

HOW DO PEOPLE READ NEWS ON THE INTERNET

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İnsanlar İnternette Yayınlanan Haberleri Nasıl Okuyor

Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerindeki gelişmeler, medya endüstrisi içerisinde haberin verilmesi, toplanması ve okuyucular tarafından tüketilmesi olgusunda 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, haberlerin *internet* ortamında tüketilmesine okuyucu aktif bir şekilde katılır. Okuyucu burada seçicidir ve istediği haberi bir haber bombardımanına maruz kalmadan okuyabilme şansına sahiptir.

Bu noktadan hareketle son yıllarda, Batılı ülkelerde okuyucuların *internette* yayınlanan haberleri nasıl tükettiklerine dair yapılan araştırmalar, *internette* yayınlanan haberlerin formatlarının

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farklılaştırılması gerektiği gerçeğini ortaya koymuştur. Okuyucu internette yayınlanan haberin tamamını okumak istemeyerek hızlı bir şekilde habere göz gezdirip; ihtiyaç duyduğu bilgiyi, haberin bir bölümünü veya birkaç cümlesini okuyarak edinmeye çalışmaktadır. Okuyucu uzun yazılan haberleri sevmemekte ve kısa yazılan haberleri tercih etmektedir (Morkers ve Nielsen 1998). Bu bağlamda, makalemde internetin bir iletişim aracı olduğunu vurgulayarak, internet üzerinde yayınlanmak istenen bir haberin yazımında nelere dikkat edilmesi gerektiği üzerinde durdum. Özellikle *internet* haberciliğinin haberin veriliş formatını değiştirdiğini fakat haberin sahip olması gereken değerleri değiştirmemesi gerektiğini vurguladım.

Key words: Internet journalism, news writing, readers' satisfaction, news values, and credibility.

Introduction

Developments in information and communication technologies have been changing journalism by means 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 & 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. It also enables online news organizations to provide easy access to information that is often buried in the depths of traditional newspapers, and they frequently incorporate links between news items and related stories and Web sites (Tewksbury & Althaus 2000: 457-479). According to McNair (1998a: 13), one of the biggest challenges to the media in recent years is the potential impact of innovative information and communication technologies on the structure and content of media output, the processes which media messages are created and consumed. Therefore, news organizations need to closely monitor the attitude of readers toward news posted on the Internet edition of newspapers.

The arrival of the Internet in the news world has changed the structure of messages produced by journalists and the way that readers consume them on the Internet. According to Scalan (2001), Poynter Reporting and Writing Group Leader, today's electronic technology is changing the way reporters at American's newspapers tell stories. Therefore, every journalist and news organization should be aware of how these technological changes have been influencing the method of distributing and gathering news and information in the media industry. The aim of writing this article is not only to outline how news organizations on the Internet can satisfy their readers' needs and expectations while posting news on sites but also to present recent findings to journalists about how users read news on the Web. In other words, this article states how stories should be written for online users in order to keep them visiting news sites on the Internet.

How to Write News on the Internet

The Web enables people who would like to get information from various sources to access to the information provided by well-known news organizations. Internet technology makes it possible to send and receive news and other essential information anywhere in the world (Hachten 1989: 71). Owing to this, the Internet is a worldwide news and information medium (Alexander 99: 5-9). Since the World Wide Web began to expand into public arena in early 1994, growing numbers of journalists have used the Web as a reporting tool with considerable enthusiasm (Garrison 2000, 500-513). Therefore, companies that are willing to present news online should distinguish themselves from all the other sites available on the Internet by providing better news coverage, and customer oriented service. To realize this, first journalists should be aware of how readers of online newspapers behave to satisfy their expectations and needs. As Niblock (1996: 7) states in his book that the first rule of journalism is to know your audience otherwise you will not be in tune with them.

In order to collect data on what readers look at when they read news online; average time spent by online news readers to read news stories; what kind of news stories are consumed by online readers, Lewenstein (2000), a professor of communication at Stanford University, conducted the research by using eye-tracking technology to more closely analyze readers of online newspapers behave and determined some key finding as follows:

- 75 percent of the articles that people read were found by chance. At first, readers were interested in headlines or

short summaries and then clicked to receive the whole story.

- People tended to spend time reading news twice as long as with a general news provider than a specialty news provider.
- People usually began to read online news with a favored news provider.
- On average, people visited six news providers' sites.
- Only 22 percent of people's first glances included artwork, and 21 percent of the participants looked at no artwork at all during their session.
- People who read news online are first attracted to text rather than pictures or graphics.
- National news tended to attract readers' attention more than local news.

