Technology and News: How are Choices Changing the Way Americans get Their News?

Mary Eileen Lyon Cleary

Grand Valley State University

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Technology and News:

How are Choices Changing the Way Americans get Their News?

A thesis submitted

by

Mary Eileen Lyon Cleary

To

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the
degree of

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Mary Eileen Lyon Cleary

ENTITLED Technology and News: How are Choices Changing the Way Americans get Their News?

AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMMUNICATION
Abstract

This study examines the on-going research into where Americans get their information about news events. The vehicles that news consumers use drive many markets and news coverage itself. Readers, listeners and viewers are not only choosing a media vehicle; they are also choosing who will advertise on and support those media outlets. Demographics play a role in determining which media vehicles are turned to for everyday news events, crisis information or political events and analysis. Those demographics can in turn influence the events covered by the media. Media outlets will cover what people want to see or hear so advertisers will pay for the coverage and contribute to the bottom line. The audiences are fractured because technology is changing, expanding and providing more choices than ever before. The analysis of studies, memoirs and interviews shows that the news consumers and the news providers are plunging ahead together, unevenly at times, but in a constant dance that will continue to evolve with the growing options for disseminating information. The Internet is playing a much larger role even with the older media such as newspapers. Weblogs are having a major impact in delivering information and dissecting large media outlets. The speed of some news delivery is challenging the standards of accuracy. What has remained very steady through this sea of change is Americans’ appetite for news.
Acknowledgement

This research paper is dedicated to my mother for instilling a quest for learning about the past and for obtaining facts about current events. I am indebted to my entire family, especially my four children, for allowing the time spent in academic pursuit and for their constant encouragement. I must thank Michael Pritchard, academic advisor at Grand Valley State University, for his support and guidance.
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Chapter I

Introduction

Background

Americans want their news quickly and they want it to be accurate. They have never had more choices in news vehicles. The general public can click a television remote or click a computer mouse. People can choose cable, network or local news or they can choose all those outlets’ Internet news sites. They can open a newspaper or a news magazine. They can check any number of Internet bloggers. Some who write Weblogs got credentialed for the Republican and Democratic conventions for the first time in 2004.

Researchers find that all these choices, coupled with a fast-paced lifestyle, are changing the way Americans stay informed. There is round-the-clock availability of news. Cable news outlets provide news content 24/7, and the Internet even provides news to those who are not necessarily looking for it. Pew Research Center surveys show that education also makes a difference in how people choose a news source. Men and women make different choices. Age makes a difference in the source people choose to find out about political elections, homeland security, the war in Iraq or catastrophic events such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina.

There are people who seek what researchers and journalists call “hard” news. There are those who regularly fit news into their schedules. There are those who “graze” and “check-in” on news events. These groups use different sources for their news, and may even use the same source differently.

News consumers are continually changing the way media provide content. The Internet and the possibilities of weaving the old with the new media has the attention of the
bean counters and the journalists, the veterans of the news delivery and content and the young people who are beginning to write the early history of news on the Web.

Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, writes in a commentary published with a 2005 survey by the Pew Research Center:

“In time, we may need to see TV and print as a way to attract audiences to the new core business — the Internet. Those companies that fail to do this will lose out” (p. 15).

For the businesses, it is about survival; for the news consumer, it is about convenience and accuracy.

Statement of the Problem

Owners and operators of media outlets of all kinds know that the vehicle must meet the demands of news consumers to be valued. New technologies and generations are constantly redefining those demands and what it takes to be valued. A panel of media experts met in October, 2004 to talk about news delivery. The Associated Press reported on its Managing Editors conference stating that, “Old-fashioned journalism will not become obsolete in the Internet age, but newspapers will have to change or might not fare as well, a panel of media experts said Saturday” (Associated Press, October 17, 2004, p. D4).

In the technology chain, newspapers were followed by news broadcast on the radio. The first political conventions aired on radio were in 1924; the first time the Republican and Democratic conventions were broadcast on television was in 1952 (Lee, 2004). Veteran news anchor, Walter Cronkite writes in his biography, A Reporter’s Life:

Those 1952 conventions were a brief moment of glory in television’s infancy before the politicians discovered its vast potential and set out to master it. For the first time
millions of Americans saw democracy in action – as it chose its presidential candidates (Cronkite, 1996, p. 179).

The advent of television not only provided news consumers with another choice, it also had an effect on news makers. Cronkite (1996) maintains that the mere presence of television cameras influenced politics right from the start and even inspired Theodore H. White to write *The Making of the President* in 1960, a book about the election of John F. Kennedy.

Broadcast television did not do away with newspapers or radio as some prognosticators at the time said, rather it made way for a more versatile and accommodating cousin: cable TV. News options are available 24/7 on cable television. Political junkies can watch gavel-to-gavel coverage of the U.S. Congress on the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, commonly referred to as C-SPAN. Its Web site states that it was organized as a not-for-profit company and built one of Washington, D.C.’s first satellite uplinks (c-span.org). C-SPAN delivered the first televised session of the House of Representatives to more than 3 million households in March of 1979. C-SPAN.org (2004) reports that today more than 86 million households are able to watch C-SPAN’s flagship network. News viewers can have their pick from a plethora of cable news networks including CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and CNBC.

When people are not reading a newspaper or channel surfing, perhaps they are tethered to their desks and their personal computers. They have news options there as well. A June 2004 survey by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that while other media trends are flat, the steady growth in audience for online news is remarkable, and the audience is becoming more diverse. Not only can those interested in using the Internet as
a news source go to all the newspaper and broadcast and cable television Web sites for their online versions, but they can go to blog sites. “Blogs” are Weblogs and “bloggers” are the writers who fill the Web diaries with, well, anything they may want. Peter Hartlaub writes a critique of the bloggers in the San Francisco Chronicle:

Don’t read blogs or even know what a blog is? For the most part, you’re not missing much. Every Weblog hosted by a good writer who can type an interesting account of their day (such as Wilwheaton.net) is matched by 100 that constantly hit up readers for money, link any article that predicts a bright future for Web logs and name-drop other sites that do the same thing (2004, p. E1).

Bloggers got a leg up in credibility in 2004 when some of them were given credentials to cover the Republican and Democratic political conventions. They also got credit for uncovering a major error in reporting by CBS News in the fall of 2004 involving a memo that turned out to be a fake; it claimed President Bush got special treatment in the National Guard (Klam, 2004).

The entrée of bloggers into the conventions came as the major television networks cut back on their live coverage of what Richard Benedetto of Gannet News called “little more than weeklong, made-for-TV infomercials and pep rallies for the party, its candidates and its luminaries” (Rosen, 2004, p. A54).

Lee Michael Katz reported in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that “unless Paris Hilton replaces Dan Rather at the CBS News anchor desk, Republicans and Democrats will have to be content with cable” (2004, p. B3). Viewers were evidently content with Fox News. Fox was the number one choice on at least one night of the Republican convention in 2004. The New York Times reported, “It was the first time that Fox had beaten all other news outlets
for coverage of a major news event, Fox executives said" (Carter, 2004, p. P1). That fact led Rosenstiel of The Project for Excellence in Journalism to signal in the Washington Post "the end of the era of network news.” Rosenstiel wrote on September 12, 2004 that the decrease in political convention coverage marked the moment networks gave away their dominance with the American public.

