

JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges to the media is the potential impact of new information and communication technologies on the form and content of media output, the processes how media messages are produced and consumed. According to Scalán (2001), Poynter Reporting and Writing Group Leader, today's electronic technology is changing the way reporters at American's newspapers tell stories. From this stand point, every journalist in the 21st century should have some understanding of how these technological changes have been affecting the method of distributing and gathering news and information in the media industry. The aim of this article is to present the advantages and disadvantages of using Internet technology by newspaper organizations and journalists in order to draw the picture of a new form of communication medium. Thus, I wanted to make people and institutions interested in the Internet as a medium of communication aware of the benefits of using the Internet and the potential problems that they can face. This article also states how readers are getting close to their newspapers due to technological development.

Key words: Internet, online journalism, interactivity, e-mail.

İNTERNET ÇAĞINDA GAZETECİLİK

ÖZET

Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerindeki gelişmeler, medya endüstrisi içerisinde haberin ve bilginin toplanması, dağıtılması ve okuyucular tarafından tüketilmesi yöntemlerinde değişikliklere neden olmaktadır. Özellikle internet teknolojisinde yaşanan gelişmeler ve buna paralel olarak internet kullanıcısı sayısının 171 ülkede 130 milyona ulaşması (Flanagin ve Metzger 2000: 515-540) sonucunda; internet, kullanıcılar ve haber üreten gazeteciler tarafından haber ile ilgili bilgi ve belgelerin süratle toplanması ve haberin okuyucuya ulaştırılması aşamasında yoğun bir şekilde kullanılmaktadır.

Bu bağlamda, makalede gazete işletmeleri ve gazeteciler açısından İnternet teknolojisinin gazetecilik alanında kullanılmasının avantaj ve dezavantajları üzerinde durarak; bu önemli iletişim aracının gazetecilik üzerindeki olumlu ve olumsuz etkilerini ortaya koymaya çalıştım. Burada ki amacım, bu konu ile ilgilenen kişi ve kuruluşlara bir iletişim aracı olarak internetin, gazetecilikte kullanılması ile elde edebilecekleri kazanımları göstermek ve karşılaşılabilecek problemlere ışık tutmak olmuştur. Ayrıca iletişim (Networks) sistemlerinde yaşanan gelişmelerin, okuyucuları gazetelerine nasıl yaklaştırdığı ve gazeteciler ve okuyucular arasında dolaylı olmayan etkileşimli bir iletişim kanalının internet vasıtasıyla nasıl kurulduğu üzerinde durdum.

Anahtar kelimeler: İnternet teknolojisi, internet gazeteciliği, etkileşim, e-posta.

INTRODUCTION

Technological changes have been influencing the method of distributing and gathering news in the media industry. The developments of network systems have given opportunities to news organizations to perform a new type of journalism called online journalism. Inherent in the architecture of its delivery system -online journalism- is the technical capability of interactivity (Massey and Levy 1999: 138-151).

The journey into the online journalism begins with the civil usage of Internet technology. Newly invented and progressed Internet technology has substituted for the traditional journalism giving interactive and transferable contents such as voice, image, text, and pictures.

This technology makes it possible to send and

receive news and other essential information almost anywhere in the world. Therefore, millions of households all over the world are now equipped with high tech receivers for electronic newspapers. Today a large number of people uses personal computers, modems and telephones to gain instant access not only to the information any newspapers provides but more. Koch (1991: XX) expresses his opinion on the topic how technological developments would influence journalism in the 21st century:

"Technology affects not only the means of production and the efficiency by which the physical product is created, but also its very content. Use of electronic information services can and will create a radically new journalism in which the resulting report, news story, or press release is free from traditionally accepted editorial limits."

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The arrival of the Internet in the news world has brought advantages as well as disadvantages for both readers and journalists in the media industry.

