

Students' perceptions and use of the Internet as a news channel

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Abstract

New technologies, in particular the Internet, have transformed journalistic practices in many ways around the world. While a number of studies have investigated how established journalists are dealing with and using new technologies in a number of countries, very little attention has been paid to how the journalists of tomorrow view and use the Internet as a source of news. This study examined the ways in which second and third-year journalism and arts students at the University of Queensland (Australia) get their news, how they use the Internet as a news channel, as well as their perceptions and use of other new technologies. The authors draw on the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications, as well as the methodological context of survey questionnaire, to explore the primary reasons why students use the Internet as their principal news channel.

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Introduction

New technologies have transformed journalistic practices in many ways around the world. Newspapers in particular are under pressure in many developed countries to adapt to technological changes as revenues dwindle and new online business models are being explored. As a result, the Internet has become an immensely significant source of news for many in the developed world. Not surprisingly, there has been a surge in scholarly attention to how news is delivered online, as well as who is producing it and who is reading it. However, while a number of studies have investigated how established journalists are dealing with and using new technologies in a number of countries (e.g. Fenton, 2010; Obijiofor, 2009, 2003, 2001; Singer, 2005; Deuze, 2003; Garrison, 2001; Henningham, 1995), very little attention has been paid to how the journalists of tomorrow view and use the Internet as a news medium. Splichal and Sparks' (1994) seminal study of first-year journalism students in 22 countries around the world was conducted more than 15 years ago, long before the Internet became a mainstream news source for many people. In fact, in the developed world, the Internet has become an integral part of most students' lives, to the extent that these "digital natives" have been teaching their lecturers a thing or two about the Internet.

Beyond students' use of the Internet as a source of news, a number of studies have also examined students' use of the Internet in general. For example, Anderson (2001)

examined how Internet use has impacted on the social or academic lives of university students. Kandell (1998) analysed Internet addiction among students. Similarly, Kubey et al. (2001) examined the relationship between heavy Internet use and students' academic performance, while Jones et al. (2009) studied how college students in the US used the Internet. In their study, Kubey et al. (2001: 366) note the increasing use of the Internet by university students while Jones et al. (2009) report that students are "heavy users of the Internet" (2009).

Yet, as pointed out previously, there exist limited studies of exclusively journalism students' use of the Internet as a news source. Considering that a vast majority of journalists in the Western world now have some tertiary education in communication or journalism field, this group is important to examine in order for us to understand how the journalists of the future will be engaging with the Internet and other new technologies. In this context, this paper reports the results of a pilot survey that examined the ways and means by which second and third-year journalism and arts students at the University of Queensland (Australia) receive their news, including their perceptions and use of the Internet as a news channel. The study serves as a foundation for a proposed much larger (global) study of journalism students' use of the Internet as a news channel.

Theoretical framework

Many of the research studies on Internet use have been explained within the framework of uses and gratifications theory (e.g. Kaye, 2007; Kaye and Johnson, 2004; Charney and Greenberg, 2001; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). The uses and gratifications framework concentrates on media audiences rather than the media message (Littlejohn, 1992: 364). It views the audience member as an active consumer of media contents, who makes conscious decisions about what type of media and media content to expose themselves to. According to Kaye (2007: 129): “Uses and gratifications studies investigate how the audience uses the media rather than how the media use the audience.” Thus, uses and gratifications research tradition seeks to explore why people use media and what people do with the media (McQuail, 2005: 424). The key assumptions of uses and gratifications theory are:

- (a) that the audience for news and other genres of media content is active and goal directed.
- (b) that media are an important source of need gratification whose fulfillment lies with audience choices, and
- (c) that media compete with other sources of need satisfaction (Bucy et al., 2007: 149).

Kaye (2007: 129) and Littlejohn (1992) echo similar assumptions of uses and gratifications theory -- that media audiences “actively seek out media, media use is goal directed and media consumption satisfies a wide variety of needs” (Kaye, 2007: 129). In essence, the uses and gratifications theory assumes that media audiences approach media

with specific needs and for specific reasons. In the process, the media audience selects specific media content that would satisfy those needs. Littlejohn (1992: 365) states that the gratification an individual seeks from the media relates to:

one's beliefs about what a medium can provide and one's evaluation of the medium's content. For example, if you believe that sitcoms provide entertainment and you evaluate entertainment as good, you will seek gratification of your entertainment needs by watching sitcoms. If, on the other hand, you believe that sitcoms provide an unrealistic view of life and evaluate such content as bad, you will avoid viewing sitcoms (Littlejohn, 1992: 365).

