

NEWS ON THE INTERNET

*Information and Citizenship
in the 21st Century*

David Tewksbury and
Jason Rittenberg



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Philip N. Howard

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News on the Internet

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Imagine, if you can or if you remember, the days before the internet. Most people received the bulk of their news from local and national television news broadcasts. The number of news stories contained in 30 or even 60 minutes of news was relatively small, and most stories ran for a minute or two at most. What is more, television news stories were programmed to run in a particular order. To get to information about sports or weather, people had to wait through lead stories on a variety of topics (mostly local, national, and international public affairs). There was a thriving newspaper industry in those days—even as the number of people reading daily newspapers had been steadily falling for decades. Listening to radio news and reading magazine news accounted for some news consumption, but broadcast television news and newspapers were king.

Much of the news that audiences received in the 20th century was based on a model of objective reporting. That model did not guarantee perfectly neutral or balanced news, as many critics and observers convincingly argued (e.g., Bennett 1996), but journalists and others in the business said that objectivity was both a format for news presentation and a goal for news content. Of course, the news business of the 20th century was largely built on profit incentives, and those incentives led to the production of a relatively homogeneous product much of the time (Bennett 1996).

The world of news that we are describing is very different from the one we now inhabit. Indeed, the news business of the recent past is already coming to seem a little fantastical. Today, audiences for broadcast television news and newspapers are experiencing steep and steady declines. The audience for news on the internet has grown from nothing in 1993 to second behind only television (Pew Research Center 2010). These and other changes in the media marketplace have been accompanied by a number of changes in the content and presentation of news. Cable television news

has become segmented into topically and ideologically discrete channels, the number of print newspapers continues to dwindle, and the number of internet-based news sources has mushroomed.

Perhaps most important for the future of the news business, the very meaning of news is shifting. Large corporate news divisions based in New York and Washington still produce quite a bit of content about public affairs, but the nature of that content is rapidly changing. Pressures on the news business have led news providers to expand the commentary they produce as they shrink their newsroom staffs. Journalists cover more topical ground than they did before, and they often are expected to interact with audiences in online discussion environments. Increasingly, news consumers are also the creators. Online and mobile technologies allow them to feed information into the news stream and the public conversation. Almost anyone with internet access can break a story or even create the news, at least in principle.

Changes in the news business are challenging the old definitions of press and audience. On the one hand, the dividing line between journalist and citizen is becoming particularly fuzzy, as more people become involved in the creation of news. On the other hand, the current technologies have facilitated a change in the meaning of an audience. The dominant media of the 20th century operated within a system of centralized, largely one-way news dissemination. To consume the news was to ingest a diet of information selected by news professionals. What is more, the major media determined the flow of news. Even a newspaper, always the most customizable news format, contains a structure that largely organizes news for audiences. Today, the receivers of the news exert substantial control over their news diet. They can choose among numerous outlets, preselect specific topics, and focus their time and attention on the messages they prefer.

Twenty years ago, it would have been hard to predict the transformations that have passed through the news business. Things look very different today. Of course, some things remain the same. People are still people, wars are still wars, and much of what has reliably drawn audiences to the news continues to do so. Nonetheless, much about online news is novel and emergent. Researchers in communication and allied fields have been speculating about the political and social effects of all of the changes in the nature of news and audiences.

Our goal in this book is to organize and review what is known and said about news on the internet. We look at news and audiences online, describing how audiences approach the news and influence its content. We look at the kind of news that appears on the internet, compare it with what shows up elsewhere, and speculate about the meanings of these patterns.

We then return to the news audience, think about how people are getting and creating news online, and offer some conclusions about how current uses of the news may affect the quality of social and political life in modern democracies.

This introductory chapter serves two functions. First, it provides background information for much of what we discuss in the book. The evolution of the news business is directly related to the evolution of politics and public discourse in a democracy. Therefore, we start with a short discussion of information and its relationship with citizenship. Then we preview, in general terms, some of the attributes of the internet that are most relevant for the creation, presentation, and consumption of news. We also foreshadow the connections between these characteristics and some of the consequential potential effects of online news. Finally, we briefly describe the plan for the book and sketch the major emphases of each chapter.

NEWS AUDIENCES AND CITIZENS

In our review, we describe the content and presentation of news on the internet and how people are interacting with that news. Making up much of what is novel and important about online news are the developments that force us to think about the role of audiences. The shift from a top-down media system to one that features more horizontal interaction of people and news represents a change in the relationship that citizens and others in a nation have with information. For our discussion, it is useful to consider some of the ways that scholars have described the roles of citizens and information in democratic nations.

