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Daniel, Anna and Flew, Terry and Spurgeon, Christina L. (2009) *User Behaviours and Intentions in Digital Media in Australia*. In: Record of the Communications Policy & Research Forum 2009, 19-20 November 2009, University of Technology, Sydney.

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‘User Behaviours and Intentions in Digital Media in Australia’

Paper for the Communications Policy & Research Forum
19 + 20 November 2009, University of Technology, Sydney

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a study of user behaviours and intentions towards online news and information in Australia, undertaken by the Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Faculty and the Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre. It has used a literature review, online survey, focus groups and interviews to explore attitudes and behaviours towards online news and information.

The literature review on consumer user of online media highlighted emerging technical opportunities, and flagged existing barriers to access experienced by consumers in the Australian digital media sector. The literature review highlighted multiple disconnects between consumer interests in online news and their ability to fulfil them. This presents an opportunity for news entities to appraise and resolve. Doing so may enhance their service offering, attract consumers and improve loyalty. These themes were further explored by the survey.

The survey results revealed three typologies of user, described as ‘convenience’, ‘loyal’ and ‘customising’. Convenience users tend to access news by default, for example when they log out of email. Loyal users seek out a trusted brand such as mainstream news mastheads. Customising users tend to tailor news to their preferences, and be the first to use leading edge media. Respondents to the survey were then invited to participate in focus groups, which aimed to test the survey results.

Consumer perceptions and attitudes are important factors in progression towards an information economy, because ultimately consumers are customers. By segmenting the online news market according to customer typology, media providers may identify new opportunities to attract and retain customers.

Rationale

The rise of social media and the participative web have challenged traditional news entities. Challenges include content innovations that favour new entrants, decentralised creativity, organisational innovation and value-adding models (OECD 2007). New forms of competition for consumer time have empowered consumers to increasingly demand interaction with online content, for example via ‘produsage’ (Bruns 2008). Confusion exists over the use of news online by young adults in Australia, for example, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) claim online news, sports and weather is not a priority to 18-34 year olds. Those aged under 34 are least likely of the age groups to use the internet for news / info services and prefer entertainment online (ACMA 2008). However it may be that young adults do view news but consider it entertainment. Media content has disaggregated across platforms and “it is the loss of control over the format and timing of information that poses the true challenge to traditional media” (Miel and Faris, 2008: 5). These issues were explored in a literature review completed as phase one of this project.

To find a path through the rapid velocity of change in the digital media sector, it pays to focus on the needs and experiences of the end consumer. What are the expectations and attitudes of online news consumers today? How do the expectations and behaviors of young adults differ to older generations? Online news use is evolving rapidly and so a ‘pulse check’ of consumer

behaviors and perceptions towards online news and information is warranted in order to tailor services that meet user expectations and build loyalty.

Literature review

Key themes identified in the literature review included:

1. Mainstream news is perceived to be of little interest by the 18-30 year old age segment;
2. News from traditional media 'competes' with bloggers;
3. Trusted news mastheads continue to be important to consumers, especially those aged over 24 years, and during critical events (for example, bushfires);
4. Opportunities for online news in the local community exist.

Multiple disconnects exist between:

1. Changing user intentions towards online and location based news and information;
2. The ability by consumers to act on these intentions via the availability and cost of technologies; and
3. Current online offerings of traditional news providers and opportunities.

These disconnects present an opportunity for online news entities to appraise and resolve. Doing so may enhance their online offering, attract consumers and improve loyalty. We next wanted to test these findings with consumers.

Methodology

This study specifically concerned users of online news, and so was framed by a case study of two sites that are only available online with no print counterpart, namely the Brisbane Times (a city news site), and the Vine (a national site aimed at 18-29 year olds). The study involved three phases: a literature review, survey and focus groups. The literature review identified questions that were further explored by the survey.

To fit with our case study the target demographic included people aged over eighteen years living in South East Queensland and secondly, young adults nationwide. The survey was advertised on publicly available websites that targeted this demographic and a variety of social chatboards aimed at either southeast Queensland or the national young adult demographic. It was promoted heavily to Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Faculty students, many who may represent lead users for the 18-24 year segment.

The survey received 524 completed responses. A close alignment between survey respondents and the target groups (age and location) was achieved. Respondents to the survey were then invited to participate in focus groups that aimed to test and refine our survey findings. A total of 54 attendees participated in focus groups over four days, with roughly eight persons in each group. The groups were segmented beforehand by age and typology. Attendees participated in an hour discussion, with the general aim being to test our typologies. Follow up emails and conversations were held with non-metropolitan based respondents who were unable to attend the focus groups.

This study focussed on two online only sites and used respondents aged over eighteen years, so findings are not a complete national representation. A bias is inbuilt because it included an online survey, so it may be assumed that respondents are comfortable with online sources. Some direct quotes used in this paper have been edited to correct spelling and grammar. The study findings will now be discussed.

How news is accessed

The survey respondents access news most often in the home, and via wireless broadband/wi-fi or cable broadband. The findings generally correlate with the ACMA (2008) survey of internet usage so will not be expanded upon in detail here. Lack of speed on sites remains an issue, but less an issue than expected. Some may *"read the news perhaps whilst another page loads or I am waiting for something to download."* Another mentioned news sites are *"only useful if they are not massive video files. I can't stand waiting for a short story to load."* Someone nominated a preference for the text version of a news site because its full media version runs slowly and is *"ad infested."*

Which news sources are most reliable? Online news reliance generally skews towards the younger segment while those who rely on newspapers skew older. Age is an important indicator of media preferences: radio is the second preference of the 55+ year age group, but all other age segments prefer newspapers. Relying upon news received from conversations is preferred to physical newspapers by 18-24 year olds whereas none of the other age segments rely on news via conversations. It appears that family and friends (social networks) were not valued for these qualities. Magazines were the least favoured for reliability, relevance and accuracy of news and information. Someone mentioned the synergy between mediums: *"as soon as I hear something on the radio I can follow it up online."* Someone noted online is *"generally not for detailed analysis of events - newspapers, blogs, and current affairs programs provide more detail than real-time news sources,"* which indicates the person distinguishes between online news brands and blogs. -However another commented online is *"not just a 30 sec grab like radio."*

28 per cent of respondents across age groups considered mobile devices their least preferred way to access online news, and 36 per cent have never tried it. This reported low interest in news via mobile devices needs further analysis. It may simply be due to a lack of awareness, which is correlated by the 'never tried' result. One person commented online news is *"quickly becoming more mobile as well so that increases the convenience."* Increased consumption of news via mobiles may be an opportunity to deepen the penetration of news services, and improve the convenience and speed of news, thereby enhancing the consumer experience.