In effect, the networks’ owners have altered their brands. They have signaled that they are now almost entirely economic institutions. Certain news programs may remain important, such as NBC’s “Today” show, but only if they add to the bottom line (p. B7).

Bottom lines, business and consumers go hand-in-hand. News consumers are just that: consumers who are shopping for the best deal.

Significance of the Problem

News providers are like any other manufacturer of product. They know that they have to provide the best deal, or at least a good deal, to survive. All the choices provided by technological innovations have fractured audiences and made niche media players significant players.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found in its biennial survey of 3,002 adults in 2002, released in June of that year, that the public puts timeliness and accuracy at the top of what they value in news. The Pew survey results show that nearly 90 percent of people surveyed put a high level of importance on whether news is timely and up-to-date and on whether it is accurate, and nearly 70 percent want the news item to be helpful.
The June 8, 2004 biennial news consumption survey by The Pew Research Center shows the public’s news habits have remained relatively stable since the last survey with two important areas showing modest growth – online and cable news.

Cable television is allowing for political polarization to be reflected in the public’s choice of cable news outlets. The June 2004 Pew survey shows that more than 50 percent of Fox News viewers describe themselves as politically conservative, an increase of 10 percent from four years ago. The survey report also states that Fox’s chief rival, CNN has a more Democratic audience that it once did.

Political preferences are not the only factors shaping the news habits of those surveyed. About half (52%) of those Pew researchers questioned indicated that they like to get news at set times. Nearly as many (46%) said they are “news grazers.” Those who graze are younger and have a varied news diet (Pew Research Center, June 8, 2004).

The Pew study also shows the Internet audience is growing more diverse.

Internet news, once largely the province of young, white males, now attracts a growing number of minorities. The percentage of African Americans who regularly go online for news has grown by about half over the past four years (16% to 25%) (Pew Research Center, June 8, 2004, p. 3).

Older Americans are also going online in increasing numbers. Sixty-four percent in their 50s and early 60s reported to Pew researchers that they go online. That’s an increase from 45 percent in the 2000 survey. While these seasoned news consumers may be embracing the Internet, the younger ones are not embracing newspapers. Pew reports that six-in-ten Americans over the age of 65 say they read a newspaper everyday, just 23 percent of those under the age of 30 make reading a newspaper a regular part of their day.
A January, 2004 study by Pew Research took a specific look at how young people received news of political campaigns and found that non-traditional sources were on the rise. "The increasing role of the Internet and comedy programming as a source of news for younger Americans comes as they continue to turn away from more traditional campaign news sources" (Pew Research Center, January 11, 2004, p. 9). About one-in-five reported the Internet and comedy shows as a regular source of news about political campaigns. More than 20 percent of people under the age of 30 told the Pew researchers that they regularly learn about the campaign and the candidates from comedy shows like Saturday Night Live and the Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central. That is more than double the number (9%) who reported using comedy TV as a political news source four years earlier.

This Pew study was cited in an interview on NBC with Stephen Colbert of the Daily Show. Colbert told the NBC interviewer that, "No one — no one gives you fake news any faker than we do, except real news that won’t admit that what they’re saying is fake" (NBC transcript, 2005).

Television remains the main source of news for all Americans, no matter their age (Pew Research Center, January 11, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

No matter the vehicle chosen or the time spent doing it, Americans report that news remains a central part of their lives (Pew Research Center, June 8, 2004). The Pew survey shows that most people watch or read news morning, noon and night. Thirty-two percent of working people report that keeping up with news events is important to their job.

This study considered the following research question: How are choices changing the way Americans get their news? It is significant because news organizations and those who
try to influence news coverage will benefit from a fuller understanding of the news habits of various audiences. Studies show that age, gender, education, ethnicity and political ideology influence which news vehicles people choose to get their information. Those choices have been widened by the technological advancements of broadcasting, cable and the Internet. Understanding what people want when they use the different sources for news consumption will help media outlets be successful at providing useful information for the public and attracting consumers and revenues. That understanding also has implications in the public relations and advertising fields.

Overview of Thesis

Chapter I has presented the issues surrounding technological advancements in media and news presentation and how Americans are making use of the new choices available to them. Chapter II will present a review of the literature and will explore these technological changes, increased options and their implications. Chapter III specifies the details of this case study into the issues surrounding news consumption as technology increases options. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study. Chapter V reports the conclusions and offers recommendations based on those conclusions.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

There is a large body of research and plenty of popular literature about media coverage and media use. The excitement of news events, changing technology and plenty of familiarity by the American people make media a popular subject.

There are more meaningful reasons than popularity for the organizations undertaking serious research. The Pew Research Center, whose work will be cited extensively in this paper, is an independent opinion research group that bills itself on its Web site (www.people-press.org) as a nonpartisan fact tank. The center’s goal is to provide a forum for ideas on the media and public policy through public surveys. “In this role it serves as an important information resource for political leaders, journalists, scholars, and public interest organizations” (The Pew Research Center, n.d., para. 2).

The Project for Excellence in Journalism is another organization that watches closely the use of media and the number of consumers choosing which type of outlet and technology. The future of the profession of journalism and the media outlets which support it depends on making the right business choices while upholding the highest ethical standards.

The institution is affiliated with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. It began a report called, The State of the News Media in 2004. This report is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The media covers itself as well as anything and so there are numerous articles and editorial columns written about this subject matter that interest academics and the general public alike.
The research shows that the desire for news is constant; how and where it is obtained is up in the air or on paper or in cyberspace.

Technology Driving the News

Basics

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found in its biennial survey of 3,002 adults in 2002, released in June of that year, that the public puts timeliness and accuracy at the top of what they value in news.

The Pew survey results show in Section IV: Attitudes Toward the News, that 89 percent put a high level of importance on whether news is timely and up-to-date, 88 percent put a high level of importance on whether it is accurate, and 68 percent gave a high level of importance to whether the news items contain information that is helpful.

The survey reflects the regularity of news in American’s daily life. In Section I: Watching, Reading and Listening to the News, the findings are described this way:

Despite long-term declines in news attentiveness, getting the news is a staple part of the daily routine for most Americans. Asked about their activities for the previous day, fully eight-in-ten say they got at least some news from television, radio or newspapers (p. 10).

Two areas of identified growth are cable and the Internet. The 2002 survey showed the number of people who went online from home on the previous day doubled from 17 percent to 34 percent since 1998.

The most recent Pew survey on the news media was released on June 26, 2005. That survey has the subtitle, “Online Newspaper Readership Countering Print Losses.” The older media has found that merging with the young technology or new media will produce a future for all.
Newspapers

*Journey to the Web*

The newspaper industry has been in the process of reinventing itself to survive in the online age. According to an Associated Press article, S.W. Papert, III, the head of Belden Associates, a newspaper research and consulting firm in Dallas, warned attendees at a newspaper conference that newspapers need to deliver news the way readers want it or die. Papert was serving on a panel examining the future of newspapers at the Associated Press Managing Editors conference in 2004. He is quoted as saying, “At some point in the current generation, more people will get their news from the Internet than from newspapers” (Associated Press, October 17, 2004, p. D4).

