

Tomorrow's newsp@pers: online or still made out of paper?

A study on perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards online newspapers

Hans Beyers

University of Antwerp

It is impossible to imagine our present-day information society without the internet. The coming of new media like online newspapers has caused a blurring of the borders between the domains of communication media, creating a hybrid communication model which combines both interpersonal and mass communication. In this paper we make an effort to obtain a detailed image of the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of Flemish online newspapers' readers. By means of a web-based questionnaire we try to find an answer to several questions: how often do people go online for news, which online newspapers are most popular in Flanders, for what reason and in what way do people read online newspapers, and do online newspapers affect purchasing behaviour and reading habits of print newspapers? Other research questions include services offered by online newspapers (e.g. archives, digital editions, mobile services) and premium content. In an earlier stage of this study, we already found that online newspapers' readers stick to their favourite newspaper when they go online, meaning online newspapers do not introduce a decline of regional borders. Only the future can tell what the final outcome will be, however enough elements point towards a continued existence of print newspapers in the age of new media, at least for some time.

1. Introduction

In spite of doubts concerning profitability, thousands of newspapers have gone online since the mid-nineties. A lot have pulled out, others are showing moderate to good results. In this survey we aim to obtain a detailed image of the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of (mainly Flemish)¹ online newspapers' readers. We basically want to find out how readers think of online newspapers and we try to do so on a practical, aesthetical and sentimental level, as well as concerning content. By means of a web-based questionnaire we look for an answer to several questions: in the perception of readers, what features are decisive reasons for reading online newspapers and, possibly, to prefer them to printed editions? What is the demographic profile of the average reader of online newspapers, and what place do online newspapers take in their media consumption? Does the use of online newspapers affect purchasing

behavior and reading habits of print editions? Other research questions concern premium content and the reasons for not reading online newspapers.

2. Features of online news sites

Online newspapers mainly differ from their paper counterparts on four principal characteristics. It is very important to underline that it concerns potential characteristics, which are not always taken advantage of.

Several authors distinguish only 3 main features of online journalism (multimedia, interactivity and hypertext), because immediacy is not always considered a separate element. Massey and Levy see it as a dimension of interactivity (Massey & Levy, 1999: 141), but to us and others it is important and large enough to pass of as a fourth characteristic. There are empirical as well as theoretical grounds to assume so. According to Deuze & Paulussen (2002: 241-243) Dutch and Flemish journalists consider 'speed and immediacy' as one out of four key concepts creating a surplus for online news. Beyers (2003: 121-122) found that 67% of Flemish online newspaper readers see the existent traits of online newspapers as the most important reason to consult them. In this context, Pavlik mentions 'dynamic content', meaning that information in an online environment is much more manageable. Immediacy, also called asynchrony, creates a culture of breaking news (Porteman, 1998: 74-76; Porteman, 1999: 94 & Pavlik, 2001: 21-22).

2.1. Multimedia

A first feature consists in the multimedia aspect of online newspapers. Broadcast media (television and radio) merely diffuse their content by way of audio and/or video signals. Print media (e.g. newspapers and books) only use text, although regularly supplemented with some kind of illustration. Online news sites do not have a '*medientypische, spezifische materielle Form mehr, nur noch Bits*' (Berghaus, 1997: 76). Therefore, the internet is not restricted to one kind of signals: it can contain and diffuse both text and illustrations, as well as sound and (moving) image. All of this causes a blurring of the traditional borders between media: the borders between mass media mutually as well as between mass media and interpersonal communication become faint.

2.2. Interactivity

For communication studies, interactivity has been a research topic long before it became a buzzword in the internet (e.g. Enzensberger, Brecht). Tucher refers to interactivity as '*the most distinctive contribution of online journalism*' (Tucher, 1997: online). Rogers similarly characterizes interactivity as '*the most distinctive single quality of the new media*' (Rogers, 1986: 5), while Morris and Ogan think of interactivity as '*the key advantage of new media*' (Morris & Ogan, 1996: online). According to these authors the importance of interactivity is not to be underestimated.