The survey asked if and why online news is preferred. Responses revealed the following patterns:

- It is fast and current
- It is convenient
- It contains links to relevant sites
- It can search multiple sources simultaneously to get multiple viewpoints
- It contains multimedia – video, audio, photos and text.

A key comment that summarised why online news is a preferred medium was that it is:

quick to access and you can read about an issue from various points of view, both local and international, from different political points of view and personal points of view as this varies between journalists. Also, you can read about a topic across various genres that might treat it with varying levels of formality, depth etc. This

enables the development of a more well-rounded opinion and can also let you tailor what you read to your mood, level of interest etc.

Content

In contrast to other news content, for local news consumers were more likely to rely upon friends and family: 19 per cent rely upon friends and 13 per cent rely upon online sources. The 13 per cent who rely upon online sources may live in inner urban areas, where online sources are more prevalent. At least 68 per cent of respondents go to a news/information site to maintain currency with world events. 19 per cent want entertainment, gossip, lifestyle events and/or sports information. However several cautioned they perceive some news sites simply process media releases: *“they are very hit and miss, almost as if the article came straight off a press release,”* or *“they usually are puff pieces.”* Several respondents have trust issues, either relying on online news as a starting point only, or fearing the information is *“made up”* or is advertorial.

Do consumers rely upon known brands or mastheads in their selection of news?

71 per cent agreed they tend to use online news and information services that are also associated with other news media (paper, television etc.). 84 per cent of respondents firstly go to a news site home page before clicking on something of interest, as opposed to going directly to a specific part of the site or going via a newsfeed or email. It suggests the importance of the site homepage, especially when users are directed automatically to that home page when signing out of email or social network sites, for example as happens with ninemsn.

The perceived quality of online news is a persistent issue, or *“I haven't gotten past the taboo of internet information.”* Consumers need news they can trust, as seen in comments relating to trust above. Many respondents understand the dichotomy between news currency and accuracy, for example: *“They're extremely useful because of their immediacy, but that aspect also makes them less accurate. The more immediate, the less easily verified.”* But *“if it is from the right site, then the news is trustworthy and credible.”* Whether news sites with a long history and established brand are a positive or negative factor in relation to trust was unclear. Results showed the ABC and BBC enjoy a strong brand and reputation. In the focus groups many young adults mentioned seeking news via Google and Wikipedia.

Making online news choices

A question arising from ACMA (2008) data was whether and why younger users (aged 18-24) access news online. Responses indicated 18-24 year olds access news most often out of habit (33 per cent) and/or by default (23 per cent): *“It gives me a brief summary of the top stories, before I check my Hotmail.”* However they do seek out event driven news (28 per cent), suggesting these choices may relate to social events. 37 per cent of respondents aged 18-24 years nominated Facebook as their favourite website. Someone commented that the Courier Mail was their favourite news site because of an *“easy link to Facebook to share articles.”*

The high proportion of respondents who have never accessed news via a mobile device has been noted, however 12 per cent currently access news via their mobile most often, and 27 per cent said they sometimes access news via a mobile device. This may indicate that those who have tried news via mobile devices continue to do so. The iPhone featured at least three times as a reason why particular sites are a favourite, for example news.com.au was someone's favourite news site because it is "*easy to use on my iPhone.*" Mobile news users may have mobile plans paid by their employer. This segment may respond favourably to brand marketing of news on mobile devices.

Only a small proportion of users mentioned RSS feeds and news aggregators, and this may be due to a lack of awareness of these tools in the wider community. Those who do use aggregators indicated they are easier and more comprehensive, however someone cautioned that they too have drawbacks. These include: information overload; they need to be monitored regularly; information irrelevance; they may slow the computer processing speed; are generally not platform neutral (for example via mobile phones, but Google iReader can be accessed from any computer); and other compatibility and technical issues.

Favourite sites

News sites that are linked to email (ninemsn, yahoo news etc.) were nominated by 29 per cent of respondents as their favourite sites. Ninemsn was clearly the most favourite online news site and this will be discussed in the next section. The ABC has one of the strongest online Australian brands and it was noted for its "*independent journalism,*" "*higher quality news,*" for being "*close to politically neutral,*" with "*objective, informative, non-sensationalised news*" and "*no advertising or flash!*" Those who nominated the Brisbane Times as their favourite news site mentioned a key strength was its local content coverage. Overseas news brands (BBC, Sina, New York Times, CNN etc.) comprised 6 per cent of favourite news sites, with the BBC featuring heavily for "*the best non-partial news service on the web, and because it has a large physical news service behind it,*" and its innovative iPlayer tool.

iGoogle was also praised, despite aggregators not featuring highly in awareness: "*Google reader is a simply way to keep track of all of my favourite sites, blogs and other resources, and therefore my MOST favourite!*" Twitter appeared in four responses as the favourite news site, however they may have been referring to news sites accessed via Twitter, for example <http://twitter.com/nytimes> was a favourite site. A key benefit of Twitter was that it combines feeds from "*my friends, favourite celebrities and even news sites!*" Another noted their Twitter community "*is a great judge of important news, if my followers link something, it's probably relevant.*"

News and email

Of those who nominated ninemsn as their favourite news site, 84 per cent were aged between 18-24 years. The high percentage of email related sites nominated as favourite news sites may reflect users who access news by default, that is, when they log out of email sites they are automatically redirected to it, or it appears onscreen while they are on social network sites. The 'stickiness' of online news seems to be on par with their addiction to online social activities:

I don't usually go searching for news. However, I am an avid user of Hotmail!!! and yeah the thingy just shows up whenever I sign on and it somehow gets me interested in it.

This will be discussed in more detail later.

The relevance of online news

Respondents overwhelmingly believed they spend most time online looking at content concerning: real time breaking news, news and current affairs, and entertainment. Editorial/opinion also rated highly overall. So too did the promise of interaction, for example in the form of comments and uploading photos – even if that functionality is never actually used. 75 per cent indicated they want to comment or submit content and 78 per cent enjoy opinion pieces and blogs. The ‘interactivity’ aspects of news will be discussed in more detail later.

With regards to news localities (local, national and international), national news is the most sought after type of news. Interest in local news grows with age, and possibly life stages. For example, first homeowners develop an interest in their local community, and as they age this increases. News from international sites was of less interest, but for a small group of respondents it is important.