Usefulness of theory to studies of Internet use

There are theoretical implications for how and why people use the Internet. In its early years, uses and gratifications research marked a major shift away from the trend in mass communication research because it projected the media audience as active individuals who make conscious decisions about types of media and purposively selecting media contents to satisfy their individual needs. Prior to the emergence of the uses and gratifications theory, mass communication scholars had presented media audiences as a "passive" and "unthinking" group of people. However, following the emergence of the Internet and the range of choices available to Internet users, uses and gratifications approach is now deemed particularly relevant to studies that analyse why and how people use the Internet because "the role of electronic media audiences has evolved from passive

‘viewers’ or ‘listeners’ of media content into active ‘users’ of information and communication technologies” (Bucy et al., 2007: 149).

Kaye and Johnson (2004: 198) explain that uses and gratifications theory is particularly suited to the study of the Internet because “online technologies such as e-mail, bulletin boards and chat rooms are interactive applications that require audience members to be active users”. Drawing on previous research, (Kaye and Johnson, 2004: 199) argue that, in terms of gratifications that people seek through the use of the Internet, “the Web tends to satisfy entertainment, escape and social interaction needs” (Kaye and Johnson, 2004: 199). However, they point out that “because different components of the Internet are functionally different than (sic) the Web and from each other, they may gratify different needs” (2004: 199). In regard to specific uses of the Internet and e-mail, some researchers reported that Internet and e-mail users identified information collection (and the ease of collecting information on the Internet) as major gratifications they received through the use of the Internet (see Alao and Folorunsho, 2008; Wahid et al., 2006; Sairosse and Mutula, 2004; Kaye and Johnson, 2004).

As the Internet constitutes an area in which research on uses and gratifications is still growing, this study has been grounded on the uses and gratifications theory in order to explore and understand how and why university students use the Internet as a news channel. This is based on the understanding that both old media (radio, television, newspapers, etc.) and new media (Internet, online forums, e-mail, etc.) influence the way

we communicate, the way we perceive the world, and the way we interact with people from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds.

Research on uses and gratifications theory originally examined how audiences selected and used (older or traditional) mass media such as radio, television, newspapers, etc. and the gratifications they derived from using the media (see, for example, Lazarsfeld and Stanton, 1944 & 1949). According to McQuail (2005: 424), the first of the uses and gratifications research sought to identify and understand reasons “for the popular appeal of different radio programmes, especially ‘soap operas’ and quizzes, and also looked at daily newspaper reading”. Early research on the use of radio found that “day-time radio soap operas, although often dismissed as superficial and mindless stories to fill time, were also found significant by their (women) listeners. They provided a source of advice and support, a role model of housewife and mother, or an occasion for emotional release through laughter or tears” (McQuail, 2005: 424).

Critique of uses and gratifications theory

Despite its theoretical and methodological relevance, uses and gratifications theory has been criticised for its excessively descriptive orientation, its theoretical inadequacies and for “relying too heavily on audiences for reporting their true motivations for media use” (Bucy et al., 2007: 150). More significantly, uses and gratifications theory has been criticised for ignoring “the dysfunctions of media in society and culture” because it “sees media primarily as positive ways in which individuals meet their needs, without any

attention to the overall negative cultural effects of media in society” (Littlejohn, 1992: 373). Incidentally, the negative influence of media on audience members has been documented by researchers such as Lerner and Schramm (1976) and Tehranian (1989). In fact, Lerner and Schramm (1976: 341-342) identified the dysfunctional role of the mass media thus:

Throughout the less-developed regions, people have been led to want more than they can get. This can be attributed in part to the spread of the mass media, which inevitably show and tell people about the good things of life that are available elsewhere... As people in the poor countries were being shown and told about ‘goodies’ available in developed countries, they were also being taught about their own inferiority -- at least in terms of wealth and well-being. Recognition of the disparities between the rich and poor countries produced among some a sense of hopelessness, among others a sense of aggressiveness. Both apathy and aggression usually are counterproductive to genuine development efforts.