With news sites, interactivity reveals itself in 2 ways. First, interaction can be present by interfering in the communication process (e.g. e-mail, discussion boards or chat). This is what we call *communication interactivity*, 'interpersonal interactivity' (Massey & Levy, 1999: 140) or 'audience involvement' (Pavlik, 2001: 20-21). A second form of interactivity consists of selecting content. The internet facilitates 'The Daily Me' (Negroponte, 1995: 153): according to the reader's interests and needs, content can be targeted. This is also referred to as *selection interactivity*. Pavlik talks about 'customisation' (Pavlik, 2001: 22), while Massey and Levy use 'content interactivity' (Massey & Levy, 1999: 140) or the extent to which journalists -technically speaking- enable users to manage content themselves. Here, both sender and receiver have more of a grip on media because of the presence of digital systems. In this broader definition, interactivity creates increased interaction possibilities between communicator and user as well as increased control (by the user) of information and content.

Steuer combines both aspects and equals interactivity to '*the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time*' (Steuer, 1992: 84). Or, stated differently, the extent to which users are able to manage the communication process as well as its content.

2.3. Hypertext

Online media created a new dimension in news presentation: hypermedia, pointing at the interconnectivity of computer files through (hyper)links. These are references from one component (most frequently text) to another via one (or several) term(s) or icon(s). In other words, hypermedia causes the amount of information on web sites to be virtually unlimited. This is why hypertext is an ideal means to archive old news items. This archival function can be seen as a facet of hypertext as well as interactivity: on the one hand archives link certain pieces of information to each other, but on the other hand the interactive feature lies in the control gained by the user to make independent choices to search the archives (Paulussen, 2002: 1-9). Internal hyperlinks can refer to extra information about the same news item or column (within the same web site) or to another part of the same article (so-called bookmarks). When an online news site disposes of archives, this creates an additional possibility for internal hyperlinking. External hyperlinks lead to a virtually unlimited amount of information on the same subject outside of the own site. Through hyperlinks the distinction between news coverage in depth and reporting breadthways fades away: where television news brings a lot of items in a superficial way and printed newspapers offer more thorough analysis, online newspapers can easily combine both approaches. In real terms we notice that for this moment, online publishers are still not sure which approach is the right one.

2.4. Immediacy

Because of technical restraints the editorial staff of a printed newspaper is used to work towards a fixed deadline. As for online news sites, deadlines do no longer

exist. Or, put the other way around, online newspapers are tied to a permanent deadline. Newspapers on the net do not have closing times and have to be up to date 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Lasica puts this aptly: *'In a way, it's a throw-back to the old days when newspapers had three or four editions a day'* (Dibeau, 1999: online). We add that this characteristic of online media was only generally recognized in February 1997, when The Dallas Morning News' website instantly reported on the Oklahoma bombings (Rieder, 1997: online; Chung, 2004: 2).

3. Websurvey

To expound our choice for a web-based survey, we briefly discuss following criteria: the likelihood to reach respondents, cost, response/feedback, fastness, pretesting possibilities and the randomness of our sample.

To start with, a websurvey has a high *likelihood to reach respondents*. By questioning surfers on their own ground, the probability to reach them is fairly high. In addition, in our case a websurvey also provides data concerning non-readers, since not every web-user is necessarily a reader of online newspapers. Consequently, this also means that our questionnaire does not reach non-web-users. At the end of 2004, 49% of the Belgian population (or 4.2 million people) used the internet on a regular basis² (Insites, 2004: online). A market research by ISPA³ for the third quarter of 2004 shows an increase of 2,5% in the total amount of internet connections (1.992.000), pushed by an persistent grow (+5,1%) in broadband connections (cable and DSL) (ISPA, 2004: online).

Secondly, the *cost* of a websurvey is very low. Technically spoken, all that is needed is some space on a webserver, a software package to create the necessary web pages and a script to import all data into a SPSS-datafile.

Next, *feedback* is very important to get significant statistic results. To ensure enough traffic (and thus response) to our survey, we contacted several advertising partners. Telenet, a Belgian ISP with about 1.2 million⁴ unique visitors a month for its portal (<http://breedband.telenet.be/>), Internetjournalistiek (<http://www.internetjournalistiek.be>) and Digimedia (<http://www.digimedia.be/>), both sites specialized in online journalism and new media, respectively published a skyscraper and buttons on their websites. Also, a brief announcement of the study was spread by means of their e-letters. Other advertising partners included ZI-BIZ, Villamedia, Speedzone and VEPEC.