Results indicated a need for online news in isolated communities. Someone nominated the local community paper as their favourite news site online because *“there's no delivery out here so without "online" I'm out of the loop.”* A retired respondent wrote online news is *“not good at local news.”* A home carer aged 25-39 wrote she *“can't say I have ever actually used a local online news source - maybe one exists?”* Another respondent noted: *“being regional doesn't mean a closed mind.”*

Interactivity and consumer input to news

The desire for interactivity, although not a focus of this study, came through in some comments, with a sample of comments below. A key theme was the desire by some users to add their opinions and reactions to news items *“that affect us.”* The ability to comment means *“I don't think I can ever return to hard copy sources,”* perhaps because *“it makes you feel a part of the news team”* regardless of location, and we *“can't talk back to a TV now can we?”* Another person noted the comments sections *“can quickly point out flaws in an article,”* but people adding comments may fall into *“groupthink.”*

Typologies

In addition to the findings above, three groups of respondents with similar viewpoints were clearly identified from the survey responses and these were tested and refined via focus groups. Respondents could be segmented into three typologies that we named convenience, loyal and customisers. General caveats on the use of typologies apply, for example the three categories of users are not mutually exclusive and many loyal users may also customise their use to some extent. All users enjoy an element of convenience. A summary of typologies is presented in figure one.

Figure 1: Online news consumption typologies: key themes and segments

Comparative theme (by age)	Segment		
	Convenience	Loyal	Customisers
Preferred news sources/ media/ types (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Receive 'mainstream' news by default - Special interest communities and blogs perceived as more relevant than news brands /aggregators - Use ninemsn, Google News, Wikipedia, 'comedy current affairs' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take the lead from offline media by habit (influenced by family) eg TV, newspapers, radio - Use Brisbane Times, SMH, Google News, Wikipedia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seek to customise their news access - Use aggregators, RSS feeds, blogs, Twitter, Wikipedia
Preferred news sources/ media/ types (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online niche and targeted sources eg sports results - ninemsn, Google News 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Special interest (niche) and celebrity news - Brisbane Times, ABC, Google News 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online niche, targeted and 'official' sources - car radio
Trust in news (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public broadcasters most trusted news sources on and offline - Online least trusted of all platforms but most used - Aware of news brands/ personality presenters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distinguish between citizen and professional journalism - Alert to news bias and seek multiple perspectives - Seek opinions from trustworthy authorities including parents etc - Aware of news brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wary of registration requirements for participation - Seek minimal 'red tape'
Trust in news (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accuracy, reliability and timeliness more important than brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loyal to preferred news brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intermediaries (such as news brands) are judged to be better news sources than 'horse's mouth' because they have critical/impartial perspective - Accuracy, reliability and timeliness are important
Active user characteristics (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers - Do not generally contribute to online news propagation or dissemination (eg comments or forwards) - Online news consumers by default - Not pre-disposed to engage with news media because it is not perceived to be relevant - But can seek background on stories they don't understand (eg Iraq elections) - Fast technology adopters - Do use mobiles for internet connection? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers and disseminators. However tend to disseminate with known contacts (e.g. face to face) - Slow technology adopters - Don't use mobiles to receive news because they are cost sensitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nascent news propagators and disseminators, if not already - Frustrated by road blocks to 'Web 2.0' news service eg lack of integration across social media; high non-economic exit costs of social media; need to register to participate on different news sites - Early/lead technology adopters - Do use mobiles to receive news but are cost constrained - Some online fatigue - Selective, 'cherry pick' sites
Active user characteristics (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers but do value comments /contributions of other online news users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers but do value comments /contributions of other online news users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News propagators and disseminators - Actively, blog, comment

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interested in new devices eg netbooks - Do use mobiles to receive news because cost is often borne by employer - Interested in services that make it easier to locate and access relevant news and information quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generally don't use mobiles to receive news for cost reasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and forward links - Time poor - Value mobility and are mobile users - Do use mobiles to receive news because cost is often borne by employer
Propensity to pay (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will pay for hard copy news only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceive they already pay for news via mobile phone data fees - Could pay for customisable/ personalised aggregation services
Propensity to pay (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Place a premium of currency so may pay for breaking news 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could pay for customisable/ personalised aggregation brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reluctance due to time constraints more than cost constraints

Convenience users

Convenience users usually arrive at online news sites in direct response to a mechanic such as a link that has been pushed out to them (*“it pops up”*) via a social network or email application. Convenience users constitute 60 per cent of respondents to the survey and typically they are students aged 18-24 years. They are highly active users of news sites because they are highly active email, messenger and social network users. That is, they do not seek news, it just *“pops up”* when they are online. They tend to enjoy *“short and concise,” “glossy,” “gossipy type things,” “trashy,” “weird but freaky,”* and *“glamorous”* news that is *“easily read ... without devoting too much time.”* They may use news to be *“occupied when bored,”* or seek *“mind numbing after a busy day.”* They want news that *“gets right to the point without trying to complicate the story with big words or fancy analysis,”* perhaps because they are often viewing it while social networking. A key point of differentiation is that convenience users are not tied to the news brand, for example, if their email provider defaulted to a different news provider they may not notice and secondly they would not seek out that news brand when an event occurs: *“if I hear something on the radio that interests me I’ll Google it and see what they’ve got to say,”* and *“if I log into msn or something and the little msn today pops up and there’s like an interesting link I’ll click on it, but I don’t log into the news websites myself.”* At present, online news sources most effectively reach convenience users through digital direct response communication techniques. Systematic arrangements, established in the context of partnerships with search or social network media, seem to have a significant influence on the online news consumption choices of convenience users. It appears these users do not attribute as high a value to news received by default than other users who seek it out:

Focus Group Facilitator: Thomas do you use any online news....

Thomas: No not really no.

Focus Group Facilitator: No okay

Thomas: Just the little things down the side of Facebook, the headlines. And even then I won’t click on them most of the time, I’ll just look at it and go ‘oh has that happened? Cool.’

Focus Group Facilitator: What do they link to?

Thomas: I don’t know.

Convenience users aged between 18-24 years were not interested in mainstream news. However, it was not because they have disengaged, or could be perceived as lost business, instead they have never engaged with mainstream media, and so could be perceived as an untapped opportunity. They see no need for it in their lives, it is not relevant to them. However they are active seekers and users of targeted, niche information and news, especially blogs. However they do not perceive blogs and niche sites as 'news'. When they do pay attention to mainstream news it is usually in the form of satire or comedy current affairs, such as The Chaser television series, and personality driven news.

Convenience users aged 25 years and over are also interested in niche information sites, such as sports pages. They too heavily interrelate social networks, news and email/messenger tasks and were very interested in breaking news, as a form of social currency. One person in this group commented:

I don't think we're educated enough in the products that are released by news companies... So maybe I'm just not the target audience but even the new applications that come up on your screen now that notify you of news and all that, I only worked it out that a few days ago. I thought that's great, now I can work on my web document and that pops up.

