While organisations in the US have been gathering

1 US data updated August 2006.
2 In that order – updated September 2006.
data and studying online news for more than 10 years, Australian studies relating to how the internet contributes to the gathering and dissemination of news have been relatively limited. This article therefore contributes to the current body of knowledge about the internet and news in Australia, and identifies areas that require further investigation. It analyses the impact of online news, including the trend towards personalised news, and presents original research from a pilot study.

The importance of studying online behaviour, and especially news gathering habits, cannot be underestimated. The 2005 Digital Future Project Report found that reading news was the third most popular online activity in the US, with email the most popular and web surfing second (2005 Digital Future Project Report, p. 3). A report in the PANPA Bulletin (2004), indicated rapid growth in Australians’ online news consumption, citing a study commissioned by the Fairfax corporation’s online arm Fairfax Digital, which found 83 per cent of respondents visited a news website at least twice a week (Website news consumption increasing, 2004, p. 57). Australian research into online news usage remained “almost untapped” until data from a national survey was published by Nguyen, Ferrier, Western and McKay in 2005 (Nguyen et al, 2005, p. 9). The survey, which had 790 respondents, found “about one third of the sample used the internet for news”, with more than half of those users saying “news was an essential or important part of their internet usage” (Nguyen et al, 2005, pp. 12-13). The survey concluded that the internet gave the most overall satisfaction as a news source when compared with other media and was “second to none in terms of the representation of different perspectives” (Nguyen et al, 2005, p. 27).

The aforementioned Australian studies aside, research into the impact of online news consumption has so far been driven primarily by studies conducted in the US, and specifically from two important sources: the Pew Research Centre – which oversees seven different projects – and the Centre for the Digital Future. The Project for Excellence in Journalism is funded by the Pew Research Centre. The project produces annual reports, called The state of the news media. It is one of the few projects that analyses behaviour of the Web audience by investigating what types of news attract people. The 2004 report found those going online to obtain news were “divided into three distinct groups”. These groups were: those who specifically wanted to access the latest headlines (accounting for about half of the respondents), those who sourced news “after they have encountered it while doing something else online”, and those who were following up on a news story found elsewhere (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004, p. 3).

The 2007 Digital Future Project report, released in December 2006, stated that 65.8 per cent of respondents considered the internet “to be a very important or extremely important source of information” (Centre for the Digital Future, 2006, p. 4). In keeping with findings from the previous two years, the report said websites run by established media (such as The New York Times and CNN) were perceived to be the most reliable and accurate sources of information. These findings were confirmed by The state of the news media 2006 report, which also found that online versions of established media outlets were the most trusted sources of news (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006, public attitudes, p. 1).

The online medium is beginning to take precedence over print in the supply of in-depth news and information. The state of the news media 2006 report said “the Internet is an environment that may now, on some sites at least, be richer [in information] than what is available anywhere else” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006, online, p.1). The same report found growth in the use of newspaper’s websites, with 67 per cent of respondents saying they “read either local or national newspaper websites in late 2005” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006, audience, p. 1), a factor significantly contributing to the decline in printed newspaper circulation.

The internet is continually gaining ground as a source of news in Australia. Data published by Roy Morgan Research showed the five most visited news websites in Australia to be the same for the past two years, to March 2006. They were (in order): ninemsn, ABC News Online, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age and NEWS.com.au (Roy Morgan, 2006). The same Roy
Morgan survey found the “total number of Australians who visited any of the listed news sites during a four-week period from April 2005 to March 2006 was 2.99 million”, reflecting 11.5 per cent growth (Roy Morgan, 2006).

**My media – personalised news and RSS**

The way people access news online is constantly evolving. In a speech presented at the Online News Association conference in 2004, president and chief executive officer of The Associated Press, Tom Curley noted consumers wanted to “become active participants … in the exchange of news and ideas” (Curley, 2004). News Corporation’s chairman and chief executive officer, Rupert Murdoch confirmed these views in a well-documented speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 2005, saying that the next generation, who have been brought up on computers, would “have a different set of expectations about the kind of news they will get” and would increasingly demand “news that speaks to them personally” (Murdoch, 2005). News outlets have embraced personalisation since Murdoch made his landmark speech, with web-feed technology driving the process.

