

The Switch to Online Newspapers: Could Immediacy Be a Factor?

Bahiyah Omar

School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Monash University

Abstract

Using remediation theory (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) as a guide, this study tested the concept of immediacy in a 'between-subject' design experiment that compared differential effects of exposure to print and online versions of *The Australian* newspaper. The results did not support the hypothesis that online readers would perceive greater immediacy than print readers. This seemed to contradict remediation's view, yet the study did support the idea that immediacy is a factor in the switch of consumers from old to new media. Immediacy was strongly related to the goals of surveillance gratification seeking and moderately related to current issues knowledge. Because goals drive actions, this study suggests that immediacy could be responsible for the switch of customers to online newspapers as a consequence of its significant correlation to information seeking and knowledge acquisition.

Introduction

The period of mid 1990s marked the growth of the Internet and tremendous change in the newspaper industry. Before the popularization of the web, the challenge of dealing with consumer-oriented electronic publishing triggered newspaper companies to look for alternatives to print (Boczkowski, 2004). As the movement into the World Wide Web progressed dramatically, the newspaper industry invested in the Internet for non-paper-based means of delivery. The direction towards adopting the Web became clear after the introduction of the user friendly Mosaic browser in 1993 (Boczkowski, 2004) and the use of online media flourished after the introduction of Netscape in 1994 and Microsoft's Internet Explorer in 1995 (Scott, 2005). By 1996, most news media particularly newspapers had a web presence (Boczkowski, 2004; Scott, 2005). The growth of online newspapers is inevitable for many reasons; the high costs involved of producing print copies and physical delivery (Chaudhri, 1998), the ability of online newspapers to expand the newspapers' brand and reach a wider audience (Peng et. al, 1999) and also the shift of consumers' behaviour especially younger generation towards online sources (Alhers, 2006).

Consumers' switch to online media has become a great concern in the newspaper industry. The effect can be seen in the decline of daily newspaper circulationⁱ (Alhers, 2006). One of the bases of the switch, according to Alhers, is free access to online news sources. Another advantage of using online sources is the ability to locate information faster than using offline media (vanOostendorp, 1998; Frank Magid Associates, 2004). Aside from finding things faster, Frank Magid Associates (2004) found that offline media was perceived by consumers to have more advantages or else that there is no difference between online and offline news media.ⁱⁱ These results are useful to guide direction of this study. If the new media are not superior in many aspects to the old media, what could possibly explain the increase in online media usage? Could there be other possible factors? The present study aimed to find the answer by focusing on one of the compelling characteristics of new media; that is immediacy.

Immediacy: the logic of remediation

In journalism, immediacy is often used to describe the speed of news reporting. It is about delivering information immediately. Both online and conventional journalism consider immediacy to be important facet of the news business. Undoubtedly, technology plays a key role in achieving immediacy. The advance of computer and telecommunications networks facilitate the delivery of news, often as events are unfolding. The qualities of new media, however, offer better immediacy than conventional mass media in terms of bringing variety, expansion, depth, and context to the breaking news stories (Stovall, 2004). There is, on the other hand, no breaking news stories section in the traditional newspapers because of the fixed publication times, and therefore they are considered less immediate than their online counterparts.

The word immediacy implies diverse meanings in the communication literature. New media theorists, Bolter and Grusin (1999) introduce the idea of a logic of immediacy that suggests a sense of presence or transparent interface. Presence stands for an immediate relationship to the content of the medium without any mediating factors. In their remediation theory, Bolter and Grusin argue that the reciprocal logics of immediacy and hypermediacy are central to understanding new media (2005, p51). The logic of hypermediacy suggests an

incorporation of multiple media forms, represented in a single medium. The word reciprocal denotes the mutual needs for the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media. The first need refers to the logic of immediacy which strives to eliminate acts of representation and the later refers to the logic of hypermediacy that acknowledges multiple acts of representations. Bolter and Grusin depict the process of remediation as an oscillation between striving for transparency and acknowledging multiple acts of representation. As the two logics move in opposite directions, both logics at the same time act to reinforce each other.

Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying technologies of mediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p.51).