Information in the Political System

Political scientist Bruce Bimber argues that information and the technology of its control and dissemination form a central pillar of power in a democratic society. Indeed, he notes that information and its control are at the core of the relationship between citizen and state and the intermediaries between them. A relatively stable set of relationships between information flows and political institutions constitutes what he calls an “information regime.” When the nature of information structures change, political relationships also change: “Information regimes in the United States have been interrupted by information revolutions, which involve changes in the structure or accessibility of information. These revolutions

may be initiated by technological developments, institutional change, or economic outcomes. An information revolution disrupts a prior information regime by creating new opportunities for political communication and the organization of collective action” (Bimber 2003, p. 18).

Changes in information regimes are consequential because “... democratic power tends to be biased toward those with the best command of political information at any particular stage in history” (Bimber 2003, p. 18). The media system of the 20th century was very hierarchically organized. As we have noted, news and other information flowed downstream from centralized news organizations to audiences. Political and economic leaders had ready access to journalists and news providers, exercising power, in part, through their control of information.

Of course, centralized control of news and information is still the rule in much of the American political system, but things are changing. In part through harnessing the properties of the internet, audiences have more input into the news system and more control over the flow of news. As we note in this book, some people use their control to avoid news about public affairs entirely, but others use it to expand their knowledge of issues and other topics. Some members of the news audience prefer a one-way flow of news, but others are using the internet to expand the reach of their voices.

The Requirements of Citizenship

Most 20th-century interpretations of democratic theory have placed the active citizen at the center of democratic systems (Berelson 1952). Political power ultimately rests with citizens in a democracy. With that power, citizens have a responsibility to gather information about public affairs (e.g., government, politics, and international events) and to form reasoned judgments about political leaders and issues. In this framework, the citizen is essentially a consumer of information. In order to be such a consumer, the citizen must seek out public affairs information (Berelson 1952). He or she must be an active user of the media. Ultimately, the news helps citizens gather the information they need. In many respects, the news is a public service of journalists and other news producers.

Although this is the dominant interpretation of democratic theory, there are others. Perhaps chief among them is offered by Michael Schudson (1998). In a review of the history of citizenship in the United States, he suggests that the relationship between citizens and political activity has changed. Initially, the duty of citizenship featured the relationship between the individual and political leaders. Everyday-citizen involvement in politics

was limited to evaluating the qualities of leaders who represented them in government. The subsequent bulk of the 19th century featured a "partisan" model of citizenship. Here the citizen was expected to participate in the political system through support of political parties. This pluralist system replaced leaders with parties as the object of important political decision making. The 20th century is the period that put information at the core of citizens' political activity. It also saw the rise of political activity built around the establishment and protection of citizens' rights in the political system.

The role of the news in each of these periods is tied to the needs of the citizen for political information. In all times, information matters. But the need for citizens to follow a range of events, issues, and people in public affairs certainly depends on the dominant model of citizenship at any one time. Schudson suggests that the role of citizens in a democratic system is a malleable one. Political, social, and legal circumstances can influence how people think about their civic responsibilities and their relationship to the news.

Detailed knowledge about issues and policies in government has not always been central to citizenship, although it appears to occupy an important role today. Ultimately, any changes in the relationships among people, information (i.e., news), and political authority will influence how a society functions and how its citizens fare. That is one of the chief reasons we all should care about the provision and consumption of news on the internet.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG CITIZENS, NEWS, AND SOCIETY

A central premise of the theory and research discussed in this book is that the technology of information delivery matters. We will neither examine nor state that assumption very often, but it is the foundation for research on the form, use, and effects of news on the internet (just as it informed earlier work on the effects of television; see Williams 1974).

A little background on the role of technology in social change and in people's lives is useful here. To say that technology matters is rather simplistic, of course. Perhaps more to the point, most researchers in communication assume that information technologies both provide ways for people to do what they want to do and suggest new things to do (e.g., Hughes 1997). That is, new communication technologies continue some social practices, facilitate desired new ones, and inspire novel developments. They do these things simultaneously.

For example, when television was widely adopted in American households in the period after World War II, the industry in the United States largely moved successful content from radio programs to television (Sterling and Kittross 2002). The new technology let people do what they already did (e.g., enjoy drama and comedy programming). But television proved to be more than radio with pictures. It facilitated the development of a number of new kinds of programming (e.g., the “Spectacular” of the 1950s and 1960s; Sterling and Kittross 2002) that moved broadcast entertainment content beyond what had been popular on radio. Similarly, the internet was primarily a product of government researchers and other scientists seeking to improve computing power and efficiency (Margolis and Resnick 2000). It ably accomplished that mission for early users of the system in the 1970s. But, as we know, widespread diffusion of the internet in the 1990s and today has inspired a number of additional uses. These examples illustrate that communication technologies satisfy existing needs and help generate new ones at the same time.