This study reveals that people who read news online would like to be informed as much as people who read print edition of newspapers. People who use the Internet as a source of news are clearly information seekers (Stempell et. al. 2000: 71-79). According to the research, people do read news on the Internet in a way they read newspapers. Therefore, the most essential point to be successful in online journalism must be the same as in traditional news media taking into consideration accuracy, objectivity, good writing, and code of ethics. The result of Stanford Poynter Project (Johnson 2001: 10-14) displays that people are more willing to read online news than it was previously thought. However, people prefer to read news from certain providers because of writing style. Nevertheless, it indicates that

the way journalists cover news is important to attract readers and make them visit the site continuously. The other research conducted by cPulse, Internet market research firm, found that consumers are unsatisfied with the Web news experience because of citing poor organization, shallow coverage, staleness and an inability to find quickly articles. Unfortunately, one of five visitors leaves a news site displeased (Martin, 2001: 56-57).

These studies prove that people who would like to read news online are looking for good writing style and well-covered stories. It means that the quality of reporting is the principal of the achievement for news sites on the Internet. Sundar (1998: 55-68) defines quality as "the degree or level of overall excellence of a news story. It signifies an evaluation of the goodness of a communication message." 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.

After giving information about behavior of online readers toward news posted on the Internet, now I would like to discuss how journalists should cover news stories in the cyberspace. First, journalists must keep in mind that the Internet is a more interactive medium than print or TV. 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 & 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. As Lowrey (1999: 14-28) states in his article, the biggest change from print to online is the instant access to audiences. Therefore, journalists should know their audiences' needs and expectations. Dube (2000) presents the tips for online writing at the seminar organized by Poynter Organization such as:

- Journalists should think about their target audience and keep in mind that readers tend to be more proactive than print readers or TV viewers. Therefore, online readers look for information rather than passively take in what is presented to them. The other thing that journalists should consider is whether the news is written to inform local, national or international audience because news sites have potentially global reach. Journalists should write and edit stories with that mind.
- Journalists should consider what the best ways are to present the story before it is reported whether through audio, video, clickable graphics, text or links, etc. Journalists should collaborate with video, audio and interactive producers. Journalists should also develop a plan that guides them throughout the newsgathering and production process. Therefore, journalists can find new ways to present stories on the Internet differently from or better than any other medium can.
- Journalists should pay attention to the writing style. The writing for Web should be a cross between print and broadcast like tighter and punchier than print, but more

literate and detailed than broadcast writing. Journalists should also remember to write actively. As Bukoto (2001: 46-49) points out in his article, journalists should talk with their readers, not at them and not forget the interactivity. Journalists should have a conversation with their readers and ask them to comment on the story posted on the Internet.

- It is essential for journalists when reporting online to tell the readers quickly what the story is about and why readers should keep reading the news. In order to keep the most important part of information at the top of the story, 'inverted pyramid format' can be used as one solution. *Inverted pyramid* style, described by Bell (1996: 169), is to gather all the main points at the beginning and progressing through decreasingly important information. Spreading the scope of events as wide as possible in the shortest space. The technique moves like a downward spiral through the available information.
- Journalists should not attempt to write long stories online. Stories should be short and simple. According to Web usability studies, online newsreaders incline to skim over news sites rather than read them attentively. Bukoto (2001) recommends in his article that news coverage should not exceed three hundred words or should be less for the primary story.

Furthermore, Weir (2000: 35-38) states in his article that as journalists have migrated to the Web, they have brought

traditional media values with them. These values are also indicators to create good quality of news coverage.

- Journalists should do original work and advance the story.
- News posted on the Internet should be timely and relevant.
- News should be accurate.
- Journalists should be fair and remain independent. They should understand all sides before reporting.
- Journalists should maintain confidentiality and protect sources.

Beside all of these, journalists have to pay attention to definitions of the features of events that make them potentially suitable for news reporting, which are: timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, and human interest (McNair 1998b: 77). These features of events increase the chance of an event being considered newsworthy. Inevitably most reported events are characterized by more than one of these features.

Conclusion

News organizations to be successful in reporting news online should pinpoint on the quality of news coverage and the feature of the Internet technology. According to studies mentioned above, online newsreaders come to news sites to be informed as much as they can. At this point, the credibility of online news outlets is essential to keep readers coming back to sites continuously. As Lowrey mentions in his article, online users come to news sites because of the credibility of the news organization and the professionalism and experience of the staff.

Journalists should keep in mind that the Internet is just a tool for news organizations to distribute the information. Therefore, journalists should use the most effective way to deliver the news on the Internet by considering three golden rules, which are accuracy, conciseness, and clarity. In order to keep readers coming back to visit news sites continuously, new organizations should implement the journalistic standards accepted on the international scale.

Moreover, news sites on the Internet should satisfy their readers' needs and expectations with new ways to cover the stories. Online readers prefer writing that is concise and easy to scan. People do not want to read long treaties on the Web (Johnson 2001). As Poynter Reporting and Writing Group Leader Scanlan (2000) mentions in his article on the Institution Web page, "people are not looking for a block of text: they want to know what is going on. And they want to know it quickly. A news story might have to be condensed into three sentences..."

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