The *fastness* of a questionnaire via the internet is beneficial in 2 ways: the term, as well as the time needed to fill out the form, can be reduced. The websurvey was first published on 23 December 2004 at <http://www.kpsoft.be/ekrant/>. An additional advantage of websurveys is that a time-consuming phase is made redundant as all data generated by the questionnaire are automatically saved on a webpage and then exported to a SPSS-datafile.

Finally, we mention the ease of *pretesting* websurveys and the possibility to add multimedia features (e.g. audio, video). In our study, hyperlinks were used to illustrate some concepts.

On the other hand, a disadvantage of e-surveys is that they are *less random* than other methods of research, for example a survey by postal mail. First, we note that our survey was announced by sending several colleagues and contacts (academic as well as professional) in the field of online journalism and new media an invitation to fill it out and spread the survey. This way, the region of the University of Antwerp might be slightly overrepresented (on the other hand our promotional partners do not show such distortions).

4. Response

Between Thursday 23 December 2004 and Wednesday 26 January 2005,⁵ the websurvey (<http://www.kpssoft.be/ekrant/>) produced 352 respondents, 342 of which delivered useful data.⁶

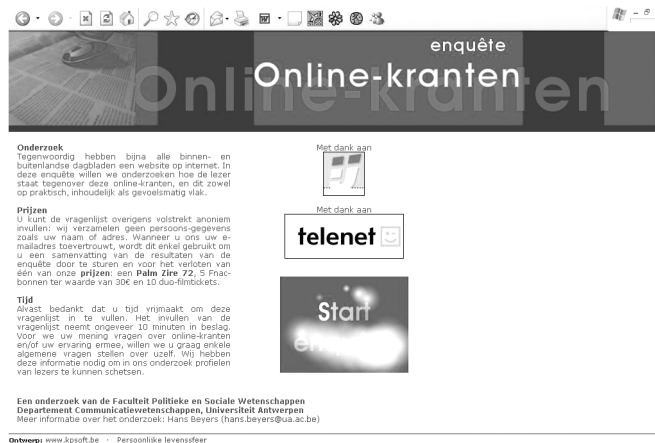


Figure 1: Websurvey - screenshot of opening page (<http://www.kpssoft.be/ekrant/>)

The graph beneath shows the number of respondents for the first 5 weeks, starting 23 December 2004. During the first week a button appeared on Internetjournalistiek.be and we invited colleagues and contacts to respond to the survey, during the fourth week we contacted some additional advertising partners (e.g. Digimedia, Villamedia) who published announcements on their websites. Also, Telenet Solutions starting showing a skyscraper. Finally, during the fifth week Speedzone and ZI-BIZ published buttons on their web sites.

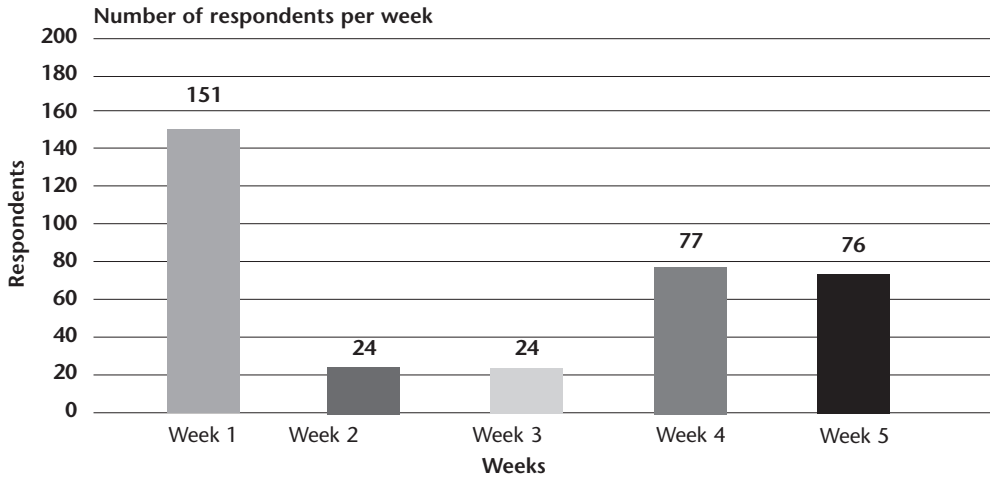


Figure 2: Response between 23 December 2004 and 26 January 2005 (not cleaned)