Similarly, Tehranian (1989: 183) cites former President Sukarno of Indonesia who lamented the destructive influence of Hollywood and the media on Indonesian people because they induced Indonesians to demand goods and services which the country could hardly afford. According to Sukarno:

The motion picture industry has provided a window on the world, and the colonized nations have looked through that window and have seen the things of

which they have been deprived. It is perhaps not generally realized that a refrigerator can be a revolutionary symbol -- to a people who have no refrigerators. A motor car owned by a worker in one country can be a symbol of revolt to a people deprived of even the necessities of life... [Hollywood] helped to build up the sense of deprivation of man's birthright, and that sense of deprivation has played a large part in the national revolutions of postwar Asia (quoted in Tehranian, 1989: 183).

In a more incisive criticism of uses and gratifications theory, Littlejohn (1992: 374) states that:

Uses and gratifications makes media consumption extremely rational, behavioristic, and individualistic. Individuals are believed to control their media consuming behavior according to conscious goals. No attention is paid to the ways in which media may be consumed mindlessly or ritualistically. The theory does not study the ways in which media content form and reflect cultural values or patterns of action. In other words, much of our consumption of mass media may not be easily traced to individual needs, but rather to habits of the culture. Also, individuals may not be aware of many of the factors that enter into their consumption choices.

Literature

There is a vast body of literature on how and why university students use the Internet (e.g. Jones et al., 2009; Anderson, 2001; Kubey et al., 2001; Kandell, 1998). Research in Africa and beyond suggests that students constitute the main consumers of Internet services in developing countries (Furuholt, et al., 2008; Omotayo, 2006; Kwansah-Aidoo and Obijiofor, 2006; Tanyeri et al., 2006; Mwesige, 2004; Sairosse and Mutula, 2004; Mutula, 2003; Odero, 2003; and Robins, 2002). In this context, we expect university students to use the Internet not only for accessing news but also for a range of purposes, such as to fulfill entertainment needs, to achieve their learning objectives, and to communicate with their friends, families and colleagues.

In Nigeria, one study examined the level of Internet use by undergraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University (Awoloye et al., 2008: 84) and found that the Internet was used “mostly for e-mail, information search and online chatting”. In a related study conducted in Nigeria, Omotayo (2006) revealed that, among the reasons given by university students for accessing the Internet, e-mail communication, search for academic and sport-related information, as well as search for pornographic material featured prominently. In Pretoria, South Africa, Odero (2003) reported differences in the way postgraduate and undergraduate students used the Internet. For example, while postgraduate students used Internet cafés mostly for educational activities, undergraduate students used the Internet for entertainment purposes such as chatting and listening to music. Robins (2002: 243) reported that a group of journalism students accessing an

Internet café in Dakar, Senegal, were engaged in “writing email to one another and checking out entertainment sites”.

While these studies explored university students’ use of the Internet in general, none focused specifically on how students use the Internet as a news channel. This is the main difference between previous studies and our study. For example, Splichal and Sparks’ (1994) influential study of first-year journalism students in 22 countries around the world was conducted more than 15 years ago, long before the Internet became a mainstream news source for many people. In fact, in the Western world, the Internet has become an integral part of most students’ lives. But, how and why do university students use the Internet as a news channel? This is the key question that we explore in this study.

Methodology

This pilot study was conducted in May 2009. Survey questionnaires were designed and administered directly to a total of 98 second and third-year journalism and arts students who studied the undergraduate course JOUR2221 (International Journalism and Mass Communication) at the University of Queensland, St Lucia campus in Brisbane, Australia. The questionnaires were administered specifically to students who attended the lecture on Monday, 25 May 2009. This occurred in Week 12 of a 13-week academic semester. A total of 176 students were officially enrolled in the course but only 98 students attended the lecture on the day the questionnaires were administered. While the number of students who attended the lecture might seem odd when compared against the

total number of students who enrolled in the course, the difference could be explained. It is normal for attendance numbers to drop off significantly in the few weeks leading up to the end of official teaching period during any semester. This has always been the trend, although no study has been conducted to identify the reasons for this tendency. Of the 98 students who received the questionnaires, only 85 students (86.73 per cent) returned the completed and valid questionnaires.

