

Attracting the Newspaper Reader in a New Domain: Dimensions of User Interest in News Content Online

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Abstract

To enhance our understanding of online news consumption, this study went beyond analyses of *medium* preference to explore issues of *content* interest: (1) identifying clusters of interest among online newspaper readers, and (2) comparing those dimensions across differences in users' demographics, frequency of news-seeking, and offline relationship with the newspaper. Through a secondary analysis of reader surveys (N=25,964), we found nine reliable classifications of content interest and distinct user types that were associated with them.

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For more than half of a century, at least since Berelson (1949) asked New Yorkers what they missed during a newspaper strike, researchers have sought to understand why people read (or choose not to read) the newspaper (Burgoon & Burgoon, 1980; Lipschultz, 1987; Poindexter, 1979; Sobal & Jackson-Beeck, 1981; Wanta, Hu, & Wu, 1995; Westley & Werner, 1964). Yet, during the past decade, as newspapers have expanded their reach to include potentially global audiences (Chyi & Sylvie, 1998; Sylvie & Chyi, 2007; Thurman, 2007), comparatively less scholarly attention has been given to the factors that might influence newspaper readership in the digital environment—a setting that, by its very nature, presents wholly new and often confounding challenges to traditional forms of storytelling and news presentation.¹

This is particularly true at the level of newspaper content; the literature has yet to fully describe and categorize newspaper offerings online, and the extent to which different clusters of content would appeal to various classes of Web readers. Moreover, and of particular relevance to scholars of mass communication and media economics, researchers have tended to ask which *media platform* audiences prefer—e.g., “traditional” print vs. “new” online media—while giving less consideration to the kind of *content* that interests audiences, or assuming that such interest remains fairly constant across different media types. Therefore, recognizing the essential role of content in creating economic value for media firms (Picard, 2002), this study attempts to address this issue by examining a broad dataset of surveys that were conducted with readers visiting 28 local daily newspapers online.

Beyond contributing to the academic literature on news content interest, this work is positioned to offer practical guidance for a newspaper industry in the throes of crisis. While print readership has been declining for decades (Meyer, 2004), it has fallen precipitously in recent years, with total U.S. daily circulation in 2008 reaching its lowest point since 1946, even as the U.S. population has more than doubled during that 62-year span (Mutter, 2008). This drop in readership comes amid even deeper declines in revenue and market value, pushing some newspapers to the brink of bankruptcy and forcing others to drop their print product (e.g., *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) or shut down altogether (e.g., *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver).

Thus, this study proposes to accomplish two goals of significance for the industry and academy alike: (1) to describe and categorize clusters of content interest among online readers of local daily newspaper sites in the United States; and (2) to compare those dimensions of content interest on distinguishing variables such as demographics, frequency of news-seeking, and one's relationship with the newspaper within the context of "multiple market definitions" (Bates, 1991, 1993) that are based on geography and medium (Chyi & Sylvie, 1998; Chyi, Yang, Lewis, & Zheng, 2009; Sylvie & Chyi, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Web has been an increasingly prominent platform for news publishing since the 1990s (Salwen, Garrison, & Driscoll, 2005b). During the dawn of online news, newspaper companies were the first to adopt the new delivery mechanism. This occurred in large measure because, while multimedia content and interactive features were unavailable at the time, news text intended for the print version could be easily "shoveled" online, making online newspaper sites predominantly textual (Li, 2006). Since then, due to technological advancement, online newspapers have gradually enriched their content with images, graphics, videos, and interactive elements (Greer & Mensing, 2006; Tremayne, Schmitz-Weiss, & Alves, 2007).

While news professionals have long worried that new media forms would strip away the audience for traditional news media, academic research on online news has given more attention to the advantages of the Web medium and the relative competition between new and established forms of news production and dissemination (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Chyi & Chang, 2009; Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Nguyen & Western, 2006). Preoccupied by the competitive dynamics between the old and the new, researchers have tended to ask which *media* audiences prefer; in doing so, they have assumed that *content* is the same across platforms—and thus that preference for certain kinds of content remains relatively unchanged from one medium to the next. We argue, however, that content preference online is not any less important than media preference, given that content is the primary form of economic value and the core business for media firms generally and newspaper companies in particular (Picard, 2002).

Online News Dilemma: High Capacity vs. Low Preference

For newspapers and other media companies, there is an inherent struggle, sometimes perceived but often real, between old and new forms of media production. This is because

fundamental media economics suggests that when content conveyed via an upstart medium satisfies the wants and needs consumers previously met through another medium, those media are potential substitutes of each other (Picard, 1989, 2002). This competitive relationship between and among different media can be measured through such metrics as consumer time spent, satisfaction, and advertising revenue (Dimmick, 2003; Dimmick et al., 2004; Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000).

The Web is gaining a larger share of the overall news audience and has become a regular news source for many Americans (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2008b; Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000). While print newspaper readership and TV news viewership are on the decline, online news use continues to grow; the Pew Research Center's 2008 *Biennial Media Consumption Survey* found that 37% of respondents reported using the Internet as a news source for three or more days per week (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2008a). In addition to its widening audience reach, online news has increasing capacity for a richer media experience, incorporating multimedia, interactive elements, and user participation that are not available in linear mass media formats (Deuze, 2003, 2004; Paterson & Domingo, 2008). Applying the theory of niche, Dimmick and his colleagues (2004) found the Internet as a news medium not only had the broadest niche—satisfying more wants and needs of consumers—but also is competitively superior to print newspapers, television news, and radio news. Having a superior capacity, online news thus compete with established news media for consumer time and other resources (Chyi & Chang, 2009; De Waal, Schonbach, & Lauf, 2005; Lee & Leung, 2008; Nguyen & Western, 2006).