The periodical *Revolution* reported that at a 2005 conference in Washington for editors, Rupert Murdoch, the head of News International, warned that newspapers that do not understand and utilize the Web will falter.

He told news providers they need to offer places for consumers to converse and allow bloggers and podcasters to exchange views. “The next generation of people have a different set of expectations about the kind of news they will get, including when and how they will get and who they’ll get it from,” says Murdoch (p. 17).

The Online News Association’s Digital Journalism Credibility (2002) survey found that most online news sources do not attract unique traffic. “Americans are using online news in addition to traditional media rather than using online news instead of traditional sources” (p. 2).

This finding is supported by a 2005 Pew study that illustrates how sustained growth in online news has implications for newspaper readership on the Web.
Overall, a third of Americans below age 40 cite the Internet as their main source of news, and many of these people are reading newspapers online. Consequently, while people under age 50 remain far less likely to read a print newspaper than are older people, they are turning to local and national newspapers online in fairly significant numbers (p. 2).

So, if newspapers keep pushing time, resources and customers to the Web, what happens to the printed page? John G. Craig, Jr. wrote a column in 1995 with the headline, *Future shocked: How will Americans get their news and information in 15 years?* He had attended a conference with newspaper experts who were trying to predict where newspapers would be in the year 2010.

Everyone believes that *Time* and the *Wall Street Journal* and other national and international media will be around in some form 15 years from now, but how many copies will be printed as opposed to torn apart on the World Wide Web, or whatever we call it, remains to be seen (Craig, 1995, n.p.).

The experts and the public knew less in 1995 about computer usage than they do now, yet the fact that the Internet would play a role was clearly identified while the extent of that role was not.

The increasing numbers of newspapers and the readers who look to their reporting are major factors in online news sources. The 2005 Pew survey, of 1,464 people over the age of 18, showed that most respondents who cite the Internet as a main source of news are including their use of online newspapers. More than 60 percent of those who use the Internet for news said they read the Web sites of local or national newspapers.
The combined questions about Internet and newspapers indicate that newspapers remain a key part of the media mix for the majority in all age groups. About a third of respondents under age 40 say the printed newspaper is a main source of news while another 20 percent say the online version of the newspaper is a part of their Internet use. Half of those aged 50 and older cite printed newspapers as a main source for obtaining news.

The survey in June of 2005 showed that it was not money but convenience that ruled the choice of turning to the online version of newspapers. Seventy-three percent cited convenience while just 8 percent claimed they chose the Web version because it was free.

The demographic breakdown of the Pew study shows that the online newspaper readers are mostly male, wealthy and educated. Almost 50 percent have college degrees, compared with 27 percent who read the print versions.

The choice of reading newspapers' online versions also seemed to be related to the respondents' views of the so called mainstream media.

People who read the newspaper online have a far less favorable opinion of network and local TV news programming than do people who read the print version, and also have a somewhat less favorable view of the daily newspaper they are most familiar with (Pew, 2005, p. 7).

Television news, which was ushered in with new technology, is now considered old news. The broadcast industry is having to keep pace with cable, digital and the Web.
Pass the Remote

In just a few generations, Americans have gone from radio to television, from broadcast to cable and now to digital signals. They have been able to embrace the new without leaving the old behind.

Walter Cronkite (1996) chronicles in his book, *A Reporter's Life*, his own progress as a journalist through the media available. His reminiscing about how election returns came to be known illustrates a well-documented mistake by a major newspaper and how much the world has changed.

It is hard to believe that as late as November 1948 few people had portable or automobile radios. We got our election returns from the coffee-shop relay, which brought the startling news that Truman had taken an early lead. But NBC’s H.V. Kaltenborn and other pundits advised us that this would change when the rural precincts were heard from. The *Chicago Tribune* was so confident that it proclaimed a Dewy victory with a banner headline in its early editions (p. 156).

Cronkite remembers that the Truman inaugural was the first and the last story of any major significance during the life of the Middle West radio bureau where he was working. He made the transition to television right along with the public. Cronkite began to get network news assignment and he writes that one of the earliest was probably one of the most complicated. It was the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953.
Cronkite writes:

It was a grand opportunity for the young medium of television to display its ability to bring the world into American’s living rooms. The overriding problem was that our abilities were still limited (p. 167).

The CBS broadcasting team scrambled and was the first to get the coronation on the air in the U.S. Cronkite cites this event as a signal that television was growing up. Other entities were catching on to the technology of broadcasting and growing up as well.

Cronkite on television and politics:
Politics stuck its toe into the television age at the party convention of 1948. Cameras were there, but the number of stations and sets were so few as to relegate that pioneering event to a historical footnote. By 1952, however, the nation was tuned in as politics really entered the television age. Those 1952 conventions were a brief moment of glory in television’s infancy before the politicians discovered its vast potential and set out to master it. For the first time millions of Americans saw democracy in action — as it chose its presidential candidates (p. 179).

Television, as news consumers know today, was not to stay in the broadcast arena.

Cable television represents the next technological advancement and the next series of options.

Cable Choices

Round-the-Clock Coverage

News is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When Ted Turner started the Cable News Network in 1980 there was some skepticism about just who the audience for this
never-sleeping news machine might be. In 2005, it is a crowded 24/7 news field and the broadcast networks are consistently feeling the heat.

An article by Wikipedia (n.d.) retrieved from the Internet chronicles the history of CNN. Turner was a media maverick who founded CNN in Atlanta. It is widely credited for introducing the concept of 24-hour news coverage.

Mark Bernheimer, a former correspondent for CNN, wrote in *The Strategist*, that Turner’s baby does not look like the pop-culture franchise it is today. “Turner’s CNN was supposed to be a place where the news was the star, and the journalists were just the people who brought it to you” (2005, p. 64).

He maintains it was not until Turner began losing control that the on-air personalities became celebrity newscasters.

Nonetheless, it is Bernheimer’s position that CNN changed the medium of television and changed people who depend on it.

While the still fledgling network defied nay-saying critics and proved to be a viable concept, CNN began to alter the way we view the very notion of TV news. Before CNN, viewers would get home and switch on the tube to see how their world, and their neighborhoods, had changed while they were at work. In the cable news era spawned by CNN, we no longer want to know what happened today, we want to know what’s happening now. In the very same way that the Internet is now revolutionizing print media — raising expectations of access and immediacy — cable began transforming broadcast journalism decades ago (2005, p. 64).

The 24-hour news network found its audience. CNN’s coverage is expansive; 90 million U.S. households receive the station. Globally, CNN is available to two billion people
in more than 200 countries. It now has 10 cable and satellite television networks such as CNN Headline News; it has four Web sites and 2,000 radio affiliations. CNN claims it launched the first major news and information Web site on the Internet when CNN.com launched in 1995 (CNN Audience and Marketing Research, personal communication, October 25, 2005).