Loyal users

A second group is those who typically seek out the online version of news they receive offline. Typically, loyal users are persons aged over 24 years and comprise about 31 per cent of respondents. They were the group whose members were most likely to read physical papers and are intentional users of online news sources who are loyal to a brand, for instance the ABC or Fairfax sites. They value the quality, reputation of news entities and return to favourite online news sources out of habit or seek out the site to follow breaking news: "*news services provided by major media publishers are the most useful as their stories have been through the usual accuracy checks.*" They trust and are faithful to established news and information brands, for example when an event occurs they will go directly to that news site. They feel an allegiance to the viewpoints and opinions expressed by journalists employed by that site, because "*the authors aren't "wanna be" journalists, they know their information and how to present it to their audience.*"

While they do not necessarily want to interact with news brands they certainly value the existence of the potential to participate in shaping and communicating the core values of their preferred news brands within and beyond the brand. These users may respond to the development of brand communities around news brands. Activities such as 'citizen journalism' may be included at one end of the spectrum of brand community-building applications and activities, but more likely, this group is more interested in lower-level interactive engagements which enhance the 'stickiness' of a brand and which can occur away from the main news 'pages', such as comments on stories and uploading images. Loyal users were passive and had the lowest propensity to interact with news, but may be receptive to learning from the brand they are loyal to.

Loyal users aged between 18-24 years in our focus groups were opinionated, judgemental and saw themselves as intellectuals who critique the news:

- M: I used to read news.com.au and I can't stand it not because it is so biased and it's just...*
- F: Even the Courier Mail, it's almost dumb founded the writing, it's so....*
- F: Oh it's so dumbed down it's just like we're idiots.*
- F: I don't even bother with the Courier Mail anymore, it's just a piece of trash.*

They enjoy reading the comments to news items, but do not trust them:

I think the fact that there are so many opinions on the internet kind of weakens their value ... reading other people's opinions can be quite dangerous due to the fact that it can twist the story more than it actually is.

They are influenced by those whose opinions they respect and trust, for example their parents. Potentially they may trust the opinions of certain journalists. They are not fast adopters of new technology and are price sensitive. They tended not to email news items to friends, instead preferring to debate issues in person, for example at the dinner table with family.

The bulk of loyal users were aged over 24 years and were more comfortable with new technologies than their younger counterparts, although in many cases their employer paid for their technology use. Like those aged under 25 years, they enjoy reading user comments on news sites for entertainment and perhaps to confirm their intellectualism: "*there are some stupid people in this country,*" but have little desire to interact with the news. This group had the highest propensity to pay for certain types of online news, perhaps because they: are time poor; want a trustworthy news service that filters out the noise of the internet; and their employer may pay for their technology use. It is worth noting here that both case study sites are owned by Fairfax Media, and this may explain the self-perceived intellectualism of the loyal users in this study.

Customising users

Our final typology is 'customising' users, who are 'lead edge' users of news applications. Typically, this group of users is professionals aged over 24 years and it comprised only about 9 per cent of respondents. They are highly active online and interactive news users. They believe "*access is completely customisable*" and they get what they want when they want it. They are not loyal to any one brand, instead they cherry pick news items across sources. In this segment we noticed emerging signs of information fatigue, with mention made about the high exit costs from social media, including the time invested in developing skills on each platform and the time and knowledge needed for product migration, for example from Myspace to Facebook to Twitter. They also emphasised a preference for minimal 'red tape' when using sites and were irritated by multimedia advertisements (when not using advertisement blocking software). One person mentioned:

I like that I can get specialised information, so I can get sent to me exactly what I want, I don't have to waste lots of time trying to find what I want to find and I like that I can do it quickly. I don't really want to spend any more time on the computer, I don't really, so I probably don't want to look at websites.

Customising users are distinguished from loyal users by their active engagement and interest in automating and customising the process of pulling news from a variety of sources, and interacting, manipulating and spreading it across their social networks. They tend to favour

RSS feeds, news aggregators and may also be early adopters of mobile platforms for receiving and contributing to news. They manage their online identity actively and may also make use of brand community tools, especially if they support the ‘spreadability’ of the customising user’s online identity, as well as aggregation in the brand community. For example, social media-style user profiles may consolidate information about media consumption habits, and customised media streams from a variety of sources might be aggregated and controlled by the end-user. Like loyal users, customising users may have significant value as brand promotion agents in social networks. For the purpose of Audience Market Foresight research they are also potentially important sources of insight into lead user behaviours in relation to the development on online news and information services.

Customisers aged under 25 years were technically savvy explorers with a strong interest in specialised and targeted news. Comments included:

the news consumer must be vigilant in delving deeper to discover the truth, ... I want something that’s a bit more targeted. I tend to pick and choose you know, it’s too broad otherwise, there’s too much noise, ... if you’re careful you can build a really good network of people who see things in a similar way. If not you can get it real noisy and people yelling and stuff.

A key difference between age groups is that younger customisers seek free material that is useful to them and convenient. They were platform neutral in their resistance to pay.

Customisers aged over 24 years were difficult to attract to our focus groups, perhaps because they are time poor. They do however invest time in personalising their news content and delivery to increase their news experience and filter out unwanted news. They actively blog, comment and link to multimedia news. As with loyal users, older customising users value mobility and several use mobile phones for news and the costs are borne by their employers.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that online news users still face technical barriers and pricing confusion in Australia. For example: we heard several examples of ‘horror’ mobile phone bills and data cap fears; onerous ‘red tape’ such as site registration requirements and content contribution restrictions (time delays between content contribution and public availability); and misuse of personal details (spam lists) from study participants. This hinders the takeup of online news innovations, especially via mobile devices. Consumers also need to be educated in emerging news platforms, such as aggregators and newsfeeds. However consumer use of news is evolving quickly, and frequently in non-traditional areas that may not have been foreseeable in recent history, such as a desire to comment on news and Twitter. While we find little support for payment options, there may be other factors that need consideration (for example would people pay for specialist rather than generalist news content, such as AFL sport, home renovations or local event news?). Regardless, a third of participants in this study remain loyal to the online offerings of news brands they are familiar with offline, although many can be typified as slow adopters and passive users. It is worth noting here that our sample base was limited to South East Queensland users and young adults nationwide, and so findings are not nationally representative.

A summary of the typologies is presented in Figure one, and this segmentation may assist online news entities to understand the different types of consumers. Although these

typologies are generalisations, they may be applied to segment the market, and secondly to identify which segment a media provider may target based upon the characteristics of their media offering (cost, brand etc.). A possible further study may explore strategies to target selected segments, which ultimately may improve customer loyalty.