5. Findings

We tried to obtain a clear and detailed image of online-readers' perceptions, opinions and attitudes concerning online newspapers. For that reason we used the following question as a criterion for selection: 'Do you occasionally read online newspapers?' (question 8a). This phrasing implicates a more subtle approach of more or less frequent online readers and their user experiences. This also means several questions were only answered by respondents who explicitly indicated (by means of question 8a) that they were online readers.

5.1. Do you occasionally read online newspapers?

Our data show that 81,5% of our preliminary respondents (n=330) occasionally read online newspapers. We note that our survey was only available online and that we did not execute a survey by post or telephone. As a consequence, the results for this question can be biased in the way that only people with access to the internet could return our survey. On the other hand, this bias does not pose a further problem because we will chiefly focus on people who actually do read online newspapers.

Within our group of online newspaper readers, nearly half (48,5%) consults online newspapers at least once a day.

How often do you read an online newspaper?	Frequency	Percent
Several times a day	55	21,7%
Daily	68	26,8%
Several times a week	77	30,3%
Once a week	17	6,7%
Several times a month	29	11,4%
Seldorn or never	8	3,1%
Total	254	100%

Figure 3: 'How often do you read an online newspaper?' (n=254)

5.2. Profile of readers of online newspapers

5.2.1. Gender

Possibly, online newspapers show an even more pronounced discrepancy in terms of gender than figures for internet access: 87,3% of our male respondents (n=229 and $p<.001$) say they read online newspapers, while 67% of women do so (n=94 and $p<.001$).

5.2.2. Age

On the issue of age, we see a domination of the age categories between 18 and 34: 18,9% for category 18-24 and 40,2% between 25 and 34; together accounting for almost two third (59,1%) of our sample. Especially remarkable is that only 2 (out of 254) respondents turned out to be younger than 18. People aged 55 and over account for 13,8% of our online newspaper reading sample, compared to 5,9 % in 2001 (Beyers, 2003: 119). Readership of online newspapers amongst older ones thus seems to be on the way up.

5.2.3. Highest education

75,3% of our responding online newspaper readers have received some form of higher education, 46,4% studied at a university.

5.3. General media consumption

As shown in the below figure television, printed newspapers and radio are still the three dominant information media. For nearly one out of 10 respondents (9,1%), online newspapers are the most important channel for daily news.

What medium do you use most to keep up to date?	Ranking	Frequency	Percent
Television	1	93	28,2%
Printed newspaper	2	84	25,5%
Radio	3	62	18,8%
Internet (in general)	4	49	14,8%
Online newspaper	5	30	9,1%
Teletext	6	8	2,4%
E-letter	7	3	0,9%
Magazine	8	1	0,3%
SMS	9	0	0%
Other	10	0	0%
Total		330	100%

Figure 4: 'What medium do you use most frequently to keep up to date?' (ranked by percentage, n=330)

When we asked for a second choice of media to keep abreast of current events the same top-five appeared, with online newspapers once again in fifth place (with 6,4%). Only when we asked for a third choice of media, some differences occurred, with the internet (22,2%) taking the lead closely followed by television (21,6%), radio (20,1%) and printed newspapers (17,9%). Online newspapers score only 4% here.

5.4. Decline of regional borders?

What shifts take place between print newspapers' readers and those of online newspapers? Do readers remain true to their favourite newspaper when they are online and where do online readers go if their print newspaper does not offer an online version (e.g. De Nieuwe Gazet)?