The experience of immediacy is as diverse as its meanings. Bolter and Grusin (1999) regard immediacy as “our name for a family of beliefs and practices that express themselves differently at various times among various groups...” (p.30). Bolter and Grusin illustrate users’ experience of using both immersive and non-immersive interfaces to demonstrate the experience of immediacy. Virtual reality is an example of an immersive medium. It brings users direct to the content of the medium where they can experience a virtual world and interact with objects naturally as they do in the physical world. Meanwhile, non-immersive interfaces such as the graphical user interface [GUI] employ the mouse or the pen-based means to “allow the user the immediacy of touching, dragging, and manipulating visually attractive ideograms” (p.23). This experience is more exciting, lively and realistic than mere use of text. Both immersive and non-immersive experiences demonstrate the desire for immediacy which Bolter and Grusin claim as a goal of new media.

A lack of immediacy, according to Bolter and Grusin (1999), is the main inadequacy of older media that new media seek to improve upon. They have a strong assumption that the point of new media is to reform or improve the conditions of their predecessors. Virtual reality improves upon film by providing a more immersive experience of participation in a virtual world, electronic mail allows faster delivery than physical mail, hypertext offers interactivity not available through plain text, and digital audio and video bring more accessible sounds and images than their analog equivalents. Remediation also suggests that reforms brought about by digital media allow improvements in many aspects of lives such as commerce, education and social relationships. In this sense, Bolter and Grusin (2005) suggest that media can reform reality itself.

Research questions and hypotheses

The central focus of the present study is on the reforms brought about by the new media. In the context of newspapers, specific questions raised in the present study are: Do newspaper readers find the online version more immediate than the print version? Is immediacy positively related to ‘surveillance gratification seeking’ⁱⁱⁱ, the main motivation for news? Is immediacy positively related to knowledge about current issues, the expected outcome of news seeking? Having answered these questions, the findings can hopefully give an insight into the general question of whether immediacy could become a factor for the shift of consumers to online news sources.

Based on the literature of remediation, this study assures that immediacy is a focal point of media reform. Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue that the purpose of new media is to improve the condition of older media. The improvement is said to be primarily related to an improved immediacy. Therefore, immediacy should be greater in new media than in the old media. New media will be perceived of or experienced as more transparent, less opaque – more ‘real’ – than old media.

Hypothesis 1: The online newspaper readers will perceive greater immediacy than the print newspaper readers

The news media serve several functions. Most media scholars (eg: Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990; Lasswell, 1960) agree that the role of informing the public, that is the ‘surveillance’ function, is considered central. Some studies find the most common motivation for news is in fact surveillance gratification seeking (eg: Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Eveland, 2001). Immediacy should, therefore, have positive relationship with surveillance gratification seeking.

Hypothesis 2: Immediacy will be positively related to surveillance gratification seeking.

The newspaper is a source of information or knowledge about current issues. There is an enormous literature in mass communications that study the extent (eg: Eveland & Dunwoody, 2001; Tewksbury & Althaus, 1999; Sundar et al., 1998) and types (eg: Graber, 2001; Jonassen et al., 1993) of knowledge learnt from media exposure. Undeniably knowledge is a desired outcome of media use, especially for media that are replete with information like newspapers. Given the idea of reform brought about by new media, the relation between immediacy and current issues knowledge is expected to be positive.

Hypothesis 3: Immediacy will be positively related to current issues knowledge.

Method

The method used was a ‘between-subject’ experimental design. The experiment was conducted on 11th September 2006 at Monash University, Clayton. Recruitment of participants was carried out by putting up advertisements for voluntary participation.

Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduate students from Monash University, Clayton. The advantage of using students as participants is that young people constitute “the segment of the population central to the popularity of online news” (Eveland et al., 2004, p.91) and concern over the switch in consumer behavior relates profoundly to young people (Alhers, 2006). Hence, this group is a compelling subject population for online news study. The average age of the participants was 20. About a quarter of the participants (43.1%) were first year students and two thirds (66.7%) were international or non-local students. Female participants (62.5%) outnumbered male participants (37.5%). There was diversity in the background of study. Most of them came from the Faculties of Medicine (29.2%), Arts (22.2%) and Business and Economics (20.8%). On average participants used the Internet every day and spent about 3 hours using the Internet in a day.

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the following: a print group (n = 23), an online group (n = 25) and a control group (n = 24) prior to coming to the locations of the study. There were no significant differences across the three groups in terms of age, gender, locality, year of study, level of reported academic performance and perceived knowledge about current issues. Random assignment was successful.