Personalised news and information can be constantly streamed from participating sources to computers, weblogs and websites using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and similar web-feeds. Users of web-feed technology select content that interests them by posting RSS web addresses (also known as channels) into news aggregator software. These news feeds then appear on a homepage, weblog or website, often in a headline-only format. Google is one organisation that has made RSS technology easy to use since the release of its news aggregator, Google Reader in October 2005. Users subscribe to the product free of charge and then simply copy and paste the Web addresses of chosen RSS feeds (found through a Google RSS search facility) into the reader. Google then produces a personalised homepage featuring the user’s chosen web-feeds.

Web-feeds are available from commercial, government and not-for-profit websites as well as weblogs (blogs) and various established and alternative media outlets. Australia’s public service broadcaster, the ABC has a wide range of RSS news feeds. They reflect the corporation’s media diversity, with different news genres, plus radio and television feeds. An evaluation of the website by the writer of this article in December 2006 found that ABC Online had 12 national RSS news feeds, 44 regional RSS news feeds, six different types of sports feeds, six RSS feeds from specific television programs, two children’s feeds, four local radio feeds, and 47 national radio feeds.

Although organisations such as Yahoo, Excite and Netscape have offered personalised homepages for a number of years, the uptake of RSS technology has been relatively slow. A survey conducted in November 2004 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 5 per cent of respondents used RSS or similar web-feed technology (Rainie, 2005, p. 1). In Australia, a study of 150 people undertaken by the writer in August 2005, found 8.7 per cent of respondents subscribed to an RSS news feed, with 26 per cent saying they did not subscribe, and 65.3 per cent saying that they did not know what an RSS news feed was.

J. D. Lasica, formerly a senior editor of the *Online Journalism Review*, and an expert in user-generated content, noted that “no trend threatens the guardians of old media more than personalisation” (Lasica, 2004). Using the previously described technology, web users are able to construct news feeds solely based on particular genres or topics which interest them. Lasica described inclusive personalisation as follows:

> **True personalisation requires an extra step: a recurring set of interactions between news provider and news consumer that permits you to tailor the news to your spe-**

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3 The RSS research formed part of the writer’s study described under the heading “Perspectives, patterns and participation – original research findings”.

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cific interests. Imagine a publication made up entirely of articles of special interest
to you: stories about your hometown, your college, field of study, hobbies and
interests, favourite bands, TV shows and sports teams, along with coupons and
discounts for all the stuff you need to buy.

Call it the "Daily Me". (Lasica, 2004)

A report by Reuters' chief executive officer Tom Gloce, published in the Financial Times on
March 7, 2005, raised an interesting observation in relation to this type of personalisation. Gloce
said customised news should allow "room for human expression" and that 20 per cent should
include additional content, not actually requested, as a way to "avoid users feeling uncomfortable
about media companies making news that exactly matches customer profiles" (Gloce, 2005).

Streamlining media content to meet specific needs and profiles could indeed result in people
not consuming certain genres of news (such as political news), a practice that could eventually
impact negatively on the process of democracy itself. The "dangers" of actively tailoring media
to specific needs are described by Pavlik and McIntosh (2005), who say:

This phenomenon could fragment audiences into small groups of like-minded indi-
viduals who do not interact with other groups or with society as a whole and choose
to receive only the news and information that reinforces their beliefs and values.
(Pavlik & McIntosh in Bucy, 2005, p. 70)

However, Pavlik and McIntosh also addressed the perceived positive aspects of personalised
news, seeing it as a way to potentially increase public engagement in news consumption, encour-
aging interaction and "helping them [news consumers] become better informed about current
events" (Pavlik & McIntosh in Bucy, 2005, p. 70).