CNN's success ushered in MSNBC, a cable division of NBC, and Fox News Channel (FNC). Fox was launched 16 years after CNN and it took until the 2004 Republican National Convention for it to score its first big win over all cable and network news during a major event (Carter, 2004).

The major stories provide good research points. Where do people turn when they really want to know what is going on in the nation or the world?

9/11

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001 created long-term effects on the way Americans are treated at airports and the way the public views security. But have they had long-term effects on news consumption?

Poindexter and Conway (2003) found a significant increase in the viewing of local and network television news in the weeks following the attacks. Their 2002 cross-sectional survey also showed readership of newspapers and Internet news did not see as large of an increase.

The numbers in the pre- and post-9/11 trend analysis in the Poindexter and Conway (2003) study show from 2000 to post-September 11, 2001, local television news viewing went up 12 percent, while network news went up 13 percent. The reported increase of daily...
newspaper reading was 4 percent. The use of cable news increased 9 percent, while the reading of Internet news increased 2 percent.

Not all studies show the same increase in news consumption. The Pew Research Center (2002) determined that the American public's news habits did not change significantly following September 11, 2001. The researchers concluded that a modestly higher level of the public expressed interest in international news. That number grew from 14 to 21 percent from 2000 to 2002.

The Pew Survey also found no indication that people under the age of 35 changed their news habits as the results of the attacks. “They continue to register lower levels of news consumption than did previous generations at a comparable stage in the life cycle” (p. 2).

Researchers in this post-9/11 survey did find a gender gap in rating what is valued in news sources.

Both men and women value accuracy and timeliness, but women put a higher premium on whether the news source is convenient. Sixty-two percent of women say it is important that news fits easily into their daily schedule, while 53 percent of men agreed.

Women also place greater importance on the likeability of the news host or anchor than men do, 62 percent to 48 percent.

The attacks on September 11, 2001, may be the reason there is a rise in Americans interested in international news. The Pew Research Center (2002) found that the number of people who track foreign developments very closely grew from 14 to 21 percent from 2000 to 2002. “But a solid majority of the public (61%) continues to track international news only when major developments occur, while far fewer (37%) are consistently engaged by international news coverage” (p. 2).
Whether it is international, national or local news that consumers want, in the evening, they overwhelmingly turn to television (Pew, 2002). Ninety-two percent of those who want to consume news with dinner turn to television and 91 percent turn to TV later in the evening.

**Politics**

The broadcast networks of ABC, NBC and CBS decided to drastically reduce the amount of time given to the Republican and Democratic national conventions in 2004. That decision, coupled with the win for cable news on convention coverage, made some analysts mark it as the end of network news’ dominance.

Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism wrote this for the *Washington Post*:

What happened this summer, and particularly last week, is likely to be recalled as the end of the era of network news. At the very least, mark this as the moment when the networks abdicated their authority with the American public (2004, p. B07).

The major networks made a programming decision to cover an hour of the Democratic and Republican conventions per night in prime-time in 2004. Executives and on-air personalities said the events were too controlled and contained too little real news to attract an audience for an entire evening.

Ted Koppel of ABC started his exodus in earlier elections (McConnell, 2004). He used a skeleton crew in 2000 and had pulled out of the Republican convention early and skipped the entire Democratic convention in 1996 saying they were too choreographed.
Lee Michael Katz, a former diplomatic correspondent and international editor for *USA Today*, wrote an imaginative piece for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in July of 2004. He writes about the one prime-time hour decision:

In other words, the quadrennial exercise of choosing a major party candidate for president, a ritual that embodies a rich tradition of American political history, will take up half as much time each night as a special edition of “Last Comic Standing” (p. B03).

Katz goes on to imagine the types of reality shows the networks could devise to make the conventions ratings winners for the broadcasters. The networks did not have to go to such lengths; viewers with a passion for politics found the 24/7 news environment on cable satisfied their need to watch the political conventions.

*New York Times* writer, Alessandra Stanley (2004), explored the question of whether Americans were getting the coverage they deserve or were the networks shirking their civic responsibility.

One thing is inarguable: Even though each of the three networks devoted only three hours to the entire event, coverage of political conventions has never been more varied and plentiful. Viewers could hear every speech, count every delegate vote and see every Democratic bigwig and media diva by switching among PBS, C-Span, three 24-hour cable news networks, and, for the first time this week, ABC’s fledgling digital cable news network, ‘ABC News Now’” (p. 4-1).

In a major upset, the Fox News Channel got the largest audience during the Republican National Convention in the late summer of 2004 (Carter, 2004).
A June 2004 study by the Pew Research Center states that since 2000 Fox has seen tremendous gains in the number of Americans who regularly watch. The number has gone from 17 percent to 25 percent, while audiences for other cable outlets have been flat.

This survey also looks at political affiliation and found that more than 50 percent of regular Fox viewers described themselves as politically conservative, an increase from 40 percent four years earlier. CNN’s audience had more self-identified Democrats.

People 18 to 29 years old are moving toward non-traditional media sources for information about the current presidential campaign, according to The Pew Research Center’s 2004 survey.

The survey of 1,506 adults on campaign news and political communication conducted December 19, 2003 to January 4, 2004 found that Americans under 30 turn to cable news networks most frequently as a campaign news source. Thirty-seven percent reported they regularly learn something from cable news networks about the election, while 20 percent reported regularly learning something from the Internet.

Former Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean is cited as having used the Internet most effectively during his campaign (The Pew Research Center, 2004).

Political Science professor and director of the Elon Institute of Politics and Public Affairs George Taylor told Elon University’s The Pendulum Online that, “The Internet as a campaign tool has dramatically grown since its first use by Lamar Alexander back in 1996. Dean has begun to use the Internet tremendously as a way to reach and communicate with the public” (Dorne, 2004, para. 10).

Regardless of age, about one in five surveyed in The Pew Center’s 2004 study said they use the Web for political activity. Those activities include getting candidate information (11
percent), sending or receiving campaign e-mails (11 percent) and visiting Web sites of political groups (six percent).

The Online News Association conducted a Digital Journalism Credibility study in 2002 that showed the Web was being used in addition to other news sources and not as a substitute for them. The Executive Summary states most online news sites do not attract unique users. Most of the online news users also use traditional sources to obtain their news.

Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) concur with this finding of the Web as a complement to traditional media. Their survey of 520 undergraduate students at a large public university indicates use of the Web as a news source will not likely have a significant negative effect on the use of traditional news media.

Comedy and Cable

One in five people surveyed by The Pew Research Center in January of 2004 said they regularly use the Internet for campaign news, but nearly the same number, 21 percent, say they get election information from television comedy shows such as “Saturday Night Live” and “The Daily Show.” When the same question was asked in 2000, just 9 percent of young people cited comedy shows as a political news source.