The questionnaire was designed specifically to explore the students' use of the Internet as a news channel, including why they used the Internet to access news, their perceptions of the Internet, the specific needs they sought to gratify by using the Internet, as well as their use and perceptions of the mainstream media (e.g. newspapers, television, radio, etc.). The questionnaire consisted of a total of 24 questions, two of which were open-ended. The rest of the questions were closed-ended questions designed to test the students' opinions on a range of issues, including their rating of the Internet as a news medium, their frequency of Internet use, the news media they rely on for news most of the time, the news outlet that serves as their main source of foreign news, the use of search engines to explore other material of interest, and what the students considered to be the single most important issue in journalism education in the 21st century, among other items in the questionnaire.

We extrapolated and coded the unstructured responses into response categories. We analysed the data through cross-case analysis method. The process involved gathering markedly different and similar responses. These were subsequently used in analysing the

data. Consequently, open responses were categorised according to degree of uniqueness or similarity.

Owing to the relatively small sample size and the pilot nature of this study, we advise that the results presented in this paper should be treated cautiously as preliminary. The results should not be taken as an accurate representation of the opinions of all second and third-year journalism and arts students who were enrolled in the University of Queensland in 2009. We require a larger sample to arrive at more comprehensive conclusions.

Research questions

There were two main overarching research questions which we examined in this study. Each of the two main questions also contained sub-questions. For example, our first research question asked: To what extent do second and third year journalism and arts students at the University of Queensland use the Internet as a news channel? Within this main question, we posed six other sub-questions such as:

- What type of online news appeals to the students most?
- How do the students perceive the Internet as a news medium relative to other news channels?
- Other than the Internet, which other news channel do students rely on for news most of the time?
- Why do they use the Internet?

- How often do students use Internet search engines to explore the various applications and resources on the Internet?
- What kinds of gratifications do students seek to derive from using the Internet?

These sub-questions were included because we were interested in exploring students' use of the Internet for other purposes. For example, in order to determine the students' Internet skill levels, we posed the sub-question which sought to determine how often students used Internet search engines to explore the various resources and applications on the Internet. This sub-question was based on our assumption that students' ability to use Internet search engines would demonstrate the extent to which the students were able to utilise the many important applications and resources available on the Internet. For example, Chachage (2001: 228) underscored the relevance of Internet search engines thus:

Search engines on the Internet are like catalogues in the library. A library can have a lot of resources, but if it doesn't have a key (catalogues) to show these resources, they become useless. The same is true for search engines on the Internet. The Internet can act as the biggest library in the world, but without search engines, locating the items one needs will be very difficult and time consuming.

Kaye and Johnson (2004: 198) also note that "...Web users actively search out information when they click on links or employ search engines, suggesting Web use is goal directed and that users are aware of the needs they are attempting to satisfy".

Our second major question asked: What role does foreign news play in students' news consumption habits? Based on this question, we posed two sub-questions, namely:

- Which news medium constitutes the main source of foreign news for students?
- How do students rate foreign news coverage in Australian media?

Twelve years ago, Alysen (1998: 143) asked final year journalism students at Deakin University (Australia) "if there were any issues they felt should be given greater coverage in the Australian media". Although more than half of the students said they had no idea or did not think there were issues to be given greater coverage in the Australian media, the rest of the students who indicated there were issues to be covered in the media listed some issues, including "a need for more international news" (Alysen, 1998: 144). It was on this basis that we posed the second major research question and the two sub-questions. The essence was to test the finding reported by Alysen in her study.

Results and data analysis

The results presented here have been structured to reflect students' answers to the two main research questions, as well as the sub-questions

Question 1: To what extent do second and third year journalism and arts students at the University of Queensland use the Internet as a news channel?

- What type of online news appeals to the students most?
- How do the students perceive the Internet as a news medium relative to other news channels?
- Other than the Internet, which other news channel do students rely on for news most of the time?
- Why do they use the Internet?
- How often do students use Internet search engines to explore the various applications and resources on the Internet?
- What kinds of gratifications do students seek to derive from using the Internet?