Therefore, every journalist and news organization should have some understanding of how these technological changes have been affecting the method of distributing and gathering news and information in the media industry in order to be successful within cutthroat competition. The purpose of writing this article is not only to outline the benefits and drawbacks of using Internet technology by newspaper organizations and journalists but also to discuss the status of the Internet as a communication medium. Furthermore, I intend to give some clues to online news organizations and journalists what obstacles can be faced while posting the news on the Internet.

I. ADVANTAGES OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGY IN JOURNALISM

The online technologies usually called "databases" or "online libraries" have enhanced the traditional watchdog function of journalism by giving reporters ways to search more deeply for information. Electronic databases by providing a wide variety of journals, newsletters, and newspaper texts have expanded the reporters' toolbox. According to Tewksbury and Althaus (2000: 457-479), "the way news sources based on the World Wide Web use visuals, graphics, and inter-connectivity features may encourage people to process online stories differently from how they process traditional newspaper articles."

Koch (1991: 119) concludes that these technologies give more freedom to journalists from total reliance on the individuals, and from limited views voiced by specific experts and officials. This freedom allows reporters and editors themselves to define the context of a news story, therefore regaining control of their own agenda and better approximate the profession's instrumental goals. Additionally, John Hussar (Roy 1997: 118), the editor of Desert Sun owned by Gannet, points out that "database reporting is essential for today's news gathering. Not only is it quicker, but journalists can provide more facts as well as depth for analyzing complex stories for today's busy readers."

The Web technology has also introduced different culture built on interactivity, fewer rules, and fewer limits. Some writers argue that the main benefit of online journalism lies in its potential for interpersonal interactivity. Journalism on the Internet enables readers, reporters,

and editors to communicate interactively in the cyberspace, as Bukoto (2001: 44-46) claims, "the Internet provides an interactive gathering place for journalists and the public." At this point it would be helpful to talk in which ways online journalism can be interactive in order to understand the topic better. 'Interactive' online journalism has two broad dimensions (Massey and Levy 1999: 138-151). One of these is content interactivity, defined as the degree to which journalists technologically empower readers over content. The other is interpersonal interactivity, or in other words, the extent to which news audiences can have computer mediated conversations through journalists' technological largess.

In order to realize interpersonal interactivity, journalists offer opinions and evidence about e-mail interactivity with readers when they put their e-mail addresses on the Web. E-mail can bring instant feedback to a story just posted as well as to one that is read in the print edition of the newspaper. Besides, receiving readers' inputs about stories assists journalists to cover topics thoroughly. Thus, it can increase the quality of news posted on the news site on the Internet as well as the one that is printed in the newspaper. According to Giles (2000: 4), e-mail gives an opportunity to reporters and editors to hear from people who may know something about the story and who can share an authoritative perspective, provide additional sources or raise the possibility that the story may be unbalanced or unfair. The potential for such interactivity is that it can contribute to raising the level of journalistic performance.

Furthermore, the Web technology authorizes all news and other commercial online sites to install cookies without notifying Internet users in order to allow the site to start creating a profile of the users' preferences. The technology of online journalism makes it dramatically easier to do so, increasing the temptation to satisfy reader's tastes.

Online measurements are clearly more precise than previous tools. Online editors now have the ability to calculate, almost instantaneously, exactly how many readers look at each article on their site and how much time they spend there. On the other hand, the old media devotes a large amount of money and time to build the profile of user's preferences. In order to determine the wishes of readers for years, editors have used focus groups and surveys.

A cookie is a bit of encrypted computer code that is saved on computer's hard drive and identifies the computer the next time when the

user visits the same site. Therefore, cookies give permission advertisers to obtain information on how many and which readers of a news story click on an advertisement and how many of those ad-clickers actually purchase something. In addition, the number of clicks drives page views on the site. Page view is the number of Internet users who click on a specific Web page. Page-view counts are displayed to media buyers, who will acquire ads to run on the Web pages of editorial sections, how many Internet users visit the site and what they are interested in (Rainie 2000: 17-19).

The other advantage of Internet technology is that news sites on the Internet can perform something that the old media cannot. It is possible for them to market products directly from their own sites e-commerce sections, or link to other commercial sites with which they may have a financial relationship. Thus, news sites on the Internet can earn money in order to finance their operations.

