

• AUSTRALIAN
journalism
REVIEW

Fixers and foreign correspondents

Ethnic minorities in television
news

'Bad' mothers and the 'Medea'
news frame

Country newspapers and
perceptions of local 'ownership'

FM radio news: spreading the
news or spread too thin?

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Pixels, paper, and public affairs: a comparison of print and online editions of The Age newspaper

Carolyn Lee

Abstract

Given that readership of print newspapers has been linked to higher levels of civic engagement, what does the increasing use of online newspapers – and the decline in the use of paper versions – mean for the role of the media as a democratic civic forum? Research findings are sparse and inconclusive but seem to suggest that the online reading experience is very different from that of reading the paper. Responding to the seriousness of the issue of declining levels of civic engagement, this study was undertaken to explore whether possible links between civic disaffection and new forms of news format warrant more extensive treatment. This exploratory study employs a very limited sample of front and home pages from Melbourne newspaper The Age. Within this sample, a census was conducted comparing the relative quantities of public affairs content in the two formats of the newspaper. The study also examined whether this content is arranged in ways that maximise readers' access to public affairs news. The study concluded that it would indeed be desirable to conduct more research on this subject, since the findings suggest that online newspapers do not encourage as much learning about public affairs as do their paper counterparts.

Introduction

Online newspapers have existed in Australia since 1996 when “the first Australian newspaper took its tentative technological steps on to the information superhighway” (Australian Press Council, 2006, Ch. 6). Since then, all of the 12 metropolitan and national daily Australian newspapers (APC, 2006, Ch. 3) have constructed web editions, each using much of the text from the printed editions, but also a great deal of other material such as weblogs and videos, coverage

of international celebrities, "lifestyle" sections, and so on. The most developed sites are those produced by the Fairfax and News companies, followed by APN and Rural Press (APC, 2006). According to the APC report, the *Sydney Morning Herald* website "leads" in terms of traffic to online news, followed by *The Age*, both owned by Fairfax. Another Fairfax newspaper, the relative newcomer online-only *brisbanetimes.com.au*, claims to be attracting nearly as many readers as the web version of its competitor (APC, 2006), the long-established Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, published by News Ltd. The news.com.au website also comprises online editions of all its newspapers, including regional and community publications as well as main metropolitan dailies.

Public affairs information has increasingly been disseminated in the Australian community over the past century by way of the media, and particularly by newspapers. Newspaper journalism has been shown to add to public affairs knowledge in ways other media cannot, since "printed newspapers are known to widen the range of public topics, events and issues their online audience is aware of" (Schoenbach, de Waal et al., 2005, p. 245), and to be "positively associated with general political knowledge" (Lee & Wei, 2008, p. 17). However, if "internet use is on the rise while print declines" (Hoffman, 2006, p. 69), this might not augur well for political participation, given the long-established view that "print newspaper readership has consistently been correlated with higher rates of political participation, voter turnout and civic engagement" (Hoffman, 2006, p. 69, emphasis added), and given the lack of evidence that online newspapers similarly encourage civic involvement. But it is widely held that print newspapers are an endangered species as their readership migrates to the internet, and certainly Australian newspapers have responded to this migration by producing online versions. Very little is understood about the social implications of online newspaper reading, especially relating to the contribution of online newspapers to public affairs knowledge and therefore to civic life. It cannot be assumed, of course, that online and offline newspaper reading is mutually exclusive, and in an ideal situation, print as well as online editions could well work in synergy to contribute to the provision of knowledge about public affairs.

As yet there has been sparse research into this topic in Australia. Nor have there been any studies to ascertain whether public affairs content is accessed less frequently by readers of online newspapers than by readers of print editions. Moreover, we have no data on whether online newspapers are offering less public affairs content than their print editions, nor do we have figures detailing the accessibility of that content from the homepage. It is possible that public affairs content has decreased across both online and offline formats, given that intensified "competition for readers has increased pressure on the traditional standard for news, leading to 'tabloidisation' or 'infotainment'" (Norris, 2000, p. 9), a situation that has generated much criticism of newspapers, especially in Europe and the UK. Clearly, these areas urgently need to be investigated. The present study is merely a beginning for such investigations. It is a pilot study that seeks to compare amounts and types of public affairs content in online and print editions of the Melbourne *Age* newspaper over a three-day period in February 2008, with the aim of being less analytical than heuristic.