Our results show that second and third-year journalism and arts students at the University of Queensland are heavy Internet users. Of the 85 respondents, 75 (88.2 per cent) said they used the Internet every day, while another five (5.9 per cent) said they used it six times a week. The Internet also proved to be their most popular source of news. When the students were asked about the news media they relied on for news most of the time, 40.3 per cent named the Internet, followed by television at 31.9 per cent. Newspapers were only relied on by 22.2 per cent, with radio a distant fourth at 5.6 per cent. See Table 1 below.

Table 1 – News media which students rely on for news most of the time

	Number	Per cent
Internet	29	40.3
Television	23	31.9
Newspapers	16	22.2
Radio	4	5.6
Total	72	100.0

What this suggests is that, among the student population, there is a shift away from traditional news media as the primary source of news. Thottam (1999) has suggested that the Internet’s popularity as a news source may be attributed to the fact that online news is, in general, free. Hansell (2001) offers a qualified support for this view, arguing that although “most sites offering news and information are still free,” it is likely that most online news consumers would abandon the web as their primary source of news once fees are charged. Another possible explanation for Internet’s popularity as a primary news source for students, as Obijiofor and Green (2001: 96) explained, is “the trend... for people to rush to the web for snippets of breaking news”.

Thottam (1999: 217) has identified three major ways through which the Internet is challenging traditional media, in particular newspapers. One way is that newspapers are losing their breaking-news function. The second way is the decline in newspaper readership which he attributed to the proliferation of new technology-based leisure activities. The third way is the drop in advertising revenue. In a similar manner, the *Economist On-line* (1999) believes that newspaper readership is declining owing to growing competition for people’s time. According to the *Economist*: “Over the years,

technology and economics have produced more and more ways of occupying people's leisure hours: more television channels, more magazines, more theme parks, and now video games, chatrooms and all the other delights of the digital age". Nevertheless, Obijiofor and Green (2001: 95) have argued that competition for people's time and the presence of other traditional news sources such as television and radio do not offer all the reasons for the decline in newspaper readership. As they put it: "anecdotal and research evidence suggest the percentage of adult newspaper readers has been on the decline long before the emergence of the Internet" (Obijiofor and Green, 2001: 95).

In terms of the type of online news that appealed to them most, the students ranked the Internet particularly highly in terms of its ability to report breaking news as it happens, with a total of 37.7 per cent saying this was the most appealing aspect of the Internet for them. This finding supports the view of Obijiofor and Green (2001). When news events break, such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the December 26, 2004 Asian tsunami, and the terrorist bombings in London in July 2005, news consumers are more than likely to rush to the Internet for initial reports. However, in the era of Web 2.0, electronic mail and social networking sites also proved popular, with 24.7 per cent of the students naming these as the second most appealing. Entertainment news ranked third (13 per cent), while sports and international news were each named by only 7.8 per cent of the students. See Table 2.

Table 2– Type of online news that appeal to students most

	Number	Per cent
Breaking News	29	37.7
Email/social networking	19	24.7
Entertainment News	10	13.0
Sports News	6	7.8
International News	6	7.8
National News	3	3.9
Games	2	2.6
Total	77	100.0

The importance of Internet search engines was highlighted by the fact that 54.1 per cent of the students said they used them every time they logged on to the Internet, while the remaining 45.9 per cent said they used the search engines sometimes. These results support not only Chachage’s (2001) observation about the relevance of Internet search engines but the findings also underpin Kaye and Johnson’s (2004: 198) point that “...Web users actively search out information when they click on links or employ search engines, suggesting Web use is goal directed and that users are aware of the needs they are attempting to satisfy”. There is no doubt that the students consciously used Internet search engines to explore other applications and resources on the Internet.

Overall, students tended to rank the Internet better than other news media. Just over one-third (37.3 per cent) believed the Internet was a better news provider than traditional media, while 45.8 per cent ranked the Internet about the same as other news media. However, only 10.8 per cent of the students rated the Internet as worse than other news

media, with 6 per cent offering no opinion. It is important to explain that, although over 45 per cent of the students ranked the Internet about the same as other news media, however, when the students were asked to identify the media they relied on for news in general, the Internet emerged as the popular choice (see Table 1). The same trend occurred when the students were asked to nominate their main source of foreign news. Again, the Internet emerged as the dominant foreign news channel (see Table 4).