It is worth noting, however, that even though online news consumption appears to have displaced some of the audience for traditional news formats, the Web medium also appears to be *less preferred* by news consumers vis-à-vis traditional media platforms. Indeed, relative to its print counterpart, the online newspaper is perceived as less likable (Chyi & Chang, 2009) and less useful (De Waal et al., 2005). A survey of 25,000 visitors to 41 U.S. news sites found that 31% of the users felt that offline (traditional) news media were more satisfying, compared to only 16% who said that online news was more satisfying (Online Publishers Association, 2004).

This unresolved contradiction—between the high capacity (and thus potential high utility) of online news and its low preference as a news medium—points to the insufficiency of the current literature on online news. The problematic contradiction is especially worth noting

for newspaper companies who have two principal products, an online newspaper and a print newspaper. Given that research has found that different demographics of users access different types of news on different kinds of news sites (Tewksbury, 2005), a rather fundamental question remains unanswered: What exactly do people want and need to read, watch, or otherwise consume on newspaper sites? Because of content's preeminent role in the valuation of news products (Picard, 2002), understanding how consumers prefer certain types of content is of essential importance for the profit concerns of newspaper companies as well as for the development of a more focused academic inquiry into new media content and its economics.

Content and Value for Newspaper Firms

The dual-product market of the newspaper industry is such that newspapers are selling content to readers and in turn are selling access to those readers to advertisers (Picard, 1989). The theory of the firm assumes that the goal of companies is to maximize their profit (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 2004); for newspaper firms, the online platform potentially offers an additional means of making profit. Indeed, during the early years of the Web as a news medium, journalists identified profit generation through online advertising as one of the most important reasons for newspapers to go online (Peng, Tham, & Hao, 1999). A decade has passed, yet online advertising revenue has not grown fast enough to make up for the decline in print advertising (Newspaper Association of America, 2008), nor is it expected to bridge that revenue shortfall anytime soon, even by the most optimistic projections (Layton, 2008). Some newspapers have experimented with novel funding models, such as relying on a mix of advertising and paid content (Herbert & Thurman, 2007). However, thus far, no consensus has emerged regarding an optimal and profitable model for online newspapers.

For any venture to succeed, the essential task is to create value through a product or service that appeals to customer needs and desires (Picard, 2002). The value, for newspaper companies, comes from its core business—that is, its content (Sylvie, 2008). Nevertheless, the literature on newspapers has given insufficient consideration to the kind of content readers are interested in, whether offline or online. For general news content interest, the Pew Research Center's news interest report lends some insight as to what news categories most interest Americans. A 2008 survey (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2008c) found that weather had the broadest appeal to the public; nearly half of Americans followed weather news

very closely, followed by crime news (28%), education (23%), community (22%), environment (21%), politics/Washington news (21%), and local government (20%). Additionally, more than half (57%) of the respondents reported following local news most of the time, followed by 55% tracking national news and only 39% international news. While the report delineates a picture of the public's general news interest, additional studies have focused on users' news interest between offline and online news platform.

An early study using Pew Research Center's 2000 *Biennial Media Consumption Survey* data (Dutta-Bergman, 2004) found that online news users who were interested in seven topics of news were more likely than non-users to follow news in those same seven categories in the print newspaper and other traditional media. The results suggested that, in earlier times, users were interested in similar news content offline and online. Another large-scale survey found somewhat different results—that people access distinct kinds of news content via different media (Salwen, Garrison, & Driscoll, 2005a). For the type of news read, in print newspapers, most respondents reported reading local news (53%) and national news (26%), followed by international news (6%); but online, a greater proportion of respondents said they read international news (25%), while reading less local news (14%) and more national news (49%). When respondents were asked to identify the news categories that appealed to them online, weather was at the top of the list (62%), followed by local news (55%), and international news (50%). Salwen and colleagues' (2005a) results suggested that (1) people's news usage patterns with different media are not identical and (2) some news categories are more preferred online than others. Moreover, Tewksbury (2005) found that in the online news environment, both audiences and newspaper content appear to be more specialized, tailored to the distinct demographic profiles for various news sites. Given that content is the most important profit driver for newspaper companies (Fetscherin & Knolmayer, 2004), understanding how various types of content appeal to different classes of online readers is of paramount concern for the newspaper industry.

Problem Statement

From a review of the literature we find that understanding the nuances of news content and the audiences it attracts in differing contexts is of increasing concern, especially to newspaper firms seeking to develop greater market value online. However, media research has tended to privilege approaches that compare relative differences between and consumer

preferences for older and newer *media*, without giving sufficient attention to the *content* that audiences prefer—in this case, on the Web sites of local newspapers. Therefore, our primary purpose is to explore clusters of content interest among online readers of local daily newspaper sites, and to compare those dimensions of content interest across different characteristics. Past research has identified disparities in news interest and news use among groups of users varying according to demographics (Poindexter, Heider, & McCombs, 2006), frequency of news-seeking (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2008c), and their relationship with the newspaper—geographically and in terms of offline readership (Chyi et al., 2009). Therefore, we pose the following research questions:

- RQ1. What kind of content features are of greatest interest to online readers of local daily newspapers, and how might such content interest be classified?
- RQ2. How does content interest among readers of the local newspaper online vary according to key demographic variables—gender, age, level of education, and level of income?
- RQ3. How does content interest among readers of the local newspaper online vary according to one's frequency in using news and portal sites to gain local news and information?
- RQ4. How does content interest among readers of the local newspaper online vary according to one's (1) geographic proximity to the local newspaper (i.e., local vs. long-distance users) and (2) relationship with the print edition (online-only vs. "hybrid" users who read both print and online versions)?

