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Abstract: Print newspaper circulation is in a free fall. Between 2007-2009, the decline was 30% in US, 25% in UK, and a bit less in Greece, Italy, and Canada (Robinson, 2010). Print media are also being fast abandoned by younger readers: 65% of 18-29 year olds consider internet to be their primary source of news according to The Economist (anon, 2011). Nevertheless news definitely interests young people as they strive to stay informed. Pew research (Lenhart, Purcell, and Smith, 2010) indicated that 62% of internet-using teenagers, especially the older teens, consume online news about current events and politics. Print media seem to be losing young readers simply because they want news on demand, and to control and customise content, time and the medium itself (Huang, 2009). Publishers are confirming this trend by directing youth-related investment into online services (Graybeal, 2008; Kohl, 2008). Thus this new media environment, and related information behaviour of young adults, requires more explicit exploration particularly as social network sites and other supporting tools, e.g., blogs, are now fixtures of youth culture (Metz, 2009; Schwartz, 2005).

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The online news experiences of young adults

Introduction, literature review and significance of study

Print newspaper circulation is in a free fall. Between 2007-2009, the decline was 30% in US, 25% in UK, and a bit less in Greece, Italy, and Canada (Robinson, 2010). Print media are also being fast abandoned by younger readers: 65% of 18-29 year olds consider internet to be their primary source of news according to *The Economist* (anon, 2011). Nevertheless news definitely interests young people as they strive to stay informed. Pew research (Lenhart, Purcell, & Smith, 2010) indicated that 62% of internet-using teenagers, especially the older teens, consume online news about current events and politics. Print media seem to be losing young readers simply because they want news on demand, and to control and customise content, time and the medium itself (Huang, 2009). Publishers are confirming this trend by directing youth-related investment into online services (Graybeal, 2008; Kohl, 2008). Thus this new media environment, and related information behaviour of young adults, requires more explicit exploration particularly as social network sites and other supporting tools, e.g., blogs, are now fixtures of youth culture (Metz, 2009; Schwartz, 2005).

In the earlier stage of their research, Qayyum, Williamson, Liu, & Hider (2010) found a strong desire to remain informed amongst their study participants, who used a variety of news media, including printed newspapers, to try to achieve this. They confirmed findings of other researchers (e.g. (Huang, 2009; Raeymaeckers, 2004) that young people are particularly interested in entertainment but that local news of direct relevance to them is also important. In the second stage, reported here, the researchers focussed on patterns of behaviour of young adults when they interact with online news media. They used various findings of the first phase to inform their approach. There was also an emphasis on the discovery of information for everyday living as reported in (Williamson, Qayyum, Hider, & Liu, 2012).

The significance of the study relates to preferences for online information formats and content, and thus to the quality and effectiveness of user/information interactions. Given the trend identified in the literature, online newspapers and other services are here to stay, making this investigation important. The field of information science can make a contribution in this regard, as this study sets out to do. Although a minor component, the research is also significant because of the recent advent of social networking and the documented attraction of young adults to it.

Method

The overall research approach was qualitative (interpretive) and involved 34 university students, aged 18-25. Sampling was partly purposive (with criteria being “age” and “interest in news”) and partly convenience. In the first stage, 20 students were interviewed about their interest in various kinds of news, the sources they used and their perceptions of these sources. The second stage, the focus of this paper, involved 14 different students in a usability study where they undertook four different tasks. The approach was verbal protocol analysis, involving data collected from in-task think aloud sessions and retrospective interviews held immediately after each task to seek the participant’s opinions, thoughts, and motives behind their actions. Such a combination of current and retrospective thinking was preferred in this study as research by Kuusela and Paul (2000) demonstrated some distinct advantages of both techniques. Standard qualitative data analysis was used to identify categories and themes and to compare print and online news.

Task findings

Task #1: Search for and read 1-2 news stories about a community event or an activity that took place in their local area of interest during the past month. While first stage interviewees had indicated that local news was of definite interest, second stage usability participants pointed out that it is difficult to find local information online compared to national or international news. Many reported that they would rather read local newspapers because they include a relevant leisure component.

Task #2: Search for 2-3 online news stories on the political unrest in a specified country using a fixed search term. First stage participants had indicated a lack of trust for online news. TV/Radio news was trusted more. In contrast, second stage participants acknowledged online news as being trustworthy, but preferred to find their information from Google searches rather than to go straight to news sites. Criteria for reliability were that the site looked professional and was ranked sufficiently highly in Google search results. Armstrong and Collins's (2009) findings are confirmed here: that the more professional a news site appears, the higher viewers rate its quality.

Task #3: Read a specified article published on a national newspaper's website and the associated blog comments. Stage one interviews had indicated that some users read public blogs but rarely posted to any except the more personal Facebook forums. Most second stage participants considered that comments appearing on newspaper sites added no value and even viewed them as "ranting" of some sort. Some indicated that the particular blogs under consideration were not in their areas of interest. Interestingly, they preferred journalists' opinion pieces over reader views, either online or in print.

Task #4: Visit the website of another daily and then compare the various formats in which news was presented to users, i.e. the online webpage and PDF versions, and the print version of that day's paper. Stage one interviews had indicated a strong preference for print newspapers, partly attributed to parental influences and partly to the recreational aspect of reading print newspapers. Many second-stage participants also expressed a preference for print newspaper layout. Others described the webpage format as the best of the three formats as it was, a) very readable, b) offered a short blurb which gave a quick overview, and c) had an accompanying picture.

Conclusion

The results indicate a strong user preference of searching for news using a search engine instead of visiting newspaper websites. The continuous exposure to Google seems to have also led to a build-up of trust in more highly ranked results, especially from sites with a professional appearance. The users also placed more trust in expert (journalist) opinions rather than the blogs associated with articles which did not match their interests. The effect of the move from 'macro-blogging' to 'micro-blogging' (e.g. twitter) and status updates (Lenhart et al., 2010) remains to be investigated. Although the research is limited by the type of young people included, and the small number in the second stage, the conclusion is that online newspaper sites need to match the information needs of readers and pay careful attention to the appearance of their sites.

The results have implications for information research and provision more broadly, including in relation to determining information needs and preferences, the ever-evolving online environments, and social networking preferences.

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