	HBvl.	GvA	DG	HLN	M	DM	DNG	HN	DS	DT	HV	W	B
Hct Belang van Limburg (HBvl), n=11	27,3	9,1	0	0	18,2	9,1	0	0	36,4	0	0	0	0
Gazet van Antwerpen (GvA), n=14	0	28,6	0	7,1	0	0	0	0	50	14,3	0	0	0
De Gentenaar (DG), n=0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Het Laatste (DG), n=28	0	0	0	57,1	3,6	0	0	3,6	25	7,1	0	0	3,6
Metro (M), n=14	0	0	0	7,1	0	7,1	0	0	64,3	0	0	0	21,4
De Morgen (DM), n=51	2	9,8	0	2	0	21,6	0	0	54,9	2	0	0	7,8
De Nieuwe Gazet (DNG), n=2	0	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	0	0	0
Het Nieuwsblad (HN), n=14	7,1	7,1	0	0	0	0	0	50	28,6	0	7,1	7,1	0
De Standaard (DS), n=69	0	5,8	0	0	1,4	0	0	0	88,4	1,4	0	0	2,9
De Tijd (DT), n=6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	33,3	66,7	0	0	0
Het Volk (HV), n=1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	0
Waalse kranten (W), n=4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	0	0	50	0
Buitenlandse kranten (B), n=41	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2,4	0	0	0	0	97,6

Figure 5: Favourite online newspaper according to favourite printed newspaper (in percentages, N=255 and $p < .001$), highest scores in bold

In the above-mentioned chart, some correlations appear not to be significant because certain cells contain too small an amount of cases. Global figures are worth mentioning though. Apparently, most online-readers stick to their favourite print newspapers when they go online: most respondents who indicated printed newspaper X as their favourite, also mention X as their favourite newspaper website. We prudently conclude that the World Wide Web does not blur regional borders at all.

Respondents who respectively indicated *Het Laatste Nieuws* (57,1%), *Het Nieuwsblad* (50%), *De Standaard* (88,4%), *De Tijd* (66,7%), *Walloon* (50%) or foreign newspapers (97,6%) as their favourite print newspaper, also prefer to read the online version of their favourites. In all other cases *De Standaard Online* is the website of choice. These figures suggest that, once online, readers of local newspapers will also look for this regional side and secondly, that *De Standaard Online* is by far the most popular website within our survey.

De Standaard Online is the most visited newspaper website in all Flemish regions. However, we do notice some strong regional ties as *Gazet van Antwerpen* comes in second place in Antwerp and *Het Belang van Limburg* is second in Limburg (n=231 and p<.001). Again, we remind that some cells did not contain enough cases yet.

The image of the loyal online newspaper reader is further supported by a recent Belden Associates study (Sullivan, 2004). Interviews with readers of several U.S. online newspapers indicated that some users are counted up to four times as a unique visitor due to cookie blocking and clearing. Consequently, the number of unique visitors is often overrated, but at the same time frequency (and thus loyalty) is much higher.

5.5. Why do people read online newspapers?

It is interesting to find out what makes people read online newspapers. For what actual reasons do (some) people prefer online newspapers to print newspapers? Beforehand, we asked respondents to assign quota on a scale from 1 to 10 for general satisfaction concerning online newspapers: over three quarters (76%) assign quota of 7 or more. Generally speaking, users seem to be very pleased with online newspapers.

Are you in general, satisfied with online newspapers?	Frequency	Percent	
1	0	0%	
2	0	0%	
3	1	0,4%	
4	4	1,5%	
5	13	5%	
6	44	17%	
7	78	30,1%	
8	81	31,3%	
9	27	10,4%	
10	11	4,2%	
Total	259	100%	

Figure 6: 'Are you, in general, satisfied with online newspapers?' (n=259)

Next, we asked why people read online newspapers. This should allow us to refer to our four main features of electronic newspapers.