METHODS

Secondary Data Analysis

This study examines data gathered by Belden Associates, a longtime newspaper research and consulting firm based in North Carolina. From October 2007 to June 2008, Belden Associates conducted online reader surveys on Web sites representing 28 locally oriented daily newspapers (see Appendix A for the complete list of newspapers studied).² The average circulation of the 28 newspapers—95,772 on Sunday and 73,415 on weekdays—was larger than that of all 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States.³ Nevertheless, among the 28 newspapers

under study, the median paper (*The Quad City Times* in Davenport, Iowa) had a Sunday circulation of 68,472, which is rather comparable to the national average for Sunday circulation (60,471). Furthermore, because Belden Associates considered five papers with a circulation greater than 100,000 and five with a circulation of less than 20,000, the resulting data set provides a fairly balanced portrayal of typical U.S. daily newspapers in terms of circulation.

The online surveys primarily measured readers' interest in and satisfaction with the particular newspaper site they visited on that occasion, in addition to asking questions about general Internet usage, online readers' relationship with the print edition, and demographic information. Participants who accepted the survey invitation and completed the questionnaire were entered in a drawing for a cash award of \$1,000. In all, across the 28 online newspapers under study, there were 25,964 valid responses; 72.5% of respondents lived inside the newspaper designated market (NDM)⁴ and 27.5% reported residing outside the print circulation area. Both long-distance and local users are of interest for the analyses that follow.

Measures: Independent Variables

Three sets of independent variables were deployed in a series of one-way ANOVA analyses. The first included demographic variables; the second dealt with Web site usage; and the third related to one's geographic proximity to the local newspaper and one's relationship with the print edition.

Demographics. In most analyses, particularly when regression is the primary tool of measurement, the standard demographic variables—such as gender, age, level of education, and income—are employed as control variables. For the purposes of this study, however, we are concerned with a range of independent variables and their possible influence on the content interest of online newspaper readers. Furthermore, given this study's concern with providing practical guidance for newspapers, testing the independent variables without controlling for demographics or other variables allows us to consider conditions as they exist in “real life.” Thus, for these reasons, demographics were analyzed separately via one-way ANOVAs, as with other independent measures examined here. The demographic variables were coded as follows: *gender* (49.1% male; 50.9% female); *age*, recoded into three groups: 18-34 (23.2%), 35-54 (50.4%), and 55 and older (26.4%); *education*, recoded into two groups: some college or less (50%) and

bachelors degree or above (50%); and *income*, recoded into three groups: less than \$50,000 (30.8%), \$50,000 to less than \$100,000 (42.7%), and \$100,000 or more (26.5%).

Usage. Regarding readers' frequency in using Web sites to find local news and information, respondents were asked about their consumption of the local daily newspaper site itself, as well as national news sites and portal sites. The survey measured the number of days during the past week that users had visited such sites. For the local daily newspaper site (identified as whichever of the 28 newspaper sites a particular user was visiting on the day of the survey), 32.2% reported having visited it every one of the past 7 days. The variable was recoded to reflect newspaper site usage in two groups: 4 days or fewer (39.9%) or 5 or more days (60.1%). For the national news sites (namely, CNN.com, NYTimes.com, FoxNews.com and/or TV network sites), 35.8% reported having used one of them at least once in the past week to get local news and information. For portal sites (namely, Google.com, Yahoo.com and AOL.com), 45.3% reported having used one of them at least once in the past week to get local news and information. These latter variables were recoded such that: 1 = used national or portal site; 0 = did not use national or portal sites for local news and information.

Relationship with the newspaper. Location data (based on ZIP codes) determined if respondents were reported as "locals" living within the NDM (76.7%) or "long-distance" users residing outside the local circulation area (23.3%).⁵ Additionally, distinctions were made according to users' consumption of the local newspaper's print edition. All respondents were asked whether they had read the print version during the past week. From those responses, two groups of local users were formed: (1) *online-only* users who did not read the print version and (2) *hybrid* users who reported having read the print edition at least once during that time, in addition to the newspaper's online site. In all, respondents were recoded into three groups for analysis: long-distance users (23.3%), local online-only users (25.9%), and local hybrid readers (50.8%).

Measures: Dependent Variables

This paper sought to identify and classify dimensions of interest in various content features provided by local newspapers' online sites, and then to examine those dimensions in light of the independent variables mentioned previously. To identify factors of content interest, we focused on respondents' answers to this question: "Are you very interested in seeing the

following on [the local client site, tailored to each of the 28 newspaper sites under study]?” Respondents were presented with a matrix of 47 content features⁶ and could choose *yes* or *no* regarding each. Their overall interests, sorted from greatest to least, are presented in Table 1.

The 47 variables were factor analyzed to look for underlying dimensions of content interest (see Table 2). The items loading on each factor were added together to create separate scales for further testing. Before creating the scales, the items were recoded such that higher values expressed stronger interest (i.e., 1 = yes, “very interested”; 0 = no). Each additive scale was divided by its number of items, such that—with regard to their means and standard deviations—all the content-interest scales could be equally and more easily interpreted on a 0-to-1 range. Additionally, the reliability of each scale was found to be adequate,⁷ and in some cases was quite strong (see Table 3).

Because this study’s sample size was relatively large, the significance level was set at $p < 0.001$ throughout the data analysis.

RESULTS

Categorizing Content Interest

The first research question sought to identify those content features of greatest interest to online readers of local daily newspapers, as well as categorize those clusters of content interest so as to facilitate further testing (RQs 2-4). As might be expected, news features, particularly those with a local orientation, dominated among the top 10 most popular content features (see Table 1). In classifying groupings of interest across all content segments, a factor analysis found nine salient dimensions (see Table 2).⁸

Factor 1 was called *Local News* because the variables that loaded high on this primary factor emphasized an intensely local orientation: e.g., local crime, school closings, traffic, neighborhood news, and obituaries. Factor 2 was labeled *Non-Local News* because of its outward orientation; this factor included news about finance, technology, science, as well as national and international news, and legal and financial information. Factor 3 was called *Sports* because it covered all the athletics categories offered, and at all levels of competition. Factor 4 was labeled *Guides* because its components were suited for helping travelers and locals alike figure out what to see and do. Factor 5, dubbed *Commentary*, included voices both inside (local columnists) and outside (reader comment/chat) the newspaper, with a clear emphasis on opinion and discussion.