Participants in the online group were exposed to *The Australian*, Australia's national daily newspaper, retrieved from the address: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/>. The location of the study was a computer laboratory equipped with 30 IBM computers which have the same technical specifications. Meanwhile, participants in the print group were directed to a classroom and exposed to the print version of *The Australian*. Generally all news reported in the print version of *The Australian* can be found in the online version. There was either no change or limited change in the content between print and online versions of the newspaper. However, there were more news stories found in *The Australian* online particularly due to the breaking news section which was unavailable in the print version. The method used by *The Australian* is what Stovall (2004) describes as shovelware^{iv} that implies shovelling news organizations' print content onto their website.

Participants in the two experimental groups were asked to read the assigned versions of *The Australian* for 30 minutes. Then a questionnaire was administered to the two groups. Participants in the control group were not exposed to any newspaper. They completed a shortened version of the questionnaire, excluding questions related to the experience of using the medium.

Measurement

Immediacy (M = 3.81, SD = 0.56) was constructed as an average of seven, 5-point, Likert-type items ($\alpha = 0.68$) pertaining to participants' perceptions of using either print or online versions of *The Australian*. The items were developed from the concept of immediacy proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1999). Surveillance gratification seeking (M = 3.73, SD = 0.61) was measured as an average of seven 5-point, Likert-type items ($\alpha = 0.78$) on which participants indicated their motivations for news. The items were derived from previous applications of the concept in uses and gratification studies (eg: Becker, 1979; Blumler, 1979). (See the Appendix for a list of the questions.)

Current issues knowledge was measured using 10 items taken from a 20-item quiz. Because of the broad scope of news stories reported in newspapers in a day, this study only focused on the front page and national news sections of *The Australian*. The criterion of selection was based on participants' attention ($r = 0.43$) to the two sections. The 10 items were averaged and multiplied by 100 (M = 42.08, SD = 16.69) to form a measure of current issues knowledge. The score represented the percentage of correct responses. This measurement has been commonly used to examine factual knowledge gained from media exposure (eg: Eveland & Dunwoody, 2001; Eveland et. al., 2004).

Results

Hypothesis 1 posited that the online newspaper readers would perceive greater immediacy than the print newspaper readers. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the average immediacy scores for the online and print groups. There was no significant difference in scores ($t = -.53$, $p = .59$) for the online group ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .61$) and the print group ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .52$). Thus, there was no support for hypothesis 1.

Table 1: Pearson Product-Moment Correlations between Scores of Immediacy, Surveillance Gratifications Seeking and Current Issues Knowledge.

	Immediacy	
	R	P
Surveillance Gratifications Seeking (n = 48)	.51**	.00
• Online Group (n = 25)	.60**	.00
• Print Group (n = 23)	.38	.07
Current Issues Knowledge (n = 48)	.34*	.02
• Online Group (n = 25)	.44*	.03
• Print Group (n = 23)	.24	.28

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

Hypothesis 2 held that immediacy would be positively correlated with surveillance gratification seeking. Table 1 shows a strong positive correlation between immediacy and surveillance gratification seeking ($r = .51$, $n = 48$, $p = .00$). Hence, there was strong support for hypothesis 2. Comparison between the two groups demonstrated that the relationship between immediacy and surveillance gratification seeking for the online group ($r = .60$, $n = 25$, $p = .00$) was significant whereas for the print group ($r = .38$, $n = 23$, $p = .07$) it was insignificant.

Hypothesis 3 posited that immediacy would be positively correlated with current issues knowledge. There was a moderate positive correlation between the two variables ($r = .34$, $n = 48$, $p = .02$). Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported. Table 1 shows that comparison between the two groups for the correlation between immediacy and current issues knowledge revealed a significant relationship ($r = .44$, $n = 25$, $p = .03$) for the online group and an insignificant relationship ($r = .24$, $n = 23$, $p = .28$) for the print group.

Discussion

The initial expectation when conducting this study was that online newspapers would be rated more highly for immediacy than print newspapers. The formation of the hypothesis was based on the concept of immediacy proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1999) who claim new

media are more immediate (more transparent, less opaque, more 'real') than the older media. The present study found no support for this claim.

Although this study was guided by existing theory, the measure of immediacy for a non-immersive medium (such as newspapers) has not been used or validated before. Tests on reliability of scale, however, showed the Cronbach alpha coefficient for immediacy in this study was .68. What this value represents is that the questions used to examine immediacy have a good internal consistency.