Reason	Frequency 'agree'	Percentage 'agree'
Online newspapers permit to quickly consult current information.	170	63,2%
I read online newspapers because to me it's a good supplement to traditional media.	137	50,9%
Online newspapers offers archives where I can always look up old articles.	123	45,7%
With online newspapers, I can easily select the articles I want to read.	97	36,1%
I read online newspapers because that way I do not have to buy a print edition.	74	27,5%
Online newspapers can add video, audio and other animated illustrations to news.	71	26,4%
I find it handy to be able to consult Belgian news all over the world.	56	20,8%
Compared to printed newspapers, online newspapers are cheaper.	35	13%
Other	26	9,7%
I read online newspapers because of environmental considerations.	10	3,7%
With online newspapers, it is easier to voice one's opinion.	10	3,7%

Figure 7: Reasons for reading online newspapers (ranked by percentage, n=269)

The assets of online newspapers can clearly be distinguished here: several features we mentioned earlier on turn up as major reasons for reading online newspapers. The importance of 'breaking news' is demonstrated by the fact that fastness and the capacity of permanently being up to date are considered the main characteristics and benefits (63,2%) of online newspapers. 50,9% say they read online newspapers because to them it's a good supplement to traditional media. The archival function (45,7%) is closely related to the element of hyper-text and hypermedia, as a consequence of which the internet has a virtually unlimited capacity. Another important factor, the possibility to select news (36,1%), corresponds with what we earlier referred to as selection interactivity: readers are able to select the news of their interest thus putting together their own 'personal' newspaper. The way of distribution allows online newspapers to keep up with current events, all over the world (20,8%) and not obstructed by deadlines or broadcasting times. Furthermore, according to our respondents, all

of this is offered at a price that is cheaper (13%) than the one of printed newspapers. Only 3,7% claims they read online newspapers because of environmental considerations. Finally, we note that another 3,7% claim that online newspapers allow the reader to express opinions (also known as communication interactivity). This type of interactivity is often considered to provide the user with a greater control of information and content. The above-mentioned figure might suggest that today's technology provides more opportunities for an active citizenship than most people are willing to take. Our category 'Other' (9,7 %) did not contain any relevant information, because existing categories were basically reformulated here.

Next, we tried to figure out how reliable online newspapers are in the perception of consumers. Largely over half of our respondents (57,8%) does not agree with the phrasing 'Online news seems unreliable to me', while 13,5% does agree (n=325). All of this means that we can carefully state that reliability of online news (in general) turns out to be higher than one would expect at first. In addition, our study solely concerns websites of well-known publishers with long-standing names and a certain authority. However, we also asked to attribute a list of characteristics to respectively printed and online newspapers. Of our 269 online readers 53,5% thought of online newspapers as reliable, but for printed newspapers this figure rose to 64,7% ($p < .001$). Because the internet is an open medium (meaning everyone is able to receive attention all over the world by publishing on the web), reliability is an important factor in online journalism. Hence sites not disposing of a reliable trademark have to mark reliability with high priority (Jager & Van Twisk, 2002: 20).

5.6. Why do people still prefer other media?

Obviously, it is also important to know what is lacking when talking about online newspapers, because clearly not everybody prefers them. Or at least: what is 'wrong' or lacking in the perception of consumers? Why do a lot of people still decide in favour of print versions? What arguments are in play here?

When asking respondents why they do not read online newspapers, the main reason (indicated by 50,8% of non-readers) seems to be that people get enough information through traditional media (cfr. television, printed newspapers and radio, as mentioned earlier). These figures should not come as a surprise: our present-day information society offers huge amounts of information delivered by numerous channels twenty four seven.

Reason	Frequency 'agree'	Percentage 'agree'
Traditional news media provide me with enough information.	31	50,8% (p<0.001)
Online newspapers are not pleasant to read.	27	44,3% (p<0.001)
I'm not interested in online newspapers.	14	23% (p<0.001)
One can not carry around online newspapers.	12	19,7% (p<0.001)
When consulting online newspapers, I do not bump into amusing and interesting articles, which in fact is the case for printed editions.	9	14,8% (p<0.001)
Consulting online newspapers is laborious and time consuming.	8	13,1% (p<0.001)
I haven't heard about the existence of online newspapers.	5	8,2% (p<0.001)
Other	5	8,2% (p<0.001)
My newspapers does not offer an online edition.	0	0%

Figure 8: Reasons for not reading online newspapers (ranked by percentage, n=61)

A second reason for not reading online newspapers (44,3%) is that some people do not think of online reading as agreeable. Based on the answers in the text boxes, we were able to clarify 'not pleasant': it mainly concerned physical complaints such as painful eyes as a consequence of reading from a screen. Moreover, research has shown that screen-reading is about 25 % slower than paper-reading (Boerman, 2000: online). Most people also think of consulting newspapers (in general) as leisure. When this activity is performed on screen, this might be associated with professional activities and thus will more easily be considered as 'not pleasant'.