Factor 6 was labeled *Games* because it incorporated casual games (e.g., puzzles or crosswords), video games, and gambling information. Factor 7, *Marketplace*, was noted for its orientation toward buying and selling: Employment, classifieds, real estate, and automotive. Factor 8 was called *TV and Movies* because it captured broadcast/film listings and reviews. And Factor 9 was labeled *Household* because it covered home/garden and cooking/recipes.

Influence of Demographics on Content Interest

With RQ2, this study began a series of one-way ANOVA tests to measure the impact of various independent variables on the dependent variable—types of content interest. RQ2 asked how interest in various content categories varied according to online newspaper readers' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, level of education, and level of income. Let's consider each in turn (see Table 4).

Gender. Taken as a whole, women were more interested than men in the overall package of potential content features on newspaper Web sites. Considering content areas specifically, women were more interested in Local News, Guides, Games, Marketplace, TV and Movies, and Household. Meanwhile, men were more interested in Non-Local News, Sports, and Commentary. All differences were significant at the $p < .001$ level, although the F statistics indicated that some differences (such as those on Local News, Sports, and Household) were more salient than others.

Age. The categories here were fairly mixed among young and old. Employing Tukey HSD post hoc tests ($p < .05$) for each pairwise comparison, we found that the younger (18-34) and middle-aged (35-54) groups together expressed higher overall content interest than more senior users (55-plus). The mid-range group was highest on Local News, Sports, and Household. Younger people (18-34), however, were the most highly interested in Guides, Games, Marketplace, and TV/Movies, while more senior folks (55-plus) were significantly more likely to identify themselves as being interested in Non-Local News and Commentary features. Again, all of these were significant at the $p < .001$ level of analysis, although the F statistics suggested that differences associated with Local News, Games, and Marketplace were the most meaningful.⁹

Education. With a few exceptions (Non-Local News, Sports, and Commentary), lower-educated readers were significantly more interested than those with college degrees across most content factors, all at the $p < .001$ level. As before, the F statistics indicated that differences on

certain variables (e.g., Local News, Games, and Marketplace) were the most meaningful. There was no statistically significant difference on Guides.

Income. We found that the lowest-income subgroup was more likely to express an interest in Games, Marketplace, and TV/Movies, while the two higher-income subgroups showed greater interest in Non-Local News, Sports, and Commentary—the same three factors identified with the higher-educated group mentioned above. Differences across all factors were significant at the $p < .001$ level.¹⁰

Influence of Other News-Seeking Online

The third research question addressed the relationship of online usage and content interest. It sought to uncover the extent to which one's frequency in using Web sites to gain local news and information—that is, both the local daily newspaper site under study, as well as other sites, in this case national news sites and portal sites—might help explain or influence a user's interest in various types of content on newspaper sites. (See Table 4.)

“Client” newspaper site usage. Beginning with the local newspaper site under study, we might expect to find that more frequent users of the site are more interested in its content—and indeed that generally was the case. On most content dimensions, including all of the news/editorial-related dimensions, heavy users (defined as those who visited the site 5 or more days in the past week) were significantly more likely to express interest. The exceptions were Marketplace and TV/Movies, where less-frequent users were significantly more likely to report being interested. On Games and Guides, there were no significant differences.

Use of other sites. Respondents who reported using a *national* news site to get local news and information during the past week were significantly more likely to report being interested in each of the content dimensions, including the measure of overall content interest, with the exceptions of Games and Marketplace (both not significant). Meanwhile, on the measure of using portal sites to gather local news and information, portal users—defined as those who had used a portal site for news-seeking during the past week—were significantly more likely to be interested in every one of the content dimensions ($p < .001$).

Relationship with the Newspaper, in Proximity and in Print

This study's final research question aimed to examine how content interest among readers of the local newspaper online varied according to one's (1) geographic proximity to the local newspaper (i.e., local vs. long-distance users) and (2) relationship with the print edition (online-only vs. "hybrid" users who read both print and online versions). These three elements—long distance, local online-only, and local hybrid—were mutually exclusive, and thus could be tested in the same one-way ANOVAs across the range of content-interest dimensions. (See Table 4.)

The findings were rather consistent: Locals who accessed the newspaper both in print and online were significantly more likely to be interested overall and on all but one of the content factors. (All of these differences were significant at the $p < .001$ level.)¹¹ On the one exception, Sports, long-distance users were most interested, followed by local hybrid readers and local online-only users. Thus, regular contact with the local daily newspaper online *and* offline had a strong relationship with one's interest in nearly all facets of content offered online.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to contribute to the mass communications literature by studying *content* preference, an element of research on news interest and consumption that is often overlooked in studies that focus primarily on *media* preference (i.e., traditional vs. new media platforms). This emphasis on content is particularly relevant given that content is the primary driver of economic value for newspaper firms (Fetscherin & Knolmayer, 2004; Picard, 2002), and yet content preference on online newspaper sites remains a relatively understudied phenomenon. As such, this paper is positioned to provide practical guidance for an industry seeking to claim a greater and more enduring online audience.

This study was conducted primarily with two goals: (1) to categorize dimensions of content interest among online readers of U.S. daily newspaper sites; and (2) to analyze those clusters of content interest across key variables including demographics, news usage, and one's offline relationship with the newspaper. With regard to the first goal, this study identified nine factors of content interest from which were created the following constructs: Local News, Non-Local News, Sports, Guides, Commentary, Games, Marketplace, TV and Movies, and Household. Each was found to be a reliable classification of content interest, thus offering not only a new

way of conceptualizing how readers approach newspaper features online, but also allowing for these dimensions to be tested across an array of potentially influential independent variables.