Above all, the Internet provides speed and timeliness to newspapers. The Internet is a perfect place for breaking news (White 2000: 35-36). It has enabled newspapers to come full circle by posting breaking news any time during the day. Therefore, the Internet gives an opportunity to online news sites to cover breaking news faster than the old media can cover.

In conclusion, the Internet is a worldwide news and information medium. In the era of long distance telecommunication, a news organization or an individual can be located anywhere in the world and still be able to request and obtain specific news and information. Hachten (1989: 71) makes a remark that "Internet technology is making it possible to send and receive news and other essential information almost anywhere in the world." The potential payoffs as Web helps journalists avoid autocratic government restrictions. The new technology is not just a tool but it is also freedom.

II. DISADVANTAGES OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGY IN JOURNALISM

Delivering information through the Internet is expensive. Creating content demands qualified manpower, which means having the sum of skilled newsgathering, writing, editing, presentation, and general management. In order to produce quality content, an expensive series of steps should be taken by online new sites. Besides, to post online news on the Internet requires new technological tools. Therefore, providing any necessary high equipment increases capital expenditures of news organizations.

The necessity of investing large amount of money in online operations leads to powerful media companies' domination over the news on the Web. The Internet increasingly has been becoming the domain of media brand names that are linked to the major players of the global media market (White 2000: 35-36). Dominant news Web sites have been run by the old media, that is the traditional news organizations such as daily newspapers, newsmagazines, network, and major cable television outlets. McNair (1998: 173-185) mentions in his article that, as James Curran predicted in 1991, the introduction of new technologies to the print media did not fundamentally change the long-established structure of ownership and control, patterns of employment, and process of production within the media industry. The reason for newspapers' dominance in online journalism is that they have the biggest investment in news. News organizations have the resources to build powerful Web sites. Besides, they are specialized in news coverage, so it gives them an advantage. With regard to the ratings services reports published in USA Today Magazine (Aug 2001: 15-17), "most Americans go to sites operated by old-line media when for news on the Web."

The major disadvantage of journalism on the Internet is that there is no quality control. The question of reliability and trustworthiness of information posted outside the news sites' control are an issue. Standards online have not been established yet. Nevertheless, mainstream news organizations are struggling to apply old-fashioned news standards to the Web, however, are discovering that it is not easy to translate the virtues of accuracy, balance and clarity to a medium where the advantage of speed and timeliness prevail. According to Towsend (2000: 8-9) "the Web is the Wild West, with gossipmongers, stock manipulators and crackpots of every description, some posing as journalists at alleged news sites. Accuracy is sacrificed for speed and immediacy." On the other hand, as Finberg (2001: T11-14) states in his article about the survey on the credibility of a Web news story, public ranked accuracy, completeness, and fairness as the most important factors.

Online operations of newspapers on the Internet negatively influence reporting standards of journalism. The rush to break news ahead of competitors has caused news organization to post stories on the Internet without the same level of fact checking and confirmation that is expected in print media. However, these principles are as fundamental for new media as for

the old. This results in losing online edition of newspapers' credibility and public's trust. Kornblum (2000: 3D) comments on the data of a survey that was answered by 203 editors limited to the online operations of newspapers conducted by University of Memphis professor David Aran cooperating with Janna Anderson, a journalism instructor at Elon College, that "47% of respondents agreed that the ability to publish information immediately online has led to an erosion of the standards of verification; and 30% said online outlets are not as likely to follow general ethical standards of journalism as are traditional papers." The other drawback of journalism on the Internet is that online error correction policies in news forums have not been evolved to the point they need to. In print news publications when there is an error in reporting, there are at least some error-correcting mechanisms in place. As the error is noticed in print edition of newspapers, corrections can be published. However, "online new sources seem to be falling into is a tendency to correct or remove the story rather than publish a correction" (Swanie 2000: 152-157).