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‘User Behaviours and Intentions in Digital Media in Australia’

Paper for the Communications Policy & Research Forum
19 + 20 November 2009, University of Technology, Sydney

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a study of user behaviours and intentions towards online news and information in Australia, undertaken by the Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Faculty and the Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre. It has used a literature review, online survey, focus groups and interviews to explore attitudes and behaviours towards online news and information.

The literature review on consumer user of online media highlighted emerging technical opportunities, and flagged existing barriers to access experienced by consumers in the Australian digital media sector. The literature review highlighted multiple disconnects between consumer interests in online news and their ability to fulfil them. This presents an opportunity for news entities to appraise and resolve. Doing so may enhance their service offering, attract consumers and improve loyalty. These themes were further explored by the survey.

The survey results revealed three typologies of user, described as ‘convenience’, ‘loyal’ and ‘customising’. Convenience users tend to access news by default, for example when they log out of email. Loyal users seek out a trusted brand such as mainstream news mastheads. Customising users tend to tailor news to their preferences, and be the first to use leading edge media. Respondents to the survey were then invited to participate in focus groups, which aimed to test the survey results.

Consumer perceptions and attitudes are important factors in progression towards an information economy, because ultimately consumers are customers. By segmenting the online news market according to customer typology, media providers may identify new opportunities to attract and retain customers.

Rationale

The rise of social media and the participative web have challenged traditional news entities. Challenges include content innovations that favour new entrants, decentralised creativity, organisational innovation and value-adding models (OECD 2007). New forms of competition for consumer time have empowered consumers to increasingly demand interaction with online content, for example via ‘produsage’ (Bruns 2008). Confusion exists over the use of news online by young adults in Australia, for example, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) claim online news, sports and weather is not a priority to 18-34 year olds. Those aged under 34 are least likely of the age groups to use the internet for news / info services and prefer entertainment online (ACMA 2008). However it may be that young adults do view news but consider it entertainment. Media content has disaggregated across platforms and “it is the loss of control over the format and timing of information that poses the true challenge to traditional media” (Miel and Faris, 2008: 5). These issues were explored in a literature review completed as phase one of this project.

To find a path through the rapid velocity of change in the digital media sector, it pays to focus on the needs and experiences of the end consumer. What are the expectations and attitudes of online news consumers today? How do the expectations and behaviors of young adults differ to older generations? Online news use is evolving rapidly and so a ‘pulse check’ of consumer

behaviors and perceptions towards online news and information is warranted in order to tailor services that meet user expectations and build loyalty.

Literature review

Key themes identified in the literature review included:

1. Mainstream news is perceived to be of little interest by the 18-30 year old age segment;
2. News from traditional media 'competes' with bloggers;
3. Trusted news mastheads continue to be important to consumers, especially those aged over 24 years, and during critical events (for example, bushfires);
4. Opportunities for online news in the local community exist.

Multiple disconnects exist between:

1. Changing user intentions towards online and location based news and information;
2. The ability by consumers to act on these intentions via the availability and cost of technologies; and
3. Current online offerings of traditional news providers and opportunities.

These disconnects present an opportunity for online news entities to appraise and resolve. Doing so may enhance their online offering, attract consumers and improve loyalty. We next wanted to test these findings with consumers.

Methodology

This study specifically concerned users of online news, and so was framed by a case study of two sites that are only available online with no print counterpart, namely the Brisbane Times (a city news site), and the Vine (a national site aimed at 18-29 year olds). The study involved three phases: a literature review, survey and focus groups. The literature review identified questions that were further explored by the survey.

To fit with our case study the target demographic included people aged over eighteen years living in South East Queensland and secondly, young adults nationwide. The survey was advertised on publicly available websites that targeted this demographic and a variety of social chatboards aimed at either southeast Queensland or the national young adult demographic. It was promoted heavily to Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Faculty students, many who may represent lead users for the 18-24 year segment.

The survey received 524 completed responses. A close alignment between survey respondents and the target groups (age and location) was achieved. Respondents to the survey were then invited to participate in focus groups that aimed to test and refine our survey findings. A total of 54 attendees participated in focus groups over four days, with roughly eight persons in each group. The groups were segmented beforehand by age and typology. Attendees participated in an hour discussion, with the general aim being to test our typologies. Follow up emails and conversations were held with non-metropolitan based respondents who were unable to attend the focus groups.

This study focussed on two online only sites and used respondents aged over eighteen years, so findings are not a complete national representation. A bias is inbuilt because it included an online survey, so it may be assumed that respondents are comfortable with online sources. Some direct quotes used in this paper have been edited to correct spelling and grammar. The study findings will now be discussed.

How news is accessed

The survey respondents access news most often in the home, and via wireless broadband/wi-fi or cable broadband. The findings generally correlate with the ACMA (2008) survey of internet usage so will not be expanded upon in detail here. Lack of speed on sites remains an issue, but less an issue than expected. Some may *”read the news perhaps whilst another page loads or I am waiting for something to download.”* Another mentioned news sites are *“only useful if they are not massive video files. I can't stand waiting for a short story to load.”* Someone nominated a preference for the text version of a news site because its full media version runs slowly and is *“ad infested.”*

Which news sources are most reliable? Online news reliance generally skews towards the younger segment while those who rely on newspapers skew older. Age is an important indicator of media preferences: radio is the second preference of the 55+ year age group, but all other age segments prefer newspapers. Relying upon news received from conversations is preferred to physical newspapers by 18-24 year olds whereas none of the other age segments rely on news via conversations. It appears that family and friends (social networks) were not valued for these qualities. Magazines were the least favoured for reliability, relevance and accuracy of news and information. Someone mentioned the synergy between mediums: *“as soon as I hear something on the radio I can follow it up online.”* Someone noted online is *“generally not for detailed analysis of events - newspapers, blogs, and current affairs programs provide more detail than real-time news sources,”* which indicates the person distinguishes between online news brands and blogs. -However another commented online is *“not just a 30 sec grab like radio.”*

28 per cent of respondents across age groups considered mobile devices their least preferred way to access online news, and 36 per cent have never tried it. This reported low interest in news via mobile devices needs further analysis. It may simply be due to a lack of awareness, which is correlated by the ‘never tried’ result. One person commented online news is *“quickly becoming more mobile as well so that increases the convenience.”* Increased consumption of news via mobiles may be an opportunity to deepen the penetration of news services, and improve the convenience and speed of news, thereby enhancing the consumer experience.