The first of such analyses, involving demographics, found that on the measure of overall content interest there was greater interest among the following groups: women, younger and middle-aged adults almost equally, the less-educated, and those with a household income of less than \$100,000. When we consider specific dimensions and demographic variables, there are more fine-grained distinctions in content interest. For example, younger people (18-34) were significantly more interested in diversions (e.g., sports and games) and information utility (e.g., guides and entertainment listings), while the middle-aged were the most news-oriented, and those 55-and-older were significantly more likely to be interested in commentary (editorials, op-ed, blogs, chat, etc.). On age alone, one of the implications of these findings is that, contrary to the prevailing view that younger people have seeming distaste for newspaper content, this study finds that the 18-to-34 demographic, relative to older demographics, has comparatively high interest in content features on online newspaper sites—including some elements of “traditional” news. Additionally, that lower-income and lower-educated respondents reported being more interested in Local News might challenge the assumption that higher socio-economic status is associated with greater news interest and consumption in general. However, at the same time it is worth noting that higher-educated and higher-income respondents were more interested in Non-Local News, which included financial, legal, and other professional-oriented information. These findings raise new and interesting questions for further research to untangle.

Regarding the question of news-seeking online, this study found that, in general, the more frequently readers use the Web to get local news and information—whether via the local newspaper’s site, national news sites, or portal sites—the more likely they are to express interest in newspaper content online. On its face, this is a rather logical finding: Usage correlates with interest. What is intriguing, however, is to note that those who reported using portal sites to get local news and information were more interested than their counterparts on *every* category of content. This underscores a larger pattern observed in this study, that of apparent *activity* in news acquisition. While interest does not equate to consumption, it’s nonetheless true that interest, as a reflection of one’s behavioral intention, is an important antecedent to action. Therefore, from the findings here we might begin envision two distinct types of online newspaper readers: “news seekers” and “diversion seekers”; the former conceivably more engaged in pursuing content (of

all types, but particularly news) and the latter being more interested in the entertainment elements (e.g., puzzles, games, and other non-news components) of an online newspaper. Under such a scenario, both types of users approach online newspaper content with a certain (action) orientation, although with different purposes in mind. Further research would do well to better explicate and articulate these differences, to the extent they exist.

Finally, in relation to the final research question, this study found that interest in content on a local daily newspaper online was most associated with (1) reading the local paper in print form and, to a lesser extent, (2) living in the local area. Local “hybrid” users were more interested in nearly every category of content. The lone exception was Sports, for which long-distance users expressed the greatest interest. These are intriguing findings for at least two reasons. First, regarding long-distance users, it stands to reason that most users would visit a locally oriented newspaper site *outside of their area* only when they are searching for “exclusive” content not available via news media in their localities. What kind of such exclusive content would most attract the long-distance reader? In this case, it appears that local sports news—the depth of which can only be accomplished by a localized reporting team—drives long-distance traffic far more than does interest in local news, although both would qualify as “exclusive” content.

Second, with regard to the strong overall content interest among local “hybrid” users, what might explain such interest in *online* newspaper content when these readers seemingly have ready access to the print version on a regular basis? Perhaps it’s merely an indication that certain individuals have a high desire for news and related information, and so they are more likely to actively pursue news content online and offline alike, on any platform. Moreover, it may be that print readers already feel an attachment to their local newspaper as a trusted source for information, and therefore they are more inclined to be interested in content presented on *their* local newspaper’s Web site.

Taken together, these findings offer new avenues for future research on news consumption in the digital communication era. Nevertheless, there are some clear limitations to this work. First, by virtue of the sample size ($N=25,964$), the effect sizes are generally small, even if the F statistics are large; thus, while many of the differences are statistically significant (see Table 4), they may not be truly substantial in practical terms. Further research would do well to build on these exploratory findings with more precise empirical measures. Furthermore, this

study is constrained in its generalizability given that it relies on secondary data obtained via surveys that were voluntary and not conducted across a truly randomized sample of U.S. newspapers. Despite such limitations, this paper serves an important purpose in accomplishing at three things: (1) offering fresh articulations and distinct dimensions of reader interest in online newspaper content; (2) extending the literature on media use and preference by moving beyond binary debates of old vs. new *media*, to offer a new consideration of *content* as a preeminent value; and (3) developing findings that can inform the industry's approach to cultivating the online news reader as U.S. newspapers transition from print to Web.

TABLE 1

*Readers' Overall Interest in Various Content Features on Local Online Newspapers
(Percent who reported being "very interested" in each of the following 47 features)*

Rank	Content Feature	
1	Breaking news	75.6%
2	Local news	73.4%
3	Weather forecasts	60.9%
4	Local crime and safety information	50.8%
5	Statewide news	48.8%
6	Obituaries	45.5%
7	Reports on events in your neighborhood	44.1%
8	Local traffic conditions/road closures	43.5%
9	National news	43.2%
10	Local business news	39.6%
11	School closing and information	36.6%
12	Information about restaurants	35.9%
13	Classified ads	34.9%
14	Movie listings	33.5%
15	Community calendar/local schedule of events	33.2%
16	Employment opportunities and information	31.5%
17	Health and medical news	31.3%
18	Cooking and recipes	31.2%
19	College sports	28.6%
20	International news	27.8%
21	Local columnists	27.6%
22	High school sports	26.5%
23	Movie reviews	26.3%
24	Local sports (youth, semi-pro, club teams, etc)	26.2%
25	Pro sports	25.5%
26	Opinions	25.3%
27	Photo galleries	25.1%
28	Home and garden	24.9%
29	Special offers or coupons from advertisers	24.6%
30	Tourist information about the local area	23.7%
31	Lottery results	23.1%