Literature review

Australian research into online newspapers has so far occurred in two directions: one focusing on audiences; the second on content. In one study in the former category, Knox (2003) surveyed consumers of online regional newspapers in an attempt to discover the content sought by audiences. His conclusion suggested that the online content of these newspapers was popular with their audiences, and that the "provision of online content ... may ... cause a further decline in the print base". In the other category of analysis, concerning content, Goot (2008) compared coverage of candidates during the 2007 Australian federal election across all media, not just online. Findings suggested that "the internet's emphasis on the Prime Minister compared with the Leader of the Opposition was greater ... [and that] the internet was more heavily skewed towards Government

over Opposition candidates”, prompting the conclusion that “far from re-ordering old hierarchies, the internet news may have made the election a less even contest” (Goot, 2008, p. 99).

Internationally, a small range of studies has been conducted seeking to explore similarities and differences between paper and web formats of newspapers, some of these including research into whether readers’ interaction with content differs according to format (Barnhurst, 2002; Eveland & Dunwoody, 2002; Holmqvist, Holsanova et al., 2003; D’Haenens, 2004). A number of studies have compared online newspapers with paper editions to determine their respective and differential effects on readers’ acquisition of public affairs knowledge (Martin & Hansen, 1998; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Eveland & Dunwoody, 2004; Schoenbach, de Waal et al., 2005). Such studies of online news and its relationship to print counterparts are important, despite the notion that the two products are likely very similar because many of the same articles appear in both print and online editions, as shown in the widespread use of the term “parallel” (APC, 2006). Yet, as Eveland and Dunwoody (2004 p. 84) demonstrate in their research, online newspapers organise their often quite similar content very differently from the print versions. Consequently, the entire reading experience and any effects produced as a result of the reading may not be at all similar across the two formats.

Taking *The Age* home page of February 13, 2008, as an example, the horizontal blue banner immediately below the masthead features prominent links to sections (from left to right): National, World, Opinion, Business, Technology, Sport, Entertainment, Life & Style, Travel, Auto, Jobs, Real Estate, and Dating. With this format, a reader could easily go via the links straight to the Sport or Travel sections, with barely a glance at even the headlines on the front page. The headlines themselves are not in the same order as those on the front page of the print edition, and do not follow the same cues of relative importance, in terms of public affairs, provided in the traditional print format. Indeed, “readers of the traditional print editions are invited to follow the linear structure and to be led by the newspaper’s priorities, translated in cues – such as the position of the article within the paper, within a section, and on a page ... [While] cues also exist online ... average [online] newspaper users ... follow their own path” (Schoenbach, de Waal et al., 2005 p. 248).

Moreover, the very format of the online editions to a certain extent encourages readers to follow their own paths, a feature that is intrinsic to the medium of the web. As Eveland and Dunwoody (2002, p. 35) argue, with hypermedia such as online newspapers, skipping from one thing to another without necessarily reading very deeply is almost a “structural norm”. It is therefore possible that for many readers “the majority of [the content of] online newspapers are never seen”, as was concluded in one study (Holmqvist, Holsanova et al., 2003, p. 668). This study, using eye-tracking data, examined the reading behaviour of newspaper and online paper readers. One of the findings was that readers of paper newspapers read more content than readers of online news (55.1 per cent of eye fixations for the former, compared with 44.4 per cent for the latter). The findings for online newspapers showed, unsurprisingly, that the middle area of the screen attracted the most time (59 per cent), and that readers preferred the left link to the right.

In contrast, when it came to the print newspapers, this study found that the linear structure of the paper version invites browsing, a much slower activity, as readers turn the pages to look for items that interest them. One effect of this is that readers have at least some exposure to articles that might not be congruent with their personal interests, but which might increase their knowledge about public affairs. Another study found that when online and print newspaper readers were asked to name “the most important problems facing their country [the US]”, paper readers recognised more international issues and a wider variety of stories, and had different perceptions of the “most important problems facing the country” (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002, p. 185). The findings suggest that “by providing users with more content choices and control over exposure, new technologies may allow people to create personalised information environments that shut them off from the larger flows of public information in a society” (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002,

p. 196). This conclusion would not seem to be borne out by the results of the Stanford Poynter Project, although this did not explicitly look into the correlation between reading online newspapers and civic engagement. Also using eye-tracking technology, this study provided interesting data on which stories online news readers read, and which they ignore. It was found that there was a high level of reading of crime and disaster stories, as well as of opinion articles, both via traditional news providers. This study also found that serendipity operates online much as it does offline, as readers scroll through internet pages (Stanford Poynter Project).