TV ratings show “The Daily Show” has the audience. CNN’s Web site reported on March 2, 2004, that “The Daily Show” hit a milestone during the two weeks of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and President Bush’s State of the Union address. The comedy show posted more 18-to-34-year-old male viewers than any of the network news broadcasts for the first time in the show’s history.
The show’s host, Jon Stewart, told the Associated Press he is uncertain what to think about people who would use the comedy show as a primary news source. “A lot of them are probably high,” Stewart is quoted as saying (Associated Press, March 2, 2004, para. 6).

The 2004 Pew study did not address the intoxication level of respondents, but did determine that people who regularly learn about the political world from comedy programs, no matter their age, are poorly informed about the election.

Despite the signs of greater polarization in choosing news sources, the respondents to the Pew survey showed overall stability. The most popular medium continues to be local TV news, but regular viewers are still below levels seen 10 years ago. Regular newspaper reading and network news viewing have also not recovered from their decade-long slump.

The growth in news audiences is coming from online sources. The Internet is also providing a platform for discussion and editorial by anyone who wants to participate. These Internet diaries are called Web logs or blogs.

The Net

Going Online

The 2004 Pew Research Center study on news audiences shows that Americans’ news habits did not changed much from 2002 to 2004. The percentage of people who read the newspaper everyday was at 42 percent, up a point from two years prior, and those who listened to radio news everyday went from 41 percent in 2002 to 40 percent in 2004.

The Pew survey showed a jump in those who watch cable news and those who surf the Net for news. Twenty-nine percent of Americans reported they regularly go online to get news. That is up from 25 percent in 2002 and 23 percent in 2000. Compare that to 1995,
when just 2 percent of the public reported to Pew researchers that they were going online at least three days a week to get news.

The Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University found in a 2003 survey that 43 percent of 1,001 respondents to an online survey reported they had gone online for news in the past week. Going to the Internet for news was an everyday habit for 17 percent of the respondents.

Pew (2004) reported:

The online news audience is young, affluent and well-educated. More men than women go online to get news, but the gender gap has narrowed in recent years. The increase in online news use since 2002 has been particularly sharp among racial and ethnic minority groups. In 2002, 15 percent of African Americans went online regularly for news. Today that figure has risen to 25 percent. Among Hispanics, 32 percent now go online regularly for news, up from 22 percent in 2002 (p. 8).

Thirteen percent of Americans who answered the Pew survey in 2004 report that they rely on the well-known sites of AOL, Yahoo or other service providers. Ten percent say they check out the sites of major broadcast and cable news outlets.

Age matters

The Pew study (2002) states that people under the age of 35 continue to indicate lower levels of news watching or reading than previous generations did at the same life stage. The study shows that those under age 30 are not avid readers of newspapers. Just 26 percent of respondents under 30 years old reported having read a newspaper the day before the survey.
A January, 2004 study by the Pew Research Center shows television remains the main news source for all Americans, regardless of their age. But younger people are increasingly turning to comedy shows and the Internet as sources of news.

Tom Rosenstiel (2005), the director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, wrote about the future of media and the Internet and the use of blogs in an essay. He wrote that supporters of blogs see them as the core of a new citizen-based media and that critics see blogs as a new way of shouting to the masses.

Rosenstiel continued:
A majority of online news consumers now report that they visit blogs or online news columns. Yet nearly half of all Americans still have a scant notion of what blogs are, and less than a third recognize them as mostly a place for opinion and ideas (p. 15).

Blogs and Big Events

Major news events are giving Americans ample opportunity to get to know what blogs are. Hurricane Katrina that hit the Gulf Coast in the summer of 2005 kept rescuers and bloggers busy. An Internet search in the days following the tragedy for “Katrina” and “blogs” pulled up 71,300,000 hits in .14 seconds.

Weblogs

Bloggers

In a move reminiscent of the wizard behind the curtain in the land of Oz, the major political parties handed out credibility with credentials to bloggers wanting to cover the 2004 conventions. For the first time, these people who keep Web diaries were allowed to cover the Republican and Democratic conventions right along with mainstream media journalists.
Jennifer Lee (2004) reported in the *New York Times* that bloggers are maintaining that just like the groundbreaking 1924 conventions were the first ones on radio, and the 1952 Republican convention was the first one to be televised, the 2004 conventions will be remembered for the bloggers.

‘Whomever they decide to let through the gate is now the press,’ said Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University who will attend the convention for his blog, PressThink.com, which appraises media coverage. ‘What the credential means to me is that someone just expanded the idea of the press a little bit’ (p. P7).

In the same article, Lee lists some of the bloggers credentialed for the Democratic convention: Jeralyn Merritt, a criminal defense lawyer whose blog is TalkLeft.com; Ana Marie Cox from the Washington gossip site Wonkette.com who was working for MTV; and Tom Burka, a New York lawyer who writes a satirical blog at TomBurka.com. Burka is quoted as saying bloggers usually do not talk to primary sources and the kind of access the credentials allowed was a new experience for bloggers.

The bloggers are a force to be reckoned with by the large news organizations. Lee (2004) quotes a cable news executive:

‘I’m intrigued at the way that bloggers and blogs have forced their way into the political process on their own; that’s why I want to incorporate blogs into our coverage,’ said David Bohrman, Washington bureau chief for CNN, which is coordinating with Technorati, a blog-tracking service, to provide online commentary for the convention (p. P7).
The Origin of Blogs

A 2000 study by the Pew Research Center does not mention blogs. The 2004 Pew survey on political news does. But less than 10 percent of respondents who reported using the Internet for campaign news and activity reported using blogs.


A year ago, no one other than campaign staffs and chronic insomniacs read political blogs. In the late 90s, about the only places online to write about politics were message boards like Salon’s Table Talk or Free Republic, a conservative chat room. Crude looking Web logs, or blogs, cropped up online, and Silicon Valley techies put them to use, discussing arcane software problems with colleagues, tossing in the occasional diaristic riff on the birth of a daughter or a trip to Maui (p. 44).

Klam’s research shows that in 1999, veteran journalist Mickey Kaus began a political blog on the *Slate* Web site called “kausfiles.” Kaus took on a different style on the blog. Whereas in print, he was formal, on “kausfiles” he became an exasperated basket case full of self-doubt and indignation.

One does not have to be a professional journalist or a professional complainer to post a blog. The Pew Internet and American Life project found that more than two million Americans are posting Weblogs, but being the former helps with credibility.

Peter Johnson (March 21, 2005) reports in “The Media Mix” for *USA Today* that mainstream media have their doubts about bloggers because they often do not have the benefit of the editing process with colleagues and superiors and do not follow rules of sourcing. Nonetheless, former CBS News producer, Jon Klein, who now runs CNN, decided
in February 2005 to start the first daily segment on cable or network television that concentrates on blog reports.

"Inside the Blog," the four-minute segments on Inside Politics, feature a blog reporter and a political producer who are introduced by long-time anchor Judy Woodruff.

Woodruff says that ‘not being a child of the Internet, I confess I was skeptical when Jon first suggested the segment. I viewed the blogs as pure opinion, no reporting. But I’ve come to see the segment as a tool for getting at a new, unpredictable and increasingly influential place on the political landscape’ (March 21, 2005, p. 4D).

