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What Makes News Online: A New Zealand Perspective

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Abstract

The digital revolution has had far-reaching implications for the news media. The Internet has influenced how, where, and when citizens get news. It has added another element of competition between news providers, one that is not restricted by geographical boundaries. The ensuing attempts by news producers to increase, establish, and maintain a loyal readership online have been linked to an increase in tabloid and sensationalist news content (Fox & Gangl, 2011). Further, the fragmentation of the media landscape as a result of online news requires the media both to reconsider its position as the stalwart upholder of objectivity and to rethink its democratic watchdog role (Mancini, 2013).

Additionally, studies have shown that readers of news online are increasingly selecting soft news stories (Tewksbury 2002; van Heekeren 2005; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Several authors (Iyengar & Hahn, 2011; Sunstein, 2002; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010) have expressed concern that this trend will lead to a poorly informed public unless news providers embrace the participatory potential of the Internet to foster meaningful debate on issues of importance. The concerns raised by previous research formed the background of this study.

This mixed method inquiry considered three New Zealand news websites operated by newspaper organisation – the *Otago Daily Times* and the *Timaru Herald*, which are regionally based, and *Stuff* a national provider. Content analysis was used to find out what stories website readers were interested in and what story topics were being

promoted to online readers. Interviews were also conducted with the editors responsible for the websites' online coverage to canvas their views on the New Zealand digital news sphere.

This thesis found that lead news online was dominated by crime and softer news topics, particularly on the *Stuff* site. It also found readers "top five" news choices were similarly dominated by crime and softer news topics. However, analysis of the geographic sources of the stories also indicates the value and demand for local news focussed on local issues, particularly from regional websites.

Interviews with the editors of the three websites point to the difficulties faced by news organisations, particularly as regards resourcing the web and the ability to provide a true participatory news environment within financial constraints. Ultimately, because news providers and readers more often select news topics related to entertainment rather than to information, the online news environment, as it is currently heading, is unlikely to fulfil the hopes of democratic engagement. While the provision and uptake of local news is an encouraging sign, the news choices citizens make suggest a full reliance on online content is unlikely to produce the informed citizenry envisaged by internet optimists.

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