When the students were asked about the Internet’s weaknesses compared to traditional media, a large number of the respondents cited potential problems with accuracy, authenticity of sources, information overload, reliability and credibility of Internet news content, sources and providers, and the digital divide that made it difficult for some people to access the Internet in some places. Listed in Table 3 (below) is a sample of the views expressed by the students in regard to the weaknesses that hinder the Internet as a news channel:

Table 3: Perceptions of weaknesses that undermine the Internet as a news channel

Internet’s weaknesses relative to other media	Students’ comments
Problems of authenticity and accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to differentiate quality news from the bogus news. • Factual errors due to the immediacy of the medium. • It’s authenticity is questionable. • Difficult to verify authenticity with some sites. Also the potential for unqualified people to contribute means accuracy may be compromised. • The pressure to scoop other Internet news sites can result in inaccurate reporting because deadlines are so tight. • Information is quickly updated but it might contain wrong information, and quality might not be good. • Anyone can report, become biased and not as factual.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inaccuracy; lack of professionalism; news aggregators not news generators. • Not knowing whether information is correct or if it has been edited. • Often inaccurate as it is rushed. • Anyone can add their personal information even if it is wrong. • Anyone can post anything – creates inaccuracies.
Accessibility problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not accessible to everyone. • Accessibility; equality. If you can't afford a computer, you can't access the Internet. • Not everybody has access to Internet. • Have to have a computer to use it.
Reliability and credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots of news providers with no credibility. • Everyone thinks they can write journalism but it's the quality of news that, in the end suffers. • Credibility, due to the widespread usage of citizen journalism online. • Source credibility – There is so much information on the Internet it can be hard to tell what's true. • Sometimes stories aren't written as well, harder to follow/understand because of immediacy. • Inability to verify sources. Emphasis is on getting news out as quickly as possible, without first checking facts. This could be said of most news mediums now though. • The immediacy makes fact checking a rushed process which means that incorrect information may be posted. • Because it is so fast paced, it leaves room for error. Journalists are no longer ensuring they have the full story. • It's not entirely reliable because anybody can upload information which may not be true. • Credibility issues – anyone is able to post material and information on the Internet – without reliable sources.
Information overload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is so much information on the Internet, it is hard to filter it down to a few stories of interest sometimes. Info overload. • You have to search for news and I don't really like reading off a computer. I prefer newspaper or tv. • Probably quality and sheer amount of content (too much seems to lead to deterioration of quality). Lack of credibility – ease of access for anyone wishing to blog/report. • Too many authors and stories; can't clarify all.

When students were asked about the Internet's impact on newspapers, an interesting picture emerged. While, on the one hand, a large number of students believed that new technologies had improved the quality of newspapers, however, the students were also more likely than not to agree that the Internet would destroy newspapers in the future. For example, just over one-third (35.3 per cent) thought new technologies had improved the quality of newspapers, while 41.2 per cent agreed either somewhat or strongly with the statement which suggested that the Internet would destroy newspapers. In contrast, 31.8 per cent of the students disagreed with the statement which suggested that the Internet would destroy newspapers as a news medium. Overall, 44.7 per cent of students were optimistic for the future of journalism practice in Australia, while 18.8 were pessimistic. A little over one-third of the students – 36.5 per cent – were indifferent.

Question 2: What role does foreign news play in students' news consumption habits?

Based on this question, we posed two sub-questions, namely:

- Which news medium constitutes the main source of foreign news for students?
- How do students rate foreign news coverage in Australian media?

When we examined the ways in which students received news about events overseas, the importance of the Internet as a news delivery channel became even more crucial. While the Internet was named as the main source of general news by just over 40 per cent of the students (see Table 1), an even higher number – 55.7 per cent – named it as their main source of foreign news. See Table 4. Again, television came second at 24.1 per cent,

followed by newspapers at 19 per cent. Radio was an even less significant source of foreign news, at only 1.3 per cent.