23% is just not interested in online newspapers, although they are online (as our survey was online-only), while 19,7% says it is disadvantageous one can not carry around online newspapers compared to 22,5% in 2001 (Beyers, 2003: 123). This decreasing percentage may be attributed to the fact that portability is no longer an exclusive feature of print newspapers: these days, all kinds of mobile devices offer news through full internet access, SMS or special versions (e.g. handheld computers, mobile phones), pdf-like versions enable users to download and consult their newspaper on a notebook and wireless internet access and hotspots will only grow in the future. Moreover, some major companies are working on compact lightweight screens with electronic ink which can be plugged in anywhere to download the latest facts. These experiments will soon enable reading-intensive mobile display applications.

9 respondents (14,8%) regret the lack of serendipity while they consult newspapers online and a percentage of 13,1% thinks of online newspapers as laborious and time-consuming, compared to 21,1% in 2001 (Beyers, 2003: 124).

Probably, this last objection is partly due to slower types of internet connections. The fact that less people look at this as a problem is presumably caused by a huge rise in broadband connections (ISPA, 2003 & 2004). However, in terms of user-friendliness print editions score higher: 41,8% agrees with our posing that print editions are more user-friendly than online editions, while 28,6% disagrees and 29,5% was neutral (n=325).

8,2% of our respondents claims not to read online newspapers because they have not heard about their existence. Finally, no one picked 'My newspaper does not offer an online edition' as a reason for not reading newspapers online. In 2001 this figure still was 1,3% (Beyers, 2003: 124), but meanwhile *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* also gone online.

To finish this part, we took a look at the aspect of 'charm' as an argument. In our study, 68,6% thinks print newspaper have more charm than online newspapers, while the category 'disagree' scored only 10,2% (n=325).

5.7. The substitution hypothesis

Now we come to the issue of media obsolescence: do online newspapers substitute or supplement their printed counterparts? The duality between print editions and online newspapers is often represented as a question of cannibalism: in other words, online newspapers will swallow up print newspapers. But is this picture correct? Why should both not be able to exist next to one another and even reinforce each other?

In general, we can say that new media never fully replaced 'old' media, with older media adapting to this new competitive environment by for example focussing on targeted audiences or offering new services. McQuail also supports this view: 'The new electronic media can be viewed initially as an addition to the existing spectrum rather than as a replacement' (McQuail, 2000: 118). The vast majority of online news users say they still spend as much time with print as they did before and research suggests that online newspaper readers are 'news junkies': for these people, online newspapers are one source of information amongst a wide range of other media channels (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004: online; Stanford Poynter Project, 2000: online).

In response to the phrasing 'In the long term online newspapers could replace traditional print newspapers', more than half of our respondents (54,8%) answered they did not think this substitution hypothesis was within the bounds of possibility. However, nearly one quarter (24,6%) believed this replacement was realistic (n=325).

Next, we examined the purchasing behaviour and reading habits of our respondents. We wondered if the amount of print editions bought and read decreases if one also reads online newspapers. The answers to 'Since the time you read online newspapers, did the amount of print newspapers you acquire increase, decrease or stay the same?' (n=264) reveal that approximately 70,8% claims to acquire the same amount of print newspapers as before. On the other hand, the fear of some publishers is not totally unfounded, as nearly one quarter

(24,6%) admits changes in their purchasing behaviour at the expense of print newspapers. On the other hand, a percentage of 4,5% claims to be buying more print newspapers as before they were reading online newspapers.

One could also assume that online newspapers pinch off reading time previously reserved for print newspapers. On the basis of our data this seems to be correct: 27,1% confirms they spend less time on reading traditional newspapers, while the majority (64,5%) allots the same share of time to print editions. A somewhat striking figure: 8,4% says to spend more time on print versions since they read online newspapers.

Thus, one way or another online newspapers also seem to create some potential to spur readers on to buy and read print editions, but further research on this issue is necessary.