Personalisation is not only about selecting topics of interest, but is also a useful way of man-
aging the overwhelming amount of news and information available online. As previously men-
tioned, this news and information may come from a number of sources, including satirical sites
such as the Onion, which calls itself "America's finest news source"; the popular tabloid-style
participatory website Salon, or Slashdot, which provides "news for nerds". A personalised "news"
homepage could also solely consist of RSS feeds from various weblogs (blogs). Indeed, defining
news itself remains another challenge for researchers, especially if, as is suggested in follow-
ing paragraphs, the trend towards publishing and consuming "soft" news continues to increase.

**To inform or to entertain?**

"An enduring concern of mass communication researchers is the identification of the news
topics that interest audiences" (Tewksbury, 2003, p. 694). Tewksbury identified the need to moni-
tor online readership after an original study of internet news consumption in the US found lower
than anticipated interest in current affairs and a strong interest in sports news (Tewksbury, 2003,
p. 703).

The amount of celebrity and entertainment news in established print media is increasing, and
has even been described as reaching a "crisis point" in US daily media (American Press Institute,
2006). But how popular are these types of stories when they are published online? Findings from
the 2005 digital future report differentiated between reading news and reading entertainment
news as online activities, with reading news ranking third, and reading entertainment news listed
as the fifth most popular online activity (Centre for the Digital Future, 2005, p. 3).

In the UK, the BBC's head of television news, Peter Horrocks, delivered a landmark speech to
the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University in November 2006. In his
speech, Horrocks said the online audience was attracted to entertainment news and quirky stories,
especially on slow news days. Horrocks noted "news about Britney Spears' new baby attracted 350,000 readers in one day", and interest in the honeymoon of celebrity couple Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes "was sustained for days" (Horrocks, 2006). Horrocks recognised differences in viewing behaviour between the BBC's online and television audiences, saying "what people want to read when they are online may be very different to what they want to watch on television".

In Australia, the ABC's science department has also encountered strong consumer interest in off-beat stories published on the Web. A report in The Sydney Morning Herald on October 9, 2004, said: "Online it's the quirky tales that really shine", referring to the enduring popularity of an ABC story called "Found! The longest bird penis ever" (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2004). The story, first published on the ABC's website on September 14, 2001, attracted the most visits of all the ABC's nature, health and science stories, some weeks still getting "more than 10,000 hits on that particular page" (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2004).

Given the reputation and demographic of The New York Times as a printed publication, it is interesting to note what its online audience reads. An examination of the top 10 stories published online in 2005 found that an editorial on modern feminism was the most-read story of the year, with an opinion piece about President Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina second, and a hard news story about Katrina's impact ranking only fifth. A story about male underage online sex and an entertainment story about actor Tom Cruise ranked higher than the hard news about Katrina (The New York Times, 2006). The readership trend towards soft news continued in 2006. Relationships and literature featured strongly in The New York Times's 10 most-read online stories for 2006, with a two-page article about marriage topping the list and "Questions couples should ask (or wish they had) before marrying" third. The 10 best books of 2006 was the second most popular and "What is the best work of American fiction of the last 25 years?" sixth. The fifth most-read story was a two-page retrospective feature article giving a first-person account of a mid-air collision between a small business jet (which landed safely) and a Boeing 737, which crashed with no survivors. This article was published in the business section (The New York Times, 2007). Only two of the top 10 most-read stories could be classified as hard news, with a story about climate change ranked fourth and a story about a baseball player dying in an aircraft crash ranked eighth. Five of the top 10 stories ran over two or more pages.

In Australia, the websites of two Fairfax newspapers, The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald, provide electronic web audience viewing figures as publicly available data showing the most popular stories read each day. Van Heekeren's unique analysis of readership of The Sydney Morning Herald's website, conducted over a 12-week period between August and November 2004, found entertainment news was the most popular genre accessed, despite this period encompassing both the US and Australian federal elections. Political news ranked third, with crime stories ranking second (Van Heekeren, 2005, p. 5). The study, as Van Heekeren noted, "should be considered indicative rather than empirical", as readership could be influenced by factors such as what stories appeared on news alerts. In addition, a listing in the top five most-read stories could itself be a generator of popularity, as "readers may access [news] reports through the rankings list" (Van Heekeren, 2005, p. 4).