Another possible explanation for the lack of support for hypothesis 1 is that the experience of media use might have 'different meanings for different people'. The basic definition of immediacy was of a sense of 'presence', an experiencing of 'the real'. In the case of newspapers, the 'real' experience of reading a newspaper could be associated with traditional and ritual ways of acquiring the paper-based newspapers.^v The measurement of immediacy in this study, however, examined which medium provided greater satisfaction related to newspaper reading. This was based on Bolter and Grusin's (1999) description of immediacy which was then applied to the use of non-immersive media. Since traditional print newspapers are established media and widely used for centuries, it was perhaps not surprising to find a non-significant difference in the perception of immediacy between the two media.

Making a comparison between print and online newspapers readers' perception of immediacy was useful in order to understand how the different media are perceived. The issue of media switch, however, relates more profoundly to the second part of the analysis which examined relationships between immediacy and goals of media use. Eveland (2001) describes surveillance gratification seeking as the goal that drives people to consume news and the outcome of achieving this goal is measured in terms of knowledge gained. Meanwhile, Bolter and Grusin (1999) suggest immediacy as the goal of new media. The results of Pearson Product-Moment Correlations between the goal of media (i.e: immediacy) and the goals of news consumption (i.e: surveillance gratification seeking and current issues knowledge) provide some evidence of significant positive relationships, and more importantly, the significant correlations only occurred within the online group. The more highly readers perceived the online medium to have greater immediacy; the more highly they scored for surveillance gratification seeking and current issues knowledge. It is important to note, however, that there was no significant difference between print and online groups in their perception of immediacy. This seemed to indicate that even though print readers rated highly for immediacy, the scores were not associated with high scores in the goals examined in this study. In other words, for readers of print newspaper, immediacy was not linked to the goals of surveillance gratification seeking and current issues knowledge.

These findings are consistent with the arguments about reform proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1999). Goals give impetus to action (Deci & Ryan, 1985). If immediacy perceived from the use of online newspaper is significantly correlated with the goals of news consumption, then immediacy can also be considered to be one of the factors that contributes to the switch of consumers to online news media.

It is important to acknowledge that one of the limitations of this study derived from the use of volunteers as participants. Gravetter and Forzano (2006) argue that the characteristics of volunteer participants are different from non-volunteers, and therefore can affect the results. Future studies can take advantage of applying the measure of immediacy to a more representative sample.

Although the results of this study provide considerable support for the role of immediacy in news media consumption, there is need for further empirical research to examine this issue. Future work should strive to validate the measurement of immediacy and to consider the other half of the reciprocal logics of remediation; that is, the logic of hypermediacy.

Appendix

Measurement

Surveillance gratification seeking (5-point Likert-type items)

1. I read/watch/listen to the news to find out the main events of the day
2. I read/watch/listen to the news to stay in touch with the world
3. The news gives me facts to back up my opinions
4. I read/watch/listen to the news to access how our elected officials are doing
5. I read/watch/listen to the news to find out information about things that might affect my life
6. The news helps me make up my mind about things
7. The news provides food for thought and reflection

Immediacy (5-point Likert-type items)

1. I can find stories of an event that enable me to visualize a comprehensive picture of what has really happened
2. I admire the realistic quality of the images found in the newspaper
3. I can always find the latest news reported in the newspaper
4. I can view pictures of people or events from different parts of the world. It makes me feel close to them though we are far apart
5. I always find myself interested in the front-page newspaper layout
6. The newspaper has successfully blended text and graphics in its design. I find this attractive
7. I can skim through news headlines to find news stories that I want to read

Endnotes

- ⁱ Alhers claims that not only newspaper circulation has declined but also television news viewership.
- ⁱⁱ Measures used in this study were faster to find things, more useful, easier to use, more important role in day, more informative, more satisfying, more likeable, more enjoyable, more reliable, more trustworthy.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Surveillance is one of the gratification sought dimensions that explain why people use mass media. It is one of the most common dimensions found in the uses and gratifications studies (Beaudoin, 2004, p449).
- ^{iv} Shovelware refers to “the practice of simply shifting the content produced by the organization for another medium ... to the web site with little or no change” (Stovall, 2004, p16).
- ^v That is why some newspapers including *the Australian* provide a section for subscription to the print edition which could be read on the website.

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