Sometimes theory and research on new technologies can seem to imply that technologies cause change or even that people are helpless to resist inevitable effects of technology. Most researchers today try to avoid that perspective, often pejoratively labeled “technological determinism” (e.g., Williams 1974), because it does not grant people much agency in the creation and shaping of technologies. A number of researchers examining new technologies have advocated a perspective closer to social shaping of technology. They suggest that people get the technology they want (e.g., Williams 1974), shape how it is used (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985), and help determine its effects (Winner 1985).

We come down pretty close to the social perspective. We do not assume that new technologies such as the internet impose changes on people and political systems. Rather, we assume that social, economic, and political changes happen in concert with technological change. They facilitate one another. Which factor exerts the greater influence likely evolves over the course of a process of change. So, it may appear at times that the internet is driving social and political revolution. We prefer to think—taking the long view—of transformation in the role of citizens in a democracy as a joint product of technological and other changes. We try to implement that perspective in our discussion of the relationship between news and audiences. We describe what audiences do with the news and how they select news outlets, choose stories, and process information. We will similarly describe how news outlets present information and build audiences. The relationship between information and people is necessarily interactive.

The central focus of this book is the study of the potential effects of internet presentation of news. It is worth considering the particular way we approach theory and research on this topic. There are many paths to knowledge; the longer one engages in research, the more confidence one develops in the notion that many paths may lead to truth. Nonetheless, researchers (and authors of books like this one) make choices about how they will approach concepts and their study. The theory and research we review in this book come from different traditions. For example, we rely on analyses from political economy and theory from a number of domains. Underlying the bulk of our discussion and analysis, though, is the tradition of media effects research.

The media effects approach is grounded in the idea that social phenomena—such as media content and audience reactions—are open to observation and measurement. What is more, the dominant social-scientific strain of media effects research suggests that the effects of exposure to media content are unknown until they can be measured and tested. The tradition is not wholly yoked to empirical research norms, but they certainly define the parameters of much of the research in this area.

The media effects approach is one of several ways to study social phenomena. The study of media is replete with research that focuses on the social context of messages and audiences, the linguistic power of words and images, and the sociology of power within societies and institutions (such as news organizations). Some of these research traditions suggest that media effects research is too closely wedded to linear (i.e., cause leads to effect), empirical research (McQuail 2010). Critical theory, for example, suggests that media, messages, and audiences are all situated within power hierarchies that circumscribe and define communication and its outcomes (McQuail 2010). An empirical cause-and-effect orientation toward media necessarily omits important, underlying elements of social communication.

The media effects approach, largely centered in social-scientific research, retains several advantages for the aims of this book. Among them is the muscle it provides analysts wishing to compare media and messages across topical, national, and cultural boundaries. Researchers studying the content of the media might claim that they can identify the core elements of news from across the globe and within the various strata and social groups found in any one society. Likewise, media effects research can build and test theory that helps researchers understand and predict the outcomes of exposure to specific and general classes of media content. It is the generalizability of the findings of media effects research

that makes them most useful for studying the potential personal and social role of the media.

Taking the media effects perspective, our efforts to describe the content of news online involve empirical analyses of sites and messages. Likewise, we summarize what theorists and other observers have predicted about the effects of exposure to news online and subject their expectations to empirical scrutiny. Anecdotal evidence is useful, to be sure, and we appreciate the heuristic power of exemplars and focused case studies. Nonetheless, we foreground empirical research when it is available. When it is not, we rely on theory, the available evidence we have, and a skeptical brand of common sense. We also willingly conclude that many research questions are still unanswered. That is what makes research fun.

ONLINE NEWS AND ITS EFFECTS

In many ways, the internet is the sum of all other media. When trying to describe it, its uses, and its effects, one must set parameters. There are a few primary features of news on the internet that take center stage in this book. They represent some of the most exciting developments with the technology and its use, and they have implications for how information and citizenship operate in advanced democracies. We briefly preview them here, noting how these characteristics generate certain themes that run through this book.

The Internet has a Wealth of News

Among the defining features of the contemporary internet is its information storage capacity. The internet is a big place. There are few practical limitations on the amount of news and information that can be stored and accessed online. This characteristic has two dimensions relevant to the presentation of news.

First, audiences can find a greater variety of news online than they can find in other media. It is hard to imagine that there is a topic or perspective under the sun that is not covered in some way online. Chris Anderson (2004) popularized this characteristic as the “long tail” of the internet. This phrase relates to a hypothetical distribution graph where the majority of users are clustered among a few popular sources at one end, but there continues to be at least some audience for many more outlets as the number of sites continues to rise. The “long tail” is shorthand for the fact that the size of the internet allows for niche content and audiences. Users not only may