Perspectives, patterns and participation – original research findings

The following pilot study, conducted by the author in August 2005, offers a snapshot of the news gathering behaviour of a group of people living in south-east Queensland. The sample group was selected from students and staff at the University of the Sunshine Coast, because all members of this group had the opportunity and ability to access the internet (with a fast broadband connection), regardless of whether or not they had internet access at home. While the sample was not representative of the Australian population as a whole, it provided a valuable insight
into online news consumption among people with internet access. As the research project was not primarily concerned with evaluating numbers of people with internet access, but rather with what they accessed and how often, the sample provided a significant snapshot of how a selected group used the internet to gather news and information.

An internet news questionnaire was sent to potential respondents by email in August 2005. It was considered that a more candid response would be achieved through email than if questions were asked face-to-face. Replies were confidential, as email addresses were deleted before the questionnaires were processed and analysed. All staff at the university were also given the option of participating, including academics, security, maintenance, catering and administration personnel. In total, 150 people – 104 of whom were students – replied to the study. There was no access bias associated with the distribution of the questionnaire. No incentives were offered in the data collection process and there were no multiple submissions known to the writer. All returned questionnaires were included in the research, and data were entered manually into an SPSS spreadsheet.

General findings:

- While all respondents had internet access at the university, 90 per cent had access to the internet at home;
- 21 per cent of respondents spent more than 14 hours a week online (excluding email);
- 50 per cent of respondents spent between one and six hours a week online;
- 38 per cent of respondents were in the 18-24 age group.

Until the aforementioned The state of the news media 2006 report recognised the importance of the online medium for in-depth news, an analysis of previous studies found there was no distinction made between going online to read news and going online to read news in detail. A focus group discussion conducted by the author as part of the study revealed two types of news gathering processes, with skimming headlines and reading stories in detail considered differently by the participants. To test this finding, the pilot study asked respondents to name their preferred source of news and then their preferred source of in-depth news.

Television was overwhelmingly cited as the preferred source of news – by 47 per cent of respondents – with the internet listed second as a preferred source of news by 19 per cent of respondents, newspapers were cited by 17 per cent, and radio 16 per cent. However, preference for television dropped substantially, to only 21 per cent, when respondents were asked what medium was preferred for in-depth news. The most popular medium cited for in-depth news consumption was newspapers, at 37 per cent. The internet also rated very highly, with 35 per cent of respondents choosing online as their preferred medium for in-depth news coverage. Radio news dropped to 6 per cent.

In keeping with findings from US surveys, the internet was named the most important source of in-depth news for young people, with 46 per cent of respondents in the 18 to 24 age group and 48 per cent in the 25 to 34 age group saying the internet was their preferred source for in-depth news. Almost three-quarters of 18 to 24-year-olds spent more than 18 hours a week using the internet and 42 per cent of this age group accessed online news more than once a day. Across all the age groups, people who said they accessed the internet once a day, or more than once a day, to obtain news accounted for 24 per cent of respondents.

Study participants could choose from any or all of 10 different news websites in answer to the question: What news websites do you visit regularly? The 10 websites selected (based on a test study and other internet polls) were: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), ninemsn, The Age, The Courier-Mail, The Sydney Morning
Herald (SMH), The Australian, NEWS.com.au, Yahoo! News (Australia and New Zealand) and The New York Times (NYT).

The following table shows the distribution of responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News website</th>
<th>Number of respondents regularly visiting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ninemsn</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Courier-Mail</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The SMH</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEWS.com.au</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NYT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>284</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about preferred news websites, participants could also mark “other” and state their alternative sources of online news. This category drew 32 responses. The only websites to score more than three hits in this category were the portal Google News, with five, and the Sunshine Coast Daily website, with four. The Sunshine Coast Daily is a print publication specific to the geographic area surrounding the University of the Sunshine Coast, and its website provides local news. Only 2 per cent of respondents said they regularly used alternative, independent websites to obtain news.