Online news organizations tend to simply reload a corrected version of the news without comment. The problem is here what if some people have already read the erroneous information, how the news organization can let those people know that the information they got was not correct? Just changing or removing the erroneous story without comment in public leads to erosion of public trust toward the news organization. It influences the credibility of online news reporting. The Web's greatest strength is also its weakness. Anyone can report anything from anywhere in the world without taking journalistic standards into his consideration. On the other hand, there are no filters to make sure that the best get posted on the Web. Thus, this decreases the credibility and reliability of news published on the Internet. Not to mention the fact that there are no editors in cyberspace. Newspapers are also missing from online content providers. According to the author of the book *Strait Talk About the Information Highway* (Goldsborough 1999: 11-12), "the flip side to the Net's personal nature is the high incidence of information being misinformation. Without the filter of experience and editing, rumors and hoaxes proliferate."

Furthermore, many online operations are start up and their personnel are young and have never been experienced in the traditional news culture that keeps ad and editorial functions a respectable distance apart. Therefore, the opportunity for blurring the invisible line between editorial function and ad department is great.

Internet on news reporting and journalism has facilitated individuals with little or no journalistic training or experience to pass on their findings, spurious to readers. Non-journalistic web sites have people doing work that is essentially journalistic in nature, from writing stories to choosing relevant links (Stein 1999: 11-12). It is not even clear whether these people are journalists, or which ones are journalists (Overholser 2000: 60-62).

Even though online operations of news organizations bring many advantages to consumers and communities, it has not yet become a profit center in any news organization. New media leaves off subscription and advertising fees because companies are not willing to pay a flat fee for online advertising. People are also used to getting what they want on the Internet for nothing. The general attitude among Internet users is that everything is free on the Internet. Therefore, major newspaper companies do not charge any fee for access to the articles posted on the Internet.

Advertising revenues has not also grown enough to cover costs at most sites (Farhi 2000: 22-28). In order to stop worrying about incursions by advertisers into newsrooms, "the leaders of journalism should get busy finding ways to produce content that somebody, particularly subscribers, will buy and pay for online" (Rainie 2000: 17-19).

Thus, the economy of Web just cannot afford to employ that many professionals within a news organization. It would be hard to find "online newspapers" that financially could survive on their own, without subsidies of capital and content form of the core organization (Small 2000: 41-43).

The last but not least disadvantage is that online journalism abounds in obstacles such as lack of access to technology and of a wired infrastructure. There are places in the world where technological changes are not resulting in new approaches to how journalists do their job and readers get their news.

CONCLUSION

The Internet is the most powerful communication medium to arise since the dawn of television (Kelly 2000: 64-70). This technology enables reporters to send and receive information anywhere in the world. The nature of the Web technology also gives power to both readers and journalists to communicate interactively in the cyberspace. The biggest change from print to online is the instant access to audiences

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(Lowrey 1999: 14-28). Thus, this results in removing the traditional gatekeepers called news media.

Internet technology has brought new methods of gathering and delivering information and news in the media industry. Online news organizations provide easy access to information that is often buried in the depths of traditional newspapers, and they frequently incorporate links between news and related stories and Web sites. On the other hand, lack of journalistic standards erodes credibility of news posted on the Web.

Therefore, news organizations to be successful in reporting news online should pinpoint on the quality of news coverage and the feature of the Internet technology. Journalists should keep in mind that online newsreaders come to news sites to be informed as much as they can. People who use the Internet as a source of news are clearly information seekers (Stempell et. al. 2000: 71-79). At this point, the credibility of online news outlets is essential to keep readers coming back to sites continuously.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that as the percentage of Internet users rate increases, providing online news will be profitable for the news organizations. At that time, advertisers will be willing to pay certain amount of fee for the service. When the content of online edition of newspapers gets qualified, I assume that people will also subscribe for them. In order to realize this, news organizations should pay attention to produce news according to journalistic standards and be aware of pros and cons of online journalism. They should also keep in mind that the Internet is a worldwide news and information medium (Alexander 1999: 5-9).

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