Rank	Content Feature	
32	Games, puzzles, etc	22.8%
33	Technology and science news	22.8%
34	Travel news and information	22.7%
35	TV listing and reviews	21.5%
36	Local discussion forums	21.4%
37	Local business directory/listing	19.5%
38	Real estate related information	19.4%
39	Contests	17.7%
40	Blogs, reader comment, or chat	16.8%
41	Financial markets and stocks	15.7%
42	Legal and financial information	15.2%
43	Religion	12.1%
44	Personal ads	10.7%
45	Computer, online or video games	10.4%
46	Automotive-related information	9.5%
47	Gaming (gambling) information	6.3%

Note: N = 25,964; standard deviations ranged from 0.50 to 0.243

TABLE 2
Dimensions of Content Interest, as Identified via Factor Analysis

	I.	II.	III.	IV.	V.	VI.	VII.	VIII.	IX.
	Local News	Non-Local News	Sports	Guides	Commentary	Games	Marketplace	TV/Movies	Household
Breaking news	.625	.197	.083	-.051	.047	.019	-.005	.097	.083
Local news	.606	.160	.042	.023	.164	-.055	-.034	.014	.151
Local crime and safety information	.557	.100	-.030	.166	.178	.124	.134	-.062	.082
Weather forecasts	.549	.187	.084	.095	-.054	.054	.103	.231	.050
Local traffic conditions/road closures	.531	.107	.016	.273	.049	.098	.120	.181	-.062
School closing and information	.530	-.102	.114	.159	.007	.142	.210	.147	-.059
Reports on events in your neighborhood	.480	.090	.000	.306	.196	.092	.119	.089	.053
Obituaries	.468	-.127	-.042	.048	.085	.173	.061	-.224	.322
International news	.254	.662	.008	.016	.078	.005	-.036	.206	.059
Financial markets and stocks	.020	.637	.112	.187	.037	.053	.146	-.067	.038
Technology and science news	.098	.614	.012	.167	.147	.075	.073	.062	.020
National news	.399	.581	.049	-.053	.040	.008	-.035	.226	.093
Legal and financial information	.085	.521	.019	.280	.120	.141	.213	-.125	.078
College sports	-.035	.122	.787	.020	.028	-.009	-.029	.069	.004
High school sports	.126	-.095	.785	.051	.040	.028	.015	-.048	.063
Local sports (youth, semi-pro, club)	.165	-.046	.725	.074	.077	.086	.109	-.004	.082
Pro sports	-.042	.237	.661	-.045	.019	.099	-.008	.165	-.056
Tourist information about local area	.095	.096	.039	.684	.075	.041	.013	.062	.165
Travel news and information	.103	.282	.064	.586	-.027	.081	.006	.131	.153
Information about restaurants	.239	.082	.005	.584	.107	.057	.081	.271	.088

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Local business directory/listing	.182	.096	.014	.500	.159	.114	.326	.045	-.030
Blogs, reader comment, or chat	.076	-.015	.031	.039	.700	.138	.072	.043	.007
Opinions	.067	.167	.019	-.035	.695	.048	.026	.127	.121
Local discussion forums	.191	.047	.016	.210	.636	.092	.095	-.084	-.063
Local columnists	.087	.166	.119	.083	.589	-.068	-.016	.142	.202
Computer, online or video games	.003	.123	.050	-.051	.124	.618	.077	.132	.109
Games, puzzles, etc.	.147	-.010	.000	-.018	.042	.597	-.003	.237	.233
Gaming (gambling) information	-.040	.094	.120	.138	.057	.596	.022	-.045	-.069
Contests	.153	-.085	-.004	.089	.064	.521	.159	.166	.166
Lottery results	.252	.120	.021	.161	-.067	.486	.161	.057	-.108
Employment opportunities/information	.198	-.010	.000	.038	.036	.112	.683	.194	.073
Classified ads	.247	.000	-.070	.085	-.023	.158	.680	.097	.015
Real estate related information	.000	.159	.062	.135	.102	-.042	.594	.037	.191
Automotive related information	-.051	.280	.144	-.024	.088	.186	.450	.017	.154
Movie reviews	.064	.104	.075	.174	.122	.125	.067	.701	.117
Movie listings	.182	.024	.054	.170	.055	.144	.191	.692	.060
TV listings and reviews	.145	.076	.052	.072	.074	.251	.112	.517	.174
Home and garden	.102	.158	-.010	.212	.047	.069	.147	.119	.639
Cooking and recipes	.160	.008	-.056	.216	-.015	.214	.058	.215	.607
Religion	.049	.071	.132	-.003	.156	.013	.125	.048	.499[^]
<i>Eigenvalues</i>	7.288	2.276	1.928	1.635	1.580	1.370	1.241	1.120	1.056
<i>% Variance</i>	18.2%	5.7%	4.8%	4.1%	4.0%	3.4%	3.1%	2.8%	2.6%

Note. Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated by boldface type. N = 25,964.

[^] Religion was dropped in creating the Household scale variable to improve the internal reliability.

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics for the Factors of Content Interest

Content Interest Factor Index	No. of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Local News	8	.538	.289	.75
Global News	5	.249	.285	.71
Sports	4	.267	.334	.75
Guides	4	.255	.301	.65
Commentary	4	.228	.291	.65
Games	5	.161	.221	.58
Marketplace	4	.238	.279	.60
TV and Movies	3	.271	.343	.67
Household	2	.281	.375	.57
OVERALL (all variables combined)	47	.296	.183	N/A

Note. After being recoded, each additive scale was divided by its number of items, such that—with regard to means and standard deviations—all the scales could be equally compared on a 0-to-1 range. The nine factors' total number of items does not add up to 47 because seven variables were dropped from the factor analysis (see Table 2) because of cross-loadings. N = 25,964

TABLE 4*Means (SD) from ANOVA tests measuring the influence of various independent variables on factors of content interest*

