

Multimedia and Interactivity on Newspaper Websites:
A Multi-Study Analysis of Seven English-Speaking Countries

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Abstract

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Overview

Each country has its own history of journalism. That history, coupled with economic, political and social forces, has shaped its industry and print product, from ownership to writing to editing to layout. Just as print journalism is not the same across cultural and geographic boundaries, so too has online journalism taken different forms in different countries because of a variety of factors.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to provide a snapshot of the current state of online journalism in several countries, to examine differences between countries and to discuss possible reasons for the differences. To accomplish this task, we conducted multiple content analysis studies covering multimedia and interactive features in daily newspapers in the U.S., Canada, England/Scotland/Ireland, New Zealand and Australia.

Brief literature review

In order to provide that snapshot, our goal was to look at a large number of newspapers in several countries. While very few studies have looked at more than a handful of newspapers at a time, one of the first more widely-based studies was Peng, Tham and Xiaoming's 1997 survey of 247 publishers and content analysis of 80 U.S. newspaper websites. Also of note is Greer and Mensing's 1997-2003 study, which not only looked a large number of U.S. newspapers (83), but also involved an analysis of those websites over several years. There have been a few other noteworthy studies, by researchers such as Murley and Carroll (2007), who conducted a survey of college publication advisers about multimedia and interactivity on college newspaper websites, the Bivings Group, which published a 2006 report on the features of the websites of the 100 U.S. newspapers with the largest circulations and Sparks, Young and Darnell (2006), who studied 113 news organization web sites in Canada and a follow-up study of 10 of those sites. Most recently, Russial (2009) published the results of a study of a large number of U.S. daily newspaper websites.

Methodology

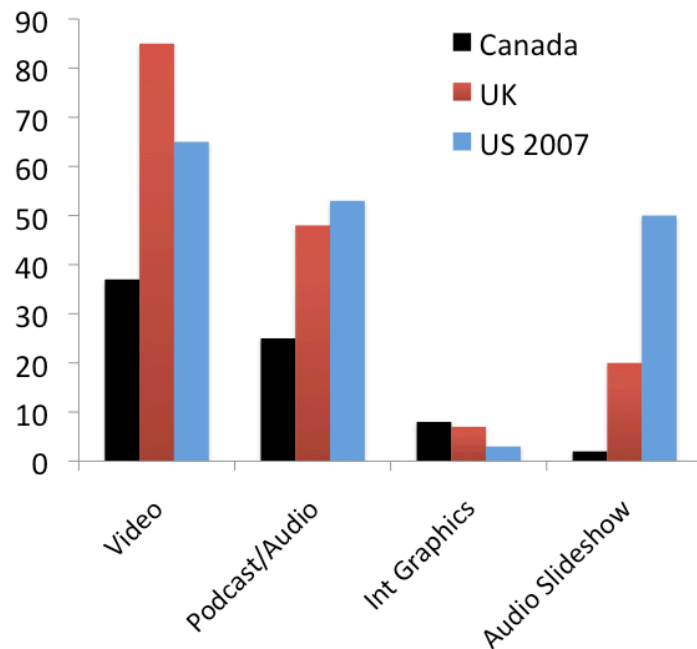
Because our aim was to provide a snapshot, we chose a content analysis method, rather than a survey methodology that might yield more in-depth data but might have a questionable return rate. In doing so, our method followed some of the framework of the Sparks, Young and Darnell study, which used a one-pass system to test for the presence of multimedia, interactive and other features. Our methodology involved several steps:

- 1) Examining the literature and numerous newspaper websites to create a list of features that fit into three main categories: distribution capabilities (such as email digests and mobile cell phone alerts of breaking news events), interactive features (such as reader polls and interactive graphics) and multimedia (such as audio and video clips). Our 2007 studies included 24 features, while our 2008 studies included 30 features, adding new features such as external rankings (Digg, Reddit, etc.) and internal rankings (most popular, most recommended, etc.).
- 2) Using the Editor and Publisher International Yearbook, creating a list of daily newspapers to examine. For the 2007 study of daily newspapers in the U.S., we used a random sampling of nearly 400 newspapers to have an error margin of less than +/- 5%. For the 2008 studies of daily newspapers in Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia, we were able to examine all of the newspapers listed.
- 3) Conducting pilot tests/norming sessions of sample examinations of website features with all of the members of our research team, achieving a 95% inter-rater reliability in 2007 and 96% in 2008.
- 4) Examining the newspapers websites over a one-month period, looking at each newspaper site in depth once and entering data about the presence or absence of the distribution/multimedia/interactive features into an Excel spreadsheet.
- 5) Compiling the data, entering circulation numbers for each newspaper and analyzing the data based on the circulation of the newspapers.

Results

We are still in the process of analyzing all of the data for all of the countries. The final paper will contain comparison numbers and graphs that will illustrate the differences in the presence of various features, both across countries and across different circulation

groups (as is to be expected, the circulation size seems to frequently, but not always, have a significant impact on the presence or absence of various features, especially more time-intensive features such as video and interactive graphics). Our preliminary analysis of some features and some countries has yielded some interesting findings, as this initial graph indicates.



Discussion

Our paper and presentation will conclude with a discussion of the factors that might explain some of the differences between the various countries. In some cases, ownership regulations have played a role in the differing degrees of convergence between countries (for example, FCC regulations in the U.S. that for many years restricted ownership of both print and broadcast media in the same market). In other cases, broadband penetration and expectations of readers have played a role (as appears to be the case with the significantly lower frequencies of video in Canada, for example). And, the proliferation of various technologies in some countries may also explain some of the differences (such as the ubiquity of the Soundslides program in the U.S. market two years ago). The degree of convergence-oriented courses in journalism education programs in various countries also may be having an impact.