Table 4 – Main source of foreign news

	Number	Per cent
Internet	44	55.7
Television	19	24.1
Newspapers	15	19.0
Radio	1	1.3
Total	79	100.0

When students were asked to explain their reasons for identifying the Internet or any other media as their main source of foreign news, a range of reasons emerged. For the Internet, the reasons include its accessibility and convenience, the diverse nature of foreign news published online, and the international dimension/focus of foreign news published online. For television, the reasons why some students selected it as their main source of foreign news included ease of access and convenience, accuracy, credibility and the visual element of television news. The students who selected newspapers as their main source of foreign news listed newspapers' credibility and consistency, the clear structure/format of foreign news sections in newspapers, trust and ease of delivery of newspapers. Surprisingly, trust is an element the students did not associate with other media. The only student who nominated radio as his/her main source of foreign news identified low cost of radio and the ease of access to radio. See Table 5 below.

Table 5: Reasons why each medium was selected as main source of foreign news

Media	Reasons why each media was selected as main source of foreign news
Internet	<p><u>ACCESS AND CONVENIENCE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access to foreign news. • The Internet is the most convenient way to read the news. • It is easier to gain access to specific news from countries, and TV news is generally pretty bad. • The Internet is my source as I am usually on there everyday and it's convenient to access. • I receive live updates from the BBC. This is done through the firefox web browser. • BBC.co.uk is my homepage. It is easy to read. It reports news immediately; it has lots of links to help in understanding the issue. • I am an overseas student, so I depend on Internet to get foreign news (including news about my country). • Internet – very easy to access international news – large scope. • Despite all its setbacks, it is the lesser evil. I find I can access the news that directly interests me. I can also revisit the page and share it with friends. I have no time to watch TV and use their scheduling. With magazines, there is not much selection in comparison to the Internet but I do use political magazines also. • The Internet is more convenient and also has a larger foreign news section than newspapers, radio and television. • I am on the Internet everyday so it is easy to simply find news on the Internet rather than going out and buying a newspaper. • It is easy to find significant international stories on the net, as they are often highlighted. <p><u>INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION/FOCUS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The news I come across on the Internet is more international. • I am an international student here in Australia. Therefore, the only source of foreign news is the Internet, where I could check online newspapers and access news from my country. • The Internet usually highlights news which is more 'internationally-centred' as it is difficult to categorise and cater to specific audiences geographically like TV, radio, newspapers and to an extent magazines.

<p>Television</p>	<p><u>ACCESSIBILITY/CONVENIENCE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy and accessible at home. • It is convenient and I don't have to go out of my way in getting to that particular news source. • TV is easily accessible and networks have news programs every couple of hours. Meanwhile, hours can and are interrupted by breaking news. • Mainly watch the news while dinner is being cooked. It is the most accessible. • It is the most convenient and frankly, easily explained. • I watch the news getting ready in the morning. • You get information quickly and you can easily compare it to other channels (e.g. Channel 7 to SBS) by switching channels. • Because it is convenient to sit down and watch/listen actuality of news such as the video footage and all compiled into news programs. • I watch the news every night, and I am not a huge reader of newspapers, so I would have to say that TV is my main source. <p><u>ACCURACY, CREDIBILITY AND VISUAL ELEMENT</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's visual. I can see best what is going on and know that the information is pretty much guaranteed to be correct. • I watch SBS news and Foreign Correspondent (ABC TV) as I feel these programs provide the most accurate news coverage. <p><u>RELEVANCE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a foreign student, I don't buy local newspapers. Thus, I stick to watching the news.
<p>Newspapers</p>	<p><u>CREDIBILITY/CONSISTENCY</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility and consistency. • I find newspapers offer the most detailed and consistent reports on foreign events. • I like reading newspapers. It's nice and relaxing to go through a paper as you can scan many stories instead of just looking up a specific one. • Tend to be more credible and give the WHOLE story. <p><u>CLEAR STRUCTURE/FORMAT</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly structured. Newspapers have a clear foreign news section that can be read easily; so you don't have to go searching for info. • When I want to learn about foreign news, I read the foreign news section.

	<u>TRUST</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspapers are more trustworthy than the Internet; they enable us to gain a wider knowledge of the subject. • I can generally trust what's in the newspaper. I can get a range of topics and views offered to me instead of me looking. I like the analysis in newspapers too. The Internet is really just good for breaking news as it happens.
Radio	<u>EASE OF ACCESS/LOW COST</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I often listen to the radio as it's a cheap and easy way of accessing news.