	Overall	Local News	Non-Local News	Sports	Guides	Commentary	Games	Marketplace	TV/Movies	Household
Gender	F = 315*	F = 1,340*	F = 63*	F = 2,725*	F = 293*	F = 33*	F = 530*	F = 410*	F = 389*	F = 1,740*
Male	.28 (.18)	.47 (.28)	.26 (.30)	.37 (.36)	.22 (.29)	.24 (.29)	.13 (.20)	.20 (.27)	.23 (.33)	.18 (.32)
Female	.32 (.18)	.60 (.28)	.24 (.27)	.17 (.27)	.29 (.31)	.22 (.29)	.19 (.23)	.27 (.28)	.31 (.35)	.37 (.40)
Age	F = 93*	F = 144*	F = 18*	F = 45*	F = 56*	F = 27*	F = 200*	F = 371*	F = 92*	F = 22*
18-34 years old	.30 (.18)	.54 (.29)	.23 (.27)	.26 (.33)	.28 (.30)	.20 (.28)	.20 (.24)	.30 (.29)	.31 (.35)	.26 (.36)
35-54 years old	.31 (.19)	.56 (.29)	.25 (.29)	.29 (.34)	.26 (.30)	.23 (.29)	.16 (.22)	.25 (.28)	.28 (.34)	.30 (.38)
55 and older	.27 (.18)	.49 (.28)	.26 (.29)	.24 (.32)	.22 (.29)	.24 (.29)	.12 (.20)	.17 (.25)	.23 (.33)	.27 (.38)
Education	F = 124*	F = 306*	F = 59*	F = 111*	F = 0.76	F = 25*	F = 951*	F = 481*	F = 25*	F = 284
Less than bachelors	.31 (.19)	.57 (.29)	.24 (.28)	.24 (.33)	.25 (.30)	.22 (.29)	.20 (.24)	.27 (.29)	.28 (.35)	.32 (.39)
Bachelors and above	.28 (.17)	.51 (.28)	.26 (.29)	.29 (.34)	.26 (.30)	.24 (.29)	.12 (.19)	.20 (.26)	.26 (.34)	.24 (.36)
Income	F = 19*	F = 45*	F = 17*	F = 150*	F = 8*	F = 14*	F = 280*	F = 196*	F = 52*	F = 23*
Up to \$49,999	.30 (.19)	.55 (.30)	.23 (.27)	.22 (.32)	.24 (.30)	.21 (.29)	.21 (.24)	.29 (.29)	.30 (.35)	.29 (.37)
\$50,000-99,999	.30 (.18)	.55 (.28)	.25 (.28)	.29 (.34)	.26 (.30)	.23 (.29)	.16 (.22)	.24 (.28)	.27 (.34)	.29 (.38)
\$100,000-plus	.29 (.18)	.51 (.28)	.26 (.30)	.31 (.344)	.26 (.30)	.24 (.29)	.11 (.18)	.19 (.26)	.24 (.33)	.25 (.37)
Client site use	F = 133*	F = 350*	F = 45*	F = 156*	F = 0.66	F = 169*	F = 6	F = 28*	F = 20*	F = 16*
4 or fewer days	.28 (.18)	.50 (.30)	.23 (.28)	.24 (.32)	.25 (.30)	.20 (.27)	.16 (.22)	.25 (.28)	.28 (.35)	.27 (.37)
5 or more days	.31 (.18)	.57 (.28)	.26 (.29)	.29 (.34)	.26 (.30)	.25 (.30)	.16 (.22)	.23 (.28)	.26 (.34)	.29 (.38)
National site use	F = 130*	F = 26*	F = 268*	F = 59*	F = 48*	F = 161*	F = 0.05	F = 0.50	F = 37*	F = 25*
Yes in past week	.31 (.18)	.55 (.28)	.29 (.30)	.29 (.34)	.27 (.30)	.26 (.30)	.16 (.22)	.23 (.28)	.29 (.35)	.29 (.38)
No in past week	.30 (.18)	.53 (.29)	.23 (.28)	.26 (.33)	.24 (.30)	.21 (.28)	.16 (.22)	.23 (.27)	.26 (.34)	.27 (.37)
Portal site use	F = 121*	F = 13*	F = 20*	F = 33*	F = 63*	F = 28*	F = 121*	F = 164*	F = 119*	F = 53*
Yes in past week	.31 (.19)	.54 (.28)	.26 (.29)	.28 (.34)	.27 (.30)	.24 (.30)	.18 (.23)	.26 (.29)	.30 (.35)	.30 (.38)
No in past week	.28 (.18)	.53 (.29)	.24 (.28)	.26 (.33)	.24 (.29)	.22 (.28)	.15 (.21)	.21 (.27)	.25 (.33)	.26 (.37)
Relationship with the print edition	F = 756*	F = 933*	F = 208*	F = 50*	F = 171*	F = 61*	F = 521*	F = 406*	F = 812*	F = 292*
Local "hybrid"	.33 (.18)	.60 (.28)	.27 (.29)	.27 (.34)	.28 (.31)	.25 (.30)	.20 (.24)	.28 (.29)	.34 (.36)	.33 (.39)
Local online-only	.30 (.18)	.55 (.28)	.26 (.29)	.23 (.32)	.25 (.30)	.21 (.28)	.15 (.21)	.24 (.27)	.28 (.34)	.28 (.37)
Long-distance	.22 (.16)	.40 (.27)	.18 (.25)	.29 (.34)	.19 (.27)	.20 (.28)	.09 (.17)	.15 (.24)	.12 (.26)	.18 (.32)

Note: * $p < 0.001$. Significance was considered only at $p < 0.001$ because of the large sample size. The largest means for significant cases are highlighted in bold. Degrees of freedom: Gender (1, 25962), Age (2, 26961), Education (1, 25399), Income (2, 22041), Client Site Use (1, 25758), National Site Use (1, 24982), Portal Site Use (1, 24982), Relationship With Print Edition (2, 24086). All possible pairwise comparisons were tested using the Tukey HSD post hoc test (see footnotes 9, 10 and 11).