The influence of blogs was felt keenly by CBS and anchor Dan Rather who suffered after bloggers did a little fact checking of their own and proved a CBS report on President George W. Bush was false.

Blogger Investigation into CBS — Memogate

It started with a September 2004 report on CBS’ 60 Minutes II that questioned President Bush’s service in the National Guard during Vietnam. In the report, Dan Rather used documents to verify that Bush did not fulfill his National Guard duty.

Peter Wallsten (2004) in a syndicated story for the Los Angeles Times reported on how the Internet and bloggers toppled the veteran Rather and many of his colleagues behind the scene at CBS. Wallsten writes that a late-night blog posting on September 8, 2004, just after the report aired, by a man known only as “Buckhead” started the ball rolling. He had some help from another FreeRepublic blog poster, TankerKC, who noted that the documents were not in the style used during that time. A few hours later, Buckhead posted comments about the proportionally spaced fonts used in the memos that were supposedly written in the
early 1970s by Bush’s commanding officer. Buckhead posted that the documents were forgeries since the IBM typewriters of that era did not have that spacing.

Wallsten reported that by the next morning, Scott Johnson, a Minneapolis lawyer who links morning news reports to a site he co-writes, got an e-mail about Buckhead. “Intrigued, Johnson, whose online ID is ‘The Big Trunk,’ put a link on his site, PowerLineBlog.com, to Buckhead’s post. Then the floodgates opened” (p. D1).

Postings continued with further verification of typewriters and fonts and special characters. Klam (2004) summarizes events this way, “…within 24 hours, the bloggers’ obsessive study of typefaces in the 1970s migrated onto Drudge, then onto Fox News and then onto the networks and the front pages of the country’s leading newspapers (p. 45).

Wallsten (2004) writes:

Suddenly, the story line shifted from the question Democrats had been trying to ask — whether Bush received special treatment in the Guard — to whether a network long detested by conservatives had been duped in its quest to air a report critical of the president in the midst of the re-election campaign (Grand Rapids Press, 2004, p. D4).

A special panel was convened to study the “Memogate” scandal. Peter Johnson of USA Today reported (February 28, 2005) that after the panel’s report came out in January 2005, Rather’s producer, Mary Mapes, was fired. Two other news staffers worked out severance terms and resigned in February 2005. Rather stepped down in March 2005 as anchor of The CBS Evening News, a year earlier than planned.

In an ironic twist, the bloggers, who are criticized for not having journalistic standards, brought a major network and a veteran anchor/correspondent to their knees.
Public Opinion of Media Opinion

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press surveyed 1,464 Americans in June 2005 and found that a growing number of people question the news media’s patriotism and fairness. The poll also found that the public makes broad distinctions between outlets that are fact or opinion based.

Cable news networks and newspapers are tied at 45 percent for mostly reporting facts, while local television news has the highest percentage (61) saying it reports mostly facts. Network evening news had 53 percent saying it reports mostly facts while their morning news garnered just 39 percent of respondents saying they are mostly fact-based (Pew, 2005).

Respondents have a clear idea that talk radio and the Internet are largely editorials. On the opinion side of the fact-opinion spectrum are talk radio shows and Internet news blogs. Just 10 percent say talk radio shows are mostly fact-oriented; 68 percent say they mostly give their opinions about the news. Far fewer Americans are familiar with news blogs than other news sources, but on balance, more say blogs are opinion-oriented than fact-based (by 32 percent – 20 percent) (Pew, 2005, p. 2).
CHAPTER III

Methodology

*Study Design Overview*

The question this researcher is endeavoring to answer is best addressed by conducting a case study involving news sources and Americans news viewing habits. The case study method is most useful when a compilation and a comprehensive review of the literature will provide a reasonable answer to the question posed. Case studies are particularly geared to "how" or "why" interrogatories. In this paper the question to be answered is, "How are choices changing the way Americans get their news?"

Wimmer and Dominick (1997) maintained that case studies use many data sources to systematically investigate individuals, groups, organizations or events. A vast amount of research has been completed from various sources such as Internet searches of databases, search engines and Web sites. Books, periodicals and journal articles provided additional material. Surveys that have been conducted nationally on the nation's news habits contributed significantly to the knowledge base of how technological advances are adding to people's choices in how they find out about news events.

*Unit of Analysis*

There are certain benchmarks in technology and in our nation's history that will provide a framework for the research. The period of time studied will be from the early 1950s until 2005, with a heavier emphasis on the last 25 years with the boom in media technology.

The first televised political conventions were in 1952, creating lasting effects on political campaigns and news coverage that have been studied and chronicled. The creation
of C-SPAN in the 1970s and CNN in 1980 mark cable television’s rise and a new 24/7 news culture. The proliferation of all news networks in the 1990s shows the success of the news-anytime option. Another incredible lurch forward in technology and news distribution can be studied by looking at the use of the Internet and personal computers. Internet news delivery and usage is still being created and now people have the option of using Web blogs as news sources. The increasing options have created fractured audiences and bottom line concerns for newspapers and television owners in the 21st century.

The media studies the media and so there are many newspaper articles and television shows on how the news business is faring and changing. Academics study the media and publish their findings in journals. Independent research centers survey the American public on a regular basis and provide a wealth of material to be analyzed.

Study Protocol

Research for the available literature has been extensive. Internet databases used include LexisNexis Academic for newspaper articles and television transcripts and ProQuest for journal articles. The search engine Google yielded newspaper articles and Web sites. The Pew Research Center and the C-SPAN sites linked to pertinent print articles and comprehensive news source surveys. Internet searches were conducted periodically throughout the term of research.

Search terms included these terms and some variations: media, news delivery, political conventions, bloggers, Pew Research Center, cable television, C-SPAN, Internet and newspapers.

Journalist Walter Cronkite’s book, A Reporter’s Life, provided useful material about the effect of television on political campaigns. The 2004 political conventions and
presidential campaign provided timely illustrations of the impact of the Internet and bottom line economics on media coverage of the campaigns.

Criteria for Interpreting the Findings

A review of this comprehensive body of research, anecdotal illustrations and editorials and opinions provided enough material to paint a picture of the changing habits of the American news consumer. The ability to examine extensive and repeated surveys of the American public added to the ability to arrive at conclusions. The fact that technology and media are a dynamic partnership indicates the need for ongoing study.
CHAPTER IV

Findings

The data seem to clearly show that Americans value news; they value convenience and they value credibility. There are shifting patterns of news consumption and sources due to technological advances, but certain criteria remain important for news consumers.

News and information that are timely and accurate are sought after commodities that are sometimes tough to come by in the same package. The pressure of getting on the Web or on the air has shortened the amount of time reporters spend in preparation of news. Bloggers are often literally keeping a Weblog, a diary for all to read, that contains musings and opinions, without the benefit of an editor. These two elements — speed and unchecked reporting — have placed an increasing burden on consumers of news to verify the accuracy of the information.