The survey asked if and why online news is preferred. Responses revealed the following patterns:

- It is fast and current
- It is convenient
- It contains links to relevant sites
- It can search multiple sources simultaneously to get multiple viewpoints
- It contains multimedia – video, audio, photos and text.

A key comment that summarised why online news is a preferred medium was that it is:

quick to access and you can read about an issue from various points of view, both local and international, from different political points of view and personal points of view as this varies between journalists. Also, you can read about a topic across various genres that might treat it with varying levels of formality, depth etc. This

enables the development of a more well-rounded opinion and can also let you tailor what you read to your mood, level of interest etc.

Content

In contrast to other news content, for local news consumers were more likely to rely upon friends and family: 19 per cent rely upon friends and 13 per cent rely upon online sources. The 13 per cent who rely upon online sources may live in inner urban areas, where online sources are more prevalent. At least 68 per cent of respondents go to a news/information site to maintain currency with world events. 19 per cent want entertainment, gossip, lifestyle events and/or sports information. However several cautioned they perceive some news sites simply process media releases: *“they are very hit and miss, almost as if the article came straight off a press release,”* or *“they usually are puff pieces.”* Several respondents have trust issues, either relying on online news as a starting point only, or fearing the information is *“made up”* or is advertorial.

Do consumers rely upon known brands or mastheads in their selection of news?

71 per cent agreed they tend to use online news and information services that are also associated with other news media (paper, television etc.). 84 per cent of respondents firstly go to a news site home page before clicking on something of interest, as opposed to going directly to a specific part of the site or going via a newsfeed or email. It suggests the importance of the site homepage, especially when users are directed automatically to that home page when signing out of email or social network sites, for example as happens with ninemsn.

The perceived quality of online news is a persistent issue, or *“I haven't gotten past the taboo of internet information.”* Consumers need news they can trust, as seen in comments relating to trust above. Many respondents understand the dichotomy between news currency and accuracy, for example: *“They're extremely useful because of their immediacy, but that aspect also makes them less accurate. The more immediate, the less easily verified.”* But *“if it is from the right site, then the news is trustworthy and credible.”* Whether news sites with a long history and established brand are a positive or negative factor in relation to trust was unclear. Results showed the ABC and BBC enjoy a strong brand and reputation. In the focus groups many young adults mentioned seeking news via Google and Wikipedia.

Making online news choices

A question arising from ACMA (2008) data was whether and why younger users (aged 18-24) access news online. Responses indicated 18-24 year olds access news most often out of habit (33 per cent) and/or by default (23 per cent): *“It gives me a brief summary of the top stories, before I check my Hotmail.”* However they do seek out event driven news (28 per cent), suggesting these choices may relate to social events. 37 per cent of respondents aged 18-24 years nominated Facebook as their favourite website. Someone commented that the Courier Mail was their favourite news site because of an *“easy link to Facebook to share articles.”*

The high proportion of respondents who have never accessed news via a mobile device has been noted, however 12 per cent currently access news via their mobile most often, and 27 per cent said they sometimes access news via a mobile device. This may indicate that those who have tried news via mobile devices continue to do so. The iPhone featured at least three times as a reason why particular sites are a favourite, for example news.com.au was someone's favourite news site because it is "*easy to use on my iPhone.*" Mobile news users may have mobile plans paid by their employer. This segment may respond favourably to brand marketing of news on mobile devices.

Only a small proportion of users mentioned RSS feeds and news aggregators, and this may be due to a lack of awareness of these tools in the wider community. Those who do use aggregators indicated they are easier and more comprehensive, however someone cautioned that they too have drawbacks. These include: information overload; they need to be monitored regularly; information irrelevance; they may slow the computer processing speed; are generally not platform neutral (for example via mobile phones, but Google iReader can be accessed from any computer); and other compatibility and technical issues.

Favourite sites

News sites that are linked to email (ninemsn, yahoo news etc.) were nominated by 29 per cent of respondents as their favourite sites. Ninemsn was clearly the most favourite online news site and this will be discussed in the next section. The ABC has one of the strongest online Australian brands and it was noted for its "*independent journalism,*" "*higher quality news,*" for being "*close to politically neutral,*" with "*objective, informative, non-sensationalised news*" and "*no advertising or flash!*" Those who nominated the Brisbane Times as their favourite news site mentioned a key strength was its local content coverage. Overseas news brands (BBC, Sina, New York Times, CNN etc.) comprised 6 per cent of favourite news sites, with the BBC featuring heavily for "*the best non-partial news service on the web, and because it has a large physical news service behind it,*" and its innovative iPlayer tool.

iGoogle was also praised, despite aggregators not featuring highly in awareness: "*Google reader is a simply way to keep track of all of my favourite sites, blogs and other resources, and therefore my MOST favourite!*" Twitter appeared in four responses as the favourite news site, however they may have been referring to news sites accessed via Twitter, for example <http://twitter.com/nytimes> was a favourite site. A key benefit of Twitter was that it combines feeds from "*my friends, favourite celebrities and even news sites!*" Another noted their Twitter community "*is a great judge of important news, if my followers link something, it's probably relevant.*"

News and email

Of those who nominated ninemsn as their favourite news site, 84 per cent were aged between 18-24 years. The high percentage of email related sites nominated as favourite news sites may reflect users who access news by default, that is, when they log out of email sites they are automatically redirected to it, or it appears onscreen while they are on social network sites. The 'stickiness' of online news seems to be on par with their addiction to online social activities:

I don't usually go searching for news. However, I am an avid user of Hotmail!!! and yeah the thingy just shows up whenever I sign on and it somehow gets me interested in it.

This will be discussed in more detail later.

The relevance of online news

Respondents overwhelmingly believed they spend most time online looking at content concerning: real time breaking news, news and current affairs, and entertainment. Editorial/opinion also rated highly overall. So too did the promise of interaction, for example in the form of comments and uploading photos – even if that functionality is never actually used. 75 per cent indicated they want to comment or submit content and 78 per cent enjoy opinion pieces and blogs. The ‘interactivity’ aspects of news will be discussed in more detail later.

With regards to news localities (local, national and international), national news is the most sought after type of news. Interest in local news grows with age, and possibly life stages. For example, first homeowners develop an interest in their local community, and as they age this increases. News from international sites was of less interest, but for a small group of respondents it is important.