Appendix A: Local Newspaper Sites and Print Circulation

Location – URL of Web site	Print Edition	Weekday Circulation	Sunday Circulation	Number of Respondents
Birmingham, AL - al.com	<i>Birmingham News</i>	143,781	176,390	1,271
Chico, CA - ChicoER.com	<i>Enterprise Record</i>	31,678	33,332	337
Davenport, IA - qctimes.com	<i>The Quad City Times</i>	54,020	68,472	204
Denver, CO - DenverPost.com	<i>The Denver Post</i>	255,935	694,053	1,124
Denver, CO - RockyMountainNews.com	<i>Rocky Mountain News</i>	255,675	N/A ¹²	1,131
Dubuque, IA - THOnline.com	<i>Telegraph Herald</i>	28,315	33,982	620
El Paso, TX - ElPasoTimes.com	<i>El Paso Times</i>	68,998	83,486	1,085
Erie, PA - GoErie.com	<i>Erie Times News</i>	56,462	79,006	1,000
Goldsboro, NC - NewsArgus.com	<i>Goldsboro News Argus</i>	19,219	22,010	520
Harrisburg/Lehigh Valley, PA - PennLive.com	<i>Patriot News</i>	95,188	145,039	985
Huntsville, AL - al.com	<i>Huntsville Times</i>	51,013	70,682	601
Klamath Falls, OR - HeraldandNews.com	<i>Herald and News</i>	16,612	17,066	440
Long Beach, CA - PressTelegram.com	<i>Press-Telegram</i>	87,637	88,495	410
Los Angeles, CA - DailyNews.com	<i>Los Angeles Daily News</i>	151,215	170,434	848
Middletown, NY - RecordOnline.com	<i>Times-Herald Record</i>	79,122	87,286	1,191
Mobile, AL - al.com	<i>The Press Register</i>	95,699	111,368	555
Montrose, CO - MontrosePress.com	<i>Montrose Daily Press</i>	5,401	5,448	332
Nampa, ID - IdahoPress.com	<i>Idaho Press Tribune</i>	18,691	19,941	247
Pasadena, CA - PasadenaStarNews.com	<i>Pasadena Star News</i>	29,712	29,527	299
Pocatello, ID - JournalNet.com	<i>Idaho State Journal</i>	16,723	17,673	226
San Gabriel, CA - SGVTribune.com	<i>San Gabriel Valley Tribune</i>	42,602	42,162	239
Sandusky, OH - SanduskyRegister.com	<i>Sandusky Register</i>	22,168	26,108	586
Springfield, MA - MassLive.com	<i>The Republican</i>	83,351	124,287	1,423
St. Paul, MN - TwinCities.com	<i>Pioneer Press</i>	184,371	245,597	422
Staten Island, NY - SILive.com	<i>Staten Island Advance</i>	58,034	73,537	651
Vancouver, WA - Columbian.com	<i>The Columbian</i>	46,203	54,328	1,016
Waterloo, IA - WCFCourier.com	<i>Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier</i>	41,477	50,301	536
Whittier, CA - WhittierDailyNews.com	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	16,339	15,842	185
Average		73,415	95,772	660

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Notes

¹ For a thorough discussion of the distinct challenges for newspapers posed by the transition from print to online, see Boczkowski (2004), Deuze (2003), Hermida & Thurman (2008), Matheson (2004), Paterson & Domingo (2008), Singer (2008), Thurman (2008), Thurman & Lupton (2008), and Tremayne et al. (2007), among others.

² The survey was made available on the 28 sites for 21-41 days.

³ In 2005, the average circulation for a U.S. daily newspaper was 36,739 and 60,471 for weekday and Sunday editions, respectively (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

⁴ In the newspaper industry, NDM refers to a geographic area specified by the newspaper that does not correspond to predetermined geographic boundaries such as MSA, city zone or county zone (R. G. Picard & Brody, 1997). The NDM must encompass at least 75 percent of the newspaper's paid circulation (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2008).

⁵ Some 1,396 long-distance users (5.4% of all respondents) reported having read the print edition during the past week, but this group was excluded from analysis because these users likely lived close to but not exactly within the NDM, and therefore clouded the distinction between truly local and truly long-distance users.

⁶ The response choices were spread among two identically worded survey questions such that together they totaled 47 content interest options.

⁷ For exploratory analyses such as this, particularly when the number of items is few, low levels of alpha (e.g., in the .50 range) do not unduly attenuate validity coefficients, as noted by Schmitt (1996).

⁸ Because they cross-loaded on more than one dimension or otherwise had weak loadings, seven variables—Statewide News, Health and Medical News, Local Business News, Photo Galleries, Personal Ads, Community Calendar, and Special Offers/Coupons—were dropped from the analysis.

⁹ A Tukey HSD post hoc test ($p < .05$) also found no significant differences between the youngest and oldest groups on the Household dimension.

¹⁰ Using Tukey HSD post hoc tests ($p < .05$) to examine each pairwise comparison, we found no significant differences between among those with incomes up to \$100,000 on overall content interest and Household. Likewise, there were no significant differences between the higher two income subgroups (those \$50,000 and up) on Non-Local News, Guides and Commentary.

¹¹ Our Tukey HSD post hoc tests ($p < .05$) found only one non-significant relationship: the difference between local online-only users and long-distance users on the Commentary dimension.

¹² Under a joint-operating agreement, the Denver Newspaper Agency, weekend distribution of the print newspaper is as follows: the *Rocky Mountain News* is published only on Saturday and *The Denver Post* only on Sunday. Thus, to calculate a Sunday average circulation for all 28 papers under study here, the *Rocky Mountain News* was dropped. It should be noted that data here were gathered before the *Rocky Mountain News* closed, publishing its last edition on February 27, 2009, after which point *The Denver Post* began publishing on Saturdays in its place.