A statistical analysis of frequency found the most popular website regularly visited for news was ABC News Online, accounting for 22 per cent of respondents. This was followed by ninemsn, the joint venture between the Microsoft Corporation and Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL), accounting for 20 per cent. The next two most popular news websites were The Australian and news.com.au, both with 8 per cent. The most popular news website accessed by the 18 to 24-year-olds was ninemsn, with this age group accounting for 55 per cent of all participants who said they visited ninemsn for news on a regular basis. When considering the data, it is important to mention that care should be taken when making comparisons and analysing the popularity of ninemsn, as personal interviews conducted as part of the project suggested that ninemsn was not exclusively accessed for news, and indeed news can be an incidental by-product of the ninemsn experience.

To further examine patterns of behaviour on news websites, participants were asked to indicate what genres of news they accessed. They could choose to mark any number of categories for the types of news consumed. Front page news/current affairs was chosen as the first category, while the other categories mirrored the BBC’s online news menu at the time. These categories were entertainment, sport, politics, business, health, international, science/nature and technology. Again, participants could also select “other” and enter qualitative responses on the questionnaire.
The following table shows the full distribution of responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of news read online</th>
<th>Number of respondents regularly visiting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front page/current affairs</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science/nature</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>366</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Front page news and current affairs was the most popular category regularly accessed by respondents, followed by international news, political news and entertainment news. An analysis by age found 18 to 24-year-olds were the most likely to read entertainment and sports news while accessing a news website, although they also demonstrated a strong interest in news and current affairs, and international news. As the 18 to 24-year-olds studied were all university students, no direct comparisons could be made with existing research into the news gathering behaviour of young people. Indeed, the relationship between young people, the internet and consumption of the soft/entertainment news genre is one that must be explored in greater detail. While research by Mindich (2005, p. 127) found that young Americans were generally “tuned out” to political news, but engaged with entertainment news, the director of survey research at the Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press, Scott Keeter, concluded that the “stereotype of a politically disengaged younger generation is not fully accurate” (Keeter, 2006).

**Conclusion**

News and information is being increasingly submitted to websites by the public, and it is important to point out that this article has not discussed another fundamental part of the internet news phenomenon – citizen journalism (also known as participatory journalism) and blogging. Instead, the emphasis was on patterns of use, preferred sources of news and the impact of personalised news.

There is no doubt that the online medium is becoming increasingly important as a source of news, at the expense of traditional media formats. Web news supplies in-depth information and analysis, not just breaking news and headlines. Respondents to the author’s study turned away from television and used the internet as a source of in-depth news to rival the newspaper. The US studies cited and the author’s study supported the widely held view that young people have the strongest engagement with the online medium. Although the Web offers myriad choices, it was interesting to find that respondents to the pilot study overwhelmingly preferred to access the websites of established media outlets to source their online news. This was consistent with findings from US research examined in the article.

With the ability to offer almost infinite information through the use of hyperlinks, the Web’s impact and importance can only increase as more and more people turn to the medium. But to become fully educated on particular topics, the Web audience needs to take full advantage of the volume of information available online, be able to recognise credible sources, and access dif-
ferent websites to form objective opinions. A challenge for researchers and educators will be to
monitor patterns of online behaviour and any resulting positive or negative social impacts from
the personalisation of news and the popularity of the soft news and entertainment news genres.
Focus should be on the content chosen by users of news-feed technology and other types of
personalisation. In turn, it is necessary to then investigate which stories are actually read once re-
ceived. Only then can an assessment be made as to whether people may be missing out on impor-
tant news items that impact on their future. If, in the words of Van Heckeran, the online audience
“wants entertainment first and foremost”, then how will that impact on the future of news? The
critical issue is to determine if the online audience will embrace the different genres and sources
of news available, or if readers will choose to access only news and information that interests
them. Indeed, the future of news will be not be decided by media magnates, or journalism educa-
tors, but will be defined by what ordinary people choose to read and do online.

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