In general terms, the quality of foreign news in Australian mainstream news media is rated as fairly adequate, with 51.2 per cent of the students choosing this option. However, one-third of the students (34.5 per cent) thought it was inadequate, and an additional 7.1 per cent believed the quality was poor. In contrast, only 1.2 per cent thought the Australian mainstream news media provided comprehensive foreign news coverage. As a result, four out of ten students (40.5 per cent) said they were dissatisfied with foreign news coverage in Australian mainstream media, while 31 per cent said they were satisfied. Close to one-third of the students, or 28.6 per cent, did not express an opinion in this regard.

Nevertheless, in terms of accuracy of foreign reports, a few students agreed with the statement which suggested that foreign news reports in Australian mainstream news media were mostly inaccurate. Only 13.1 per cent agreed either somewhat or strongly with this statement, while 35.8 per cent disagreed somewhat or strongly. One out of two respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.

Gender differences

We also examined how gender was reflected in the pattern of Internet use by students. We found no significant difference in terms of gender. The only area of our study in which we observed a slight influence was the aspect of online news content that appealed to students most. Here, we observed a slight hint that female students were less interested in sport but slightly more interested than male students in regard to national and international news, as well as involvement in social networking sites and email communication.

Conclusions

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from the results presented in this pilot study. Theoretically, uses and gratifications theory views media audiences as active consumers of media contents, who make conscious decisions about what type of media and media content to expose themselves to. Thus, uses and gratifications research seeks to explore why people use media and what people do with the media (McQuail, 2005: 424). Results from this study show that students are highly selective of the news media that gratifies their news needs, as well as the range of online news topics which they expose themselves to. Consequently, the choices that students make in their news consumption and the principal avenue through which they gratify their news needs can be explained within the uses and gratifications theory. For example, the choice of the Internet as the main source of general news and foreign news highlights the importance

of the Internet as a news delivery channel, regardless of the news genre. So, if uses and gratifications theory suggests that Internet use is “goal directed” because “users are aware of the needs they are attempting to satisfy” (Kaye and Johnson, 2004: 198) and also because Internet users actively seek out specific media they need and the contents that appeal to them, we can argue, on the basis of evidence from this study, that Internet use by students is goal directed.

Students are quite clear about the kind of news service the Internet provides to them. The selection of the Internet over other available news media suggests that students make conscious decisions about their choice of news media and news topics because the Internet fulfills a niche in their news needs. The mainstream traditional news media which did not satisfy the students’ hunger for general and overseas news were not selected by the students. In this context, the students in our study made deliberate decisions about aspects of the Internet services that satisfied their needs, such as the need to keep up-to-date with local, national and international news.

The study also found that students ranked the Internet better than other news media. A little more than one-third (37.3 per cent) of the respondents believed the Internet was a better news provider than traditional media, while 45.8 per cent ranked the Internet about the same as other news media. This evidence suggests that, on one hand, the students believed the Internet is just about the same as other media in terms of news provision. However, we must not lose sight of the result which showed that the Internet was identified as the news channel that students relied on most for general news, as well as

their main source of foreign news (Tables 1 & 4). So, regardless of the type of news or news medium, many of the students were adamant that the Internet was their number one choice.

However, despite the usefulness of the Internet, the students were aware of the weaknesses that undermine the Internet as an important news delivery channel. Problems associated with accuracy of online news, authenticity of online sources, information overload, reliability and credibility of online news content, sources and providers, and the digital divide that hampered access to the Internet in some places (see Table 3) were identified by the students.

In regard to the relationship between gender and Internet use, the study found no significant differences other than the minor observation that female students were less interested in sport but slightly more interested in national and international news, as well as interest in social networking sites and email communication than male students. Owing to the limited evidence revealed in our data, we are unwilling to make any categorical statement which could suggest that gender affects Internet use.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study is the small sample size which means the findings of the study cannot be extrapolated to the general population of second and third-year journalism and arts students at the University of Queensland. Future studies should

include a larger number of students in order to have a more representative sample of this student cohort.

Another limitation of this study is the exclusion of students who were enrolled in other non-journalism programs and courses offered in the university at the time of our study. However, as explained in the methodology section of this paper, this study was conceived and executed as the pilot of a larger (more global) study of journalism students' perceptions and use of the Internet as a news channel. We plan to reflect the outcomes of this pilot study in the design of the global study which will involve a cross-cultural study of journalism students in four continents, namely Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.

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