Daily Diet of News

More than 70 percent told Pew researchers in 2004 that on a typical weekday they start their day with some type of news. This falls in line with previous Pew research. In 2000, 67 percent said that is the way they started their morning and in 2002, 68 percent said breakfast and news went hand-in-hand.

Positive respondents to a 2005 Pew survey on public opinion of the media listed the ability to get news in a timely fashion, depth of coverage, and the ability to stay informed as reasons for their favorable responses.

Most Americans identify themselves as news consumers in all hours of the day (Pew, 2004). Researchers saw a fairly significant jump in people who follow news throughout the day when they compared 2002 data to 2004. Responses to the 2002 Pew survey on news
consumption showed 61 percent of Americans follow news during the course of the day. In 2004, that number jumped to 73 percent.

Americans spend an average of 66 minutes per day engaged in news consumption. This is up from 59 minutes in 2002, but lower than the 73 minutes reported ten years ago (Pew, 2004).

Age seems to be driving the decrease in time spent with news since 1994. The 18- to 24-year-old group reported spending 51 minutes day watching television news, reading newspapers or listening to radio news. In 2005, that time dropped to 35 minutes a day (Pew, 2004).

“The overall decrease in time spent with the news over the last 10 years has coincided with the increase in Internet news consumption” (Pew, 2004, p. 12). The average time spent reading the news online is seven minutes per day.

*The Growing Web*

The newer technologies of cable television and the Internet have allowed news consumers to get news when they want it — not when the networks or newspapers care to deliver it. Since surveys show that convenience is a key virtue of news delivery, the vehicles that deliver on-demand are gaining in audiences.

In 2005, 24 percent listed the Internet as a main source of news and 23 percent said they go online everyday for news (Pew, 2005). That number compares to data recorded in 2002 when one-in-four Americans reported going online for news at least three times per week and in 2000 when the figure was 23 percent (Pew, 2002).
The Net is not just the province of the young. Thirty percent of Americans between the ages of 30 and 49 listed the Internet as a main source of news, and there is evidence in the 2005 survey that the Web is extremely important to people in their working years.

One-third of people in their 30s say they get news online every day, as do 27 percent of people in their 40s. Nearly a quarter of people in their 50s get news online daily, about the same rate as among people ages 18-29 (Pew, 2005, p. 5).

Researchers have determined that when respondents list the Internet as a main source of news, most are including their use of online newspapers (Pew, 2005).

*The Survival Net*

It is no wonder that the review of the literature shows that newspapers’ attention to their online product is key to their survival.

While only about a third of those under age 40 count the printed newspaper as a main source of news (compared with half of those age 50 and older), another 20 percent say the online version is at least part of their Internet use. While younger people tend to consume far less news overall than their seniors, newspapers — in one form or another — remain a key part of the media mix for majorities in all age groups (Pew, 2005, p. 6).

Any media outlet with a future has to continually attract a new audience. Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and Bill Kovach, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, wrote in a 2005 essay that news companies would do well to react to shifting consumer behavior online. “As we live in an on-demand culture, the next generation of consumers wants news in a way that fits their lifestyle” (p. 15). He opined that the Internet is more than a way to hook people into the older medium.
The Web, it is increasingly clear, is becoming journalism’s future, with its own strengths and capabilities. The journalism of the 21st century should not be TV stories or newspaper stories posted online, but online multi-media content designed to exploit the unique potential of a new medium. Stories need to be written differently. The depth, interactivity, and the ability to search the Web need to be explored (p. 15).

All media outlets are busy exploring the possibilities and the lifelines available on the Internet. Cable and broadcast networks have Web sites; local television stations have Web sites; and radio stations drive people to the Web while their listeners drive to work in the morning and home in the afternoon.

A television correspondent for the Gannett station in Grand Rapids, Michigan said (personal communication, June 2005) that reporters there are urged to get stories posted online before they write and produce the report for the television newscast.

This move to the Internet may be more than just jumping on the new technology train; local stations have declining news viewers. The annual report on American journalism, *The State of the News Media 2004*, reported that since 1997, the ratings as measured by Nielsen show that the share of available viewers who watch local evening newscasts around the country has dropped 18 percent. The late news audience has dropped by 16 percent. “In other words, local TV is now losing audience as fast as network TV” (p. 21).

The best evidence, according to the report, is that networks are losing because they lack the instant availability of the 24/7 cable news stations and the Internet. Nielsen numbers show that the major evening newscasts on the three broadcast networks have seen ratings slide by 34 percent in the ten years from 1994 to 2004, and the ratings have dropped 44 percent since 1980. Even with that slide, 29 million people still tune in to the big three.
Peter Johnson of *USA Today* wrote about the changing network newscasts in an April 25, 2005 report:

Some predict that with the increasing popularity of new media, network news and its anchors will soon become extinct. CNN anchor Lou Dobbs says that although the Big Three evening newscasts showcase 'wonderful journalists and terrific talent, they are held captive by a 30-minute broadcast, a constrained budget and a commitment to ratings. It's lamentably true: They are drifting toward irrelevancy' (p. 2A).

Roger Ailes who runs the Fox News Channel and is considered a visionary said the broadcast networks' newscasts are shaken but can survive with instinct, guts and ambition.

Johnson wrote:

And technology. NBC, ABC and CBS are all embracing new technologies such as Internet broadband and video-on-demand, which are popular with younger viewers. Technology might not only save the evening news, but it also might expand its base of 27 million viewers, executives predict. (*USA Today*, April 27, 2005, p. 2A).

The move by old media to the new media means that much of the content on the Web is not original material. In addition to that, *The State of the News Media 2004* report found that much of the content does not originate in-house, and among the eight sites studied for the report, only 32 percent of the lead stories were original reports.

*From Survival to Swimming*

The flip side of the old media on the Internet is the emergence of blogs. The individually operated blogs have the potential to be influential and operate like small opinion journals do in print. While the number of blogs numbers in the millions, Perseus Development Corp., a software company, estimated that an estimated two-thirds are
abandoned (*The State of the News Media 2004*). Many of the ones that stay in operation get a
great deal of mainstream attention.

The toppling of CBS’s Dan Rather brought the presence and use of blogs into the old
media in a big way. The public is awakening to their existence, while some members of
traditional media outlets try to grasp the new frontier of reporting.

Syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker wrote a column on bloggers:

As bloggers — authors of Weblogs — have gleefully pointed out the past several
days, everyone with access to the Internet is now a journalist. Given the ‘instanaecity’
of the bloggers’ electronic encampment, known as the ‘blogosphere’ — enabling real-
time posting of news and commentary — newspapers and even broadcast media have
become the news cycle’s Sunday drivers (*Grand Rapids Press* on February 21, 2005,
p. A8).

While the 2005 Pew survey showed that online users are visiting blogs or online
columns, many Americans have little idea what they are. They are recognized as part of the
news media’s future by experts in the industry even though the definition has yet to be
finalized.