Finally, we tried to find out what the influence on future purchasing behaviour could be. Therefore, we asked for the expected buying behaviour under the assumption that all newspaper articles would be published on the World Wide Web. In given circumstances over one quarter (27,1%) says they will no longer buy print editions; but more than half (51,7%) claims they will continue doing so (21,2% mark neutral, $n=325$). In another item we created the hypothetical situation of identical counterparts (with the same content at the same price) and asked for respondents' preference. The winner is clear: 70,9% chooses print editions, and 29,1% prefers online newspapers ($n=261$). We finally asked the readers of online newspapers ($n=269$) what could further raise the quality of their favourite online newspaper. The most wanted improvements are (in order) more hyperlinks (40,5%, $p<.001$), more updates (33,5%, $p<.001$), a broader offer (24,5%, $p<.001$), more photographs (21,9%, $p<.001$), more video (20,1%, $p<.001$), the content itself (16,4%, $p=.001$), the graphics (15,2%, $p=.001$) and more interaction (11,9%, $p=.005$).⁷ 18,2% ($p<.001$) is of the opinion that their online newspaper does not need any changes.

5.8. Paid content

In general, surfers are used to getting any information for free on the web: they will simply look for other news sites where they can consult the same news for free. This means that news sites must offer relevant information that is not readily available elsewhere, particularly not via other web sites or media. The resistance to paying for online content might ebb away, but this psychological process will take time. On the other hand, online newspapers 'giving away' content, radically undervalue their own journalistic products.

Several items were included in our survey question on paid content ($n=269$) to check to what extent people are willing to pay for different kinds of content and information. Not surprisingly, the most popular items are the archives (30,9%, $p<.001$). As nowadays a lot of archives are already paid-for content, this might account for a part of this quite high willingness to pay. The second place is taken by specialized content with 22,7% of online readers willing to pay for this kind of information ($p<.001$). Next, we have 'in-depth reports' and unique

content with respectively 19,7% and 17,8% (both $p < .001$). Breaking news (14,9% with $p = .001$) and pdf-like versions (14,5% with $p = .002$) also have a reasonable percentage of potential customers. All other items (audio, video, local news, classifieds/dating, e-letters, mobile content and financial information) did not produce significant data.

When asked how much people are prepared to spend on paid content, it appears that -if people want to pay at all (38,7% does not want to pay)- most people are willing to pay between 25 and 49 a year. 15,2% is prepared to spend an amount smaller than 25 and only 12,7% wants to spend over 50 a year ($n = 269$ and $p < .001$). A recent report by the Online Publishers Association (OPA) revealed that U.S. consumers spent 853 million \$ for online content during the first half of 2004 (OPA, 2004: 4).

6. Online newspapers: findings and remarks

On the basis of our data, we could say that the profile of the average visitor of online newspapers is a 18 to 44 years old (together accounting for 73,3 of our online reading group) working (74,8%) male (76%) with some form of higher education (75,3%).

The detection that the same newspaper is read online as in print version, is a general phenomenon. A potential advantage of electronic newspapers (namely the possibility to remove geographical boundaries) thus seems to be undermined by our figures. Besides that, De Standaard Online is also the most popular newspaper in all Flemish regions.

What influence does the rise of online newspapers have on sales figures of print newspapers? Are they a threat to print newspapers, or does it all turn out better than expected? 70,8% claims their buying behaviour is still the same as before, while nearly a quarter admits to buy less print newspapers and 4,5% say to buy more. But when we ask people who do read online to make a choice between print and online on the assumption of identical 'twins' (meaning exactly the same news at the same cost), the results speak for themselves: almost three quarters preferred the print edition. Only the future can tell what the final outcome will be, but enough elements point towards a continued existence of print newspapers in the age of new media, at least for some time.

Notes

1. Some Dutch respondents participated as well.
2. At least once a month.
3. Internet Service Providers Association Belgium.
4. Figure of October 2004.
5. We stress that the figures in this paper are drawn from preliminary results (data gathered until the end of January 2005) of the survey, while the web page remained open to contribu-

tions until February/March).

6. By 1 February 2005, the number of respondents reached 680.

7. The other figures (more audio and 'Other') were not significant.

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