Results indicated a need for online news in isolated communities. Someone nominated the local community paper as their favourite news site online because *“there's no delivery out here so without "online" I'm out of the loop.”* A retired respondent wrote online news is *“not good at local news.”* A home carer aged 25-39 wrote she *“can't say I have ever actually used a local online news source - maybe one exists?”* Another respondent noted: *“being regional doesn't mean a closed mind.”*

Interactivity and consumer input to news

The desire for interactivity, although not a focus of this study, came through in some comments, with a sample of comments below. A key theme was the desire by some users to add their opinions and reactions to news items *“that affect us.”* The ability to comment means *“I don't think I can ever return to hard copy sources,”* perhaps because *“it makes you feel a part of the news team”* regardless of location, and we *“can't talk back to a TV now can we?”* Another person noted the comments sections *“can quickly point out flaws in an article,”* but people adding comments may fall into *“groupthink.”*

Typologies

In addition to the findings above, three groups of respondents with similar viewpoints were clearly identified from the survey responses and these were tested and refined via focus groups. Respondents could be segmented into three typologies that we named convenience, loyal and customisers. General caveats on the use of typologies apply, for example the three categories of users are not mutually exclusive and many loyal users may also customise their use to some extent. All users enjoy an element of convenience. A summary of typologies is presented in figure one.

Figure 1: Online news consumption typologies: key themes and segments

Comparative theme (by age)	Segment		
	Convenience	Loyal	Customisers
Preferred news sources/ media/ types (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Receive 'mainstream' news by default - Special interest communities and blogs perceived as more relevant than news brands /aggregators - Use ninemsn, Google News, Wikipedia, 'comedy current affairs' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take the lead from offline media by habit (influenced by family) eg TV, newspapers, radio - Use Brisbane Times, SMH, Google News, Wikipedia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seek to customise their news access - Use aggregators, RSS feeds, blogs, Twitter, Wikipedia
Preferred news sources/ media/ types (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online niche and targeted sources eg sports results - ninemsn, Google News 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Special interest (niche) and celebrity news - Brisbane Times, ABC, Google News 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online niche, targeted and 'official' sources - car radio
Trust in news (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public broadcasters most trusted news sources on and offline - Online least trusted of all platforms but most used - Aware of news brands/ personality presenters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distinguish between citizen and professional journalism - Alert to news bias and seek multiple perspectives - Seek opinions from trustworthy authorities including parents etc - Aware of news brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wary of registration requirements for participation - Seek minimal 'red tape'
Trust in news (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accuracy, reliability and timeliness more important than brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loyal to preferred news brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intermediaries (such as news brands) are judged to be better news sources than 'horse's mouth' because they have critical/impartial perspective - Accuracy, reliability and timeliness are important
Active user characteristics (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers - Do not generally contribute to online news propagation or dissemination (eg comments or forwards) - Online news consumers by default - Not pre-disposed to engage with news media because it is not perceived to be relevant - But can seek background on stories they don't understand (eg Iraq elections) - Fast technology adopters - Do use mobiles for internet connection? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers and disseminators. However tend to disseminate with known contacts (e.g. face to face) - Slow technology adopters - Don't use mobiles to receive news because they are cost sensitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nascent news propagators and disseminators, if not already - Frustrated by road blocks to 'Web 2.0' news service eg lack of integration across social media; high non-economic exit costs of social media; need to register to participate on different news sites - Early/lead technology adopters - Do use mobiles to receive news but are cost constrained - Some online fatigue - Selective, 'cherry pick' sites
Active user characteristics (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers but do value comments /contributions of other online news users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News takers but do value comments /contributions of other online news users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News propagators and disseminators - Actively, blog, comment

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interested in new devices eg netbooks - Do use mobiles to receive news because cost is often borne by employer - Interested in services that make it easier to locate and access relevant news and information quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generally don't use mobiles to receive news for cost reasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and forward links - Time poor - Value mobility and are mobile users - Do use mobiles to receive news because cost is often borne by employer
Propensity to pay (18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will pay for hard copy news only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceive they already pay for news via mobile phone data fees - Could pay for customisable/ personalised aggregation services
Propensity to pay (25+)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Place a premium of currency so may pay for breaking news 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could pay for customisable/ personalised aggregation brands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reluctance due to time constraints more than cost constraints

Convenience users

Convenience users usually arrive at online news sites in direct response to a mechanic such as a link that has been pushed out to them (“*it pops up*”) via a social network or email application. Convenience users constitute 60 per cent of respondents to the survey and typically they are students aged 18-24 years. They are highly active users of news sites because they are highly active email, messenger and social network users. That is, they do not seek news, it just “*pops up*” when they are online. They tend to enjoy “*short and concise,*” “*glossy,*” “*gossipy type things,*” “*trashy,*” “*weird but freaky,*” and “*glamorous*” news that is “*easily read ... without devoting too much time.*” They may use news to be “*occupied when bored,*” or seek “*mind numbing after a busy day.*” They want news that “*gets right to the point without trying to complicate the story with big words or fancy analysis,*” perhaps because they are often viewing it while social networking. A key point of differentiation is that convenience users are not tied to the news brand, for example, if their email provider defaulted to a different news provider they may not notice and secondly they would not seek out that news brand when an event occurs: “*if I hear something on the radio that interests me I’ll Google it and see what they’ve got to say,*” and “*if I log into msn or something and the little msn today pops up and there’s like an interesting link I’ll click on it, but I don’t log into the news websites myself.*” At present, online news sources most effectively reach convenience users through digital direct response communication techniques. Systematic arrangements, established in the context of partnerships with search or social network media, seem to have a significant influence on the online news consumption choices of convenience users. It appears these users do not attribute as high a value to news received by default than other users who seek it out:

Focus Group Facilitator: Thomas do you use any online news....

Thomas: No not really no.

Focus Group Facilitator: No okay

Thomas: Just the little things down the side of Facebook, the headlines. And even then I won’t click on them most of the time, I’ll just look at it and go ‘oh has that happened? Cool.’

Focus Group Facilitator: What do they link to?

Thomas: I don’t know.

Convenience users aged between 18-24 years were not interested in mainstream news. However, it was not because they have disengaged, or could be perceived as lost business, instead they have never engaged with mainstream media, and so could be perceived as an untapped opportunity. They see no need for it in their lives, it is not relevant to them. However they are active seekers and users of targeted, niche information and news, especially blogs. However they do not perceive blogs and niche sites as 'news'. When they do pay attention to mainstream news it is usually in the form of satire or comedy current affairs, such as The Chaser television series, and personality driven news.

Convenience users aged 25 years and over are also interested in niche information sites, such as sports pages. They too heavily interrelate social networks, news and email/messenger tasks and were very interested in breaking news, as a form of social currency. One person in this group commented:

I don't think we're educated enough in the products that are released by news companies... So maybe I'm just not the target audience but even the new applications that come up on your screen now that notify you of news and all that, I only worked it out that a few days ago. I thought that's great, now I can work on my web document and that pops up.