Rosenstiel and Kovach wrote:

Since consumer expectations about blogs are still being shaped, in other words, the
blogosphere is nowhere near fully formed. This is an arena where traditional media
still have a significant opportunity to distinguish themselves. And commerce, or the
demand of making a profit online, is likely to change the nature of blogs in time more
than its proponents expect. Consider that in the late 1920s, radio was still predicted to
be largely a medium for education and public safety (Pew, 2005, p. 15).
The trend to satisfy the consumer need for fast reporting offered by the Internet and cable news has resulted in a change from a journalism of verification — one in which journalists are first concerned with verifying facts — to a journalism of assertion, where information is reported with little attempt to independently verify the facts (The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). As part of this trend, researchers identify a sort of buyer beware condition:

The blogosphere, while adding the richness of citizen voices, expands this culture of assertion exponentially, and brings to it an affirmative philosophy: publish anything, especially points of view, and the reporting and verification will occur afterward in the response of fellow bloggers (Overview, p. 1).

A former NBC News executive and current professor of journalism at Northwestern University, Joe Angotti, reacted to what he calls a dangerous development:

‘Blogs and so’s your mother-style talk shows are distorting news in America beyond what anyone could have imagined 10 years ago,’ he says. ‘The public is finding it more difficult than ever to distinguish between legitimate news and unverified drivel. The problem is that most news consumers don’t realize that mainstream media reporters work within strict policies and guidelines that these other outlets don’t require’ (Johnson, USA Today, March 14, 2005, p. 3D).

The Price of Speed

Whether it is rushing to put a story on a blog or satisfy the appetite of the 24-hour news beast on cable, reporters say the depth of fact-checking may suffer. The State of the News Media 2004 contended that this puts more pressure on news consumers to understand
that their choice of where to get their news may result in a higher likelihood of incomplete or false stories.

The journalists’ role as intermediary, editor, verifier and synthesizer is weakening, and citizens do have more power to be proactive with the news. But most people will likely do so only episodically. And the proliferation of the false and misleading makes the demand for the journalist as referee, watchdog and interpreter all the greater (The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004, p. 5).

The report goes on to state that consumers are getting jumbled, chaotic reports in cable and online reporting. “There is also a great deal of effort, particularly on cable news, put into delivering essentially the same news repetitively without any meaningful update” (p. 5).

Correspondent Jonathan Karl, who spent eight years covering politics on CNN, lamented to a USA Today reporter that because of the need to constantly be on the air live, he had to stop news gathering and report before he was ready.

‘I can’t tell you how many times I’d be on the air and my cell phone would ring, but I couldn’t answer it,’ says Karl, 36. ‘I knew it was a source, but I couldn’t say, ‘Hey, wait a minute, I’ve got a call’ (Johnson, USA Today, March 15, 2004, p. 1D).

Mark Bernheimer, a former national correspondent for CNN, wrote in an essay for The Strategist, that news in real time has advantages but that convenience has its price.

Bernheimer wrote:

Watching news as it happens often means witnessing events out of context, or worse, getting inaccurate information in the infancy of a developing story. The bigger the
breaking news, the higher the pressure for instant facts and the greater the probability
of erroneous information reaching the public (p. 64).

Bernheimer concluded that the viewer who chooses cable news has an increased need
to exercise responsibility and discretion.

Room for All

Media outlets will find their audience — at home, at work, eating breakfast or a
midnight snack. And, the audience will find the news. People will find news even when they
are not looking for it. Nearly 65 percent of respondents to a 2002 Pew survey said they
stumbled upon news when they went on the Internet for other reasons.

People will continue to enjoy a printed newspaper, even while also checking their
favorite newspaper’s Web site for the absolute latest. While the Internet is growing in
popularity, television as a whole remains a main source of news (Pew, 2004). A September
2005 study by Ball State University and the Center for Media Design showed that television,
as a whole, is the dominant media in terms of time. Americans spend 240.9 minutes every
day watching television. The Internet came in second place at 120 minutes per day (Ball
State University, 2005).

Local television news remains popular precisely because it is local (Pew, 2005).
Finding out what is happening in the respondents’ local community also was a factor in a
positive view of local newspapers.

Need News

Time seems to be a factor in staying informed. Slightly more than half of those
surveyed by Pew researchers in 2002 said they wished they had more time to follow news
stories. It may be a challenge to free up the time, and check the accuracy, but Americans report that the news remains vital; eight-in-10 said that the news is as important as ever.
CHAPTER V

Conclusions

Everyone, from academics to journalists to consumers, is trying to determine how Americans will get their news and information in the future.

John G. Craig, Jr. wrote in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette after attending a conference about newspapers in the year 2010 that no one knows how the information business will be configured down the road. He wrote that all those in attendance could agree upon is that there will be a significant change in mass communication primarily because of the increase and improvement in computer technology.

Research Question

The question considered, “Technology and News: How are choices changing the way Americans get their news,” can only be answered for a rather brief period of time by the data. The surveys and habits of Americans are a snapshot of this moment in media history. The trend is clearly toward the increased use of the Internet as a news source. The studies also showed that many news consumers are adding the Web to a full plate of media choices and not leaving other sources completely out of their news diet.

The compilation of these data is useful to media organizations, advertisers, politicians and public relations professionals. With demographics playing an identifiable role in predicting a certain degree of media choices, these industries could target their audiences as they become more splintered and yet available for more pin-point marketing and messaging.

Research Challenges

Technology by its very nature is changing daily, and Americans are avid consumers. A 2002 Pew study showed that the number of people with DVD players tripled from two
years previous, while the proportion of Americans who have a Palm Pilot or similar device doubled.

This growth in technology and the acceptance by the general public makes the study of news consumption challenging for researchers; there will always be changes and trends in directions that may not even have been known just a short time prior to the technology’s introduction and growth in popularity.

The best picture of how technology is changing the way Americans get their news and information is gained in repeated studies where researchers can track trends. Because the producers of news, advertisers, public relations practitioners and politicians move in fast-breaking environments, the studies need to be repeated often to have meaning in the market place or at the voting booth.

Recommendations

Commercial and political applications are just a couple of reasons for the continued study of the news sources Americans pick. The scholarly pursuits of sociological trends and communication as a whole are others.

Sundar and Nass (1996) tackled research questions brought about by the growth of online communication. They wrote that not only has this growth opened up a new channel for news delivery, but it has also challenged the understanding of the scholarly concepts of source, medium and receiver. Their results indicate that different communication sources attributed to different reactions to identical news stories. They argued for more research into the concept of “source.”

There are many indications from the data already gathered that the source people use to get their news can influence the accuracy and thus their perception of events. The faster
the delivery of the news, the higher the odds of little or no oversight by editors and colleagues, especially in the cases of the independent Weblogs. This means that not only do consumers need to stay informed about current events, but to be truly informed they also have to understand the system of news gathering and reporting and the track record for accuracy of the media source.

Future Study

The Internet could very well still be in its infancy regarding the possibilities on the Web, and television is about to undergo a major leap in capabilities with the mandated change from an analog to a digital signal by 2009. Industries adapt and so do viewers, readers and listeners. The options will continue to change and so will consumers’ media mix. The studies of both must continue to provide an accurate picture of the way Americans stay informed.
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