Loyal users

A second group is those who typically seek out the online version of news they receive offline. Typically, loyal users are persons aged over 24 years and comprise about 31 per cent of respondents. They were the group whose members were most likely to read physical papers and are intentional users of online news sources who are loyal to a brand, for instance the ABC or Fairfax sites. They value the quality, reputation of news entities and return to favourite online news sources out of habit or seek out the site to follow breaking news: "*news services provided by major media publishers are the most useful as their stories have been through the usual accuracy checks.*" They trust and are faithful to established news and information brands, for example when an event occurs they will go directly to that news site. They feel an allegiance to the viewpoints and opinions expressed by journalists employed by that site, because "*the authors aren't "wanna be" journalists, they know their information and how to present it to their audience.*"

While they do not necessarily want to interact with news brands they certainly value the existence of the potential to participate in shaping and communicating the core values of their preferred news brands within and beyond the brand. These users may respond to the development of brand communities around news brands. Activities such as 'citizen journalism' may be included at one end of the spectrum of brand community-building applications and activities, but more likely, this group is more interested in lower-level interactive engagements which enhance the 'stickiness' of a brand and which can occur away from the main news 'pages', such as comments on stories and uploading images. Loyal users were passive and had the lowest propensity to interact with news, but may be receptive to learning from the brand they are loyal to.

Loyal users aged between 18-24 years in our focus groups were opinionated, judgemental and saw themselves as intellectuals who critique the news:

M: I used to read news.com.au and I can't stand it not because it is so biased and it's just...

F: Even the Courier Mail, it's almost dumb founded the writing, it's so....

F: Oh it's so dumbed down it's just like we're idiots.

F: I don't even bother with the Courier Mail anymore, it's just a piece of trash.

They enjoy reading the comments to news items, but do not trust them:

I think the fact that there are so many opinions on the internet kind of weakens their value ... reading other people's opinions can be quite dangerous due to the fact that it can twist the story more than it actually is.

They are influenced by those whose opinions they respect and trust, for example their parents. Potentially they may trust the opinions of certain journalists. They are not fast adopters of new technology and are price sensitive. They tended not to email news items to friends, instead preferring to debate issues in person, for example at the dinner table with family.

The bulk of loyal users were aged over 24 years and were more comfortable with new technologies than their younger counterparts, although in many cases their employer paid for their technology use. Like those aged under 25 years, they enjoy reading user comments on news sites for entertainment and perhaps to confirm their intellectualism: "*there are some stupid people in this country,*" but have little desire to interact with the news. This group had the highest propensity to pay for certain types of online news, perhaps because they: are time poor; want a trustworthy news service that filters out the noise of the internet; and their employer may pay for their technology use. It is worth noting here that both case study sites are owned by Fairfax Media, and this may explain the self-perceived intellectualism of the loyal users in this study.

Customising users

Our final typology is 'customising' users, who are 'lead edge' users of news applications. Typically, this group of users is professionals aged over 24 years and it comprised only about 9 per cent of respondents. They are highly active online and interactive news users. They believe "*access is completely customisable*" and they get what they want when they want it. They are not loyal to any one brand, instead they cherry pick news items across sources. In this segment we noticed emerging signs of information fatigue, with mention made about the high exit costs from social media, including the time invested in developing skills on each platform and the time and knowledge needed for product migration, for example from Myspace to Facebook to Twitter. They also emphasised a preference for minimal 'red tape' when using sites and were irritated by multimedia advertisements (when not using advertisement blocking software). One person mentioned:

I like that I can get specialised information, so I can get sent to me exactly what I want, I don't have to waste lots of time trying to find what I want to find and I like that I can do it quickly. I don't really want to spend any more time on the computer, I don't really, so I probably don't want to look at websites.

Customising users are distinguished from loyal users by their active engagement and interest in automating and customising the process of pulling news from a variety of sources, and interacting, manipulating and spreading it across their social networks. They tend to favour

RSS feeds, news aggregators and may also be early adopters of mobile platforms for receiving and contributing to news. They manage their online identity actively and may also make use of brand community tools, especially if they support the ‘spreadability’ of the customising user’s online identity, as well as aggregation in the brand community. For example, social media-style user profiles may consolidate information about media consumption habits, and customised media streams from a variety of sources might be aggregated and controlled by the end-user. Like loyal users, customising users may have significant value as brand promotion agents in social networks. For the purpose of Audience Market Foresight research they are also potentially important sources of insight into lead user behaviours in relation to the development on online news and information services.

Customisers aged under 25 years were technically savvy explorers with a strong interest in specialised and targeted news. Comments included:

the news consumer must be vigilant in delving deeper to discover the truth, ... I want something that’s a bit more targeted. I tend to pick and choose you know, it’s too broad otherwise, there’s too much noise, ... if you’re careful you can build a really good network of people who see things in a similar way. If not you can get it real noisy and people yelling and stuff.

A key difference between age groups is that younger customisers seek free material that is useful to them and convenient. They were platform neutral in their resistance to pay.

Customisers aged over 24 years were difficult to attract to our focus groups, perhaps because they are time poor. They do however invest time in personalising their news content and delivery to increase their news experience and filter out unwanted news. They actively blog, comment and link to multimedia news. As with loyal users, older customising users value mobility and several use mobile phones for news and the costs are borne by their employers.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that online news users still face technical barriers and pricing confusion in Australia. For example: we heard several examples of ‘horror’ mobile phone bills and data cap fears; onerous ‘red tape’ such as site registration requirements and content contribution restrictions (time delays between content contribution and public availability); and misuse of personal details (spam lists) from study participants. This hinders the takeup of online news innovations, especially via mobile devices. Consumers also need to be educated in emerging news platforms, such as aggregators and newsfeeds. However consumer use of news is evolving quickly, and frequently in non-traditional areas that may not have been foreseeable in recent history, such as a desire to comment on news and Twitter. While we find little support for payment options, there may be other factors that need consideration (for example would people pay for specialist rather than generalist news content, such as AFL sport, home renovations or local event news?). Regardless, a third of participants in this study remain loyal to the online offerings of news brands they are familiar with offline, although many can be typified as slow adopters and passive users. It is worth noting here that our sample base was limited to South East Queensland users and young adults nationwide, and so findings are not nationally representative.

A summary of the typologies is presented in Figure one, and this segmentation may assist online news entities to understand the different types of consumers. Although these

typologies are generalisations, they may be applied to segment the market, and secondly to identify which segment a media provider may target based upon the characteristics of their media offering (cost, brand etc.). A possible further study may explore strategies to target selected segments, which ultimately may improve customer loyalty.

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