One of the main benefits claimed for online newspaper reading is that the web format "provides audiences with substantially more control over the news selection process than they enjoyed with traditional media" (Martin & Hansen, 1998, p. 694). Indeed, it has long been argued that media which remove some of the barriers between audiences and information have the potential to "raise the quality of democracies" (Martin & Hansen, 1998, p. 694). In addition, it is possible that online newspapers could draw in readers who might otherwise not read a newspaper at all (Hoffman, 2006). Conversely, Norris (2001) suggests that while the internet has the potential to strengthen civic participation in democracies, a "democratic divide may still exist between those who do and do not use the multiple political resources available on the internet for civic engagement" (Norris, 2001, p. 12). Significantly, Norris's research shows that only about a third of internet users read newspaper articles online (Norris, 2001, pp. 221, 223). In the current study, the specific part of this issue that we address can be framed by the following questions: What is the relative quantity of public affairs content of the two formats of *The Age*? And is this information arranged in ways that maximise readers' access to it?

Methodology

To seek answers to these questions, a pilot study was conducted involving a census of articles over a three-day period from February 13, 2008, in *The Age* print and online editions (<http://www.theage.com.au/>). We specifically chose these three days as they immediately followed an historical event: the apology of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to Indigenous Australians at a formal ceremony on February 12, 2008. As our aim was to discover the relative amounts and accessibility of articles offering public affairs information in the two editions of *The Age*, this period was chosen because one would expect news published during this time to be rich in public affairs coverage.

Following Boczkowski (2007), who examined the front pages and homepages of Argentina's daily newspapers to compare their associated stories, for our analysis we collected paper editions of *The Age* and captured the home pages of the electronic version of the same paper for the days February 13, 14 and 15. The homepage was chosen for analysis because it represents "an equivalent of a print paper's front page: a user's first visual impression of an online newspaper" (Boczkowski, 2007, p. 171). As Boczkowski noted, this demarcation is useful as a "common metric" (p. 171) when comparing homepages either within or across newspapers. The importance of newspaper front pages has likewise been highlighted by other researchers, since such pages "orient their readers to the world" (Van Leeuwen & Kress, 1998, p. 216). Accordingly, we have confined our pilot study to the front page of the paper edition, and the first screen of the online version. For further methodological guidance we drew on Barnhurst (2002), who examined the online editions of three US newspapers, *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Oregonian*, with the aim of providing a descriptive account of what these newspaper websites "are like for their user/viewer/readers" (Barnhurst, 2002, p. 481). Barnhurst's focus is cognate with ours, especially in his attention to layout and other aesthetic and structural features of online articles. Following his coding procedure, we similarly recorded each story's location in *The Age* online site, such as whether it appears at the top of the first list, or fifth down the page, and so on. We also noted the

number of levels through which a user must click in order to access the story (number of "jumps" or "leaps"); the amount of scrolling down the screen needed to read a story; and "the types of links and images that ran along with the text of the story" (Barnhurst, 2002, p. 481).

Barnhurst's categorisation of content was, however, somewhat broad for our purposes. His first stage was a content analysis of stories, categorising them into the four topics of employment, crimes, accidents and politics. In contrast, the categories we formulated are more focused to our research aims, and will be outlined below. Because we were seeking to ascertain relatively how much of the content of each format – print and online – offers public affairs information, and whether its location and layout maximises readers' access, our categorisations of content needed to be linked to notions of the media as a civic forum, following Habermas's concept of the ideal public sphere (Habermas, 1989). As Sparks (2003) points out, the term "public sphere" is "notoriously complex and contested"; so, following him, we use it in this study "in a relatively simple ... way to direct our attention to the active process whereby denizens of a society come to form their views about the political alternatives facing them" (Sparks, 2003, p. 113). Historically, it is print newspapers that have provided a good deal of the public affairs knowledge necessary for this process, but it has also been incumbent in democratic societies for all media to contribute to such knowledge. Of course, not all media have performed as well as others in providing a democratic civic forum.

Assessing this performance is a complex undertaking, but following Norris, we can say there are "specific indicators ... used to audit how well the media perform" as a civic forum (Norris, 2000, p. 26), and these indicators are normatively derived from Schumpeterian theories of representative democracy. As Norris explains, "the Schumpeterian perspective reflects one of the most widely accepted understandings of democratic institutions ... having been used extensively for cross-national and longitudinal comparisons" (Norris, 2000, p. 23). In this conception of representative democracy, the news media have three basic roles, "as a civic forum, encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs, as a watchdog ... and as a mobilising agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process" (Norris, 2000, p. 12). Clearly these roles can only be achieved if a sizeable percentage of material presented has the capacity to inform readers about public affairs.

Of course, the very term "public affairs" is open to contestation, and what constitutes material of this category in some places or eras is not the same as in others; in the past two decades in Australia, as elsewhere, such categorisation has been in a state of flux. As Lumby states: "The line between the private and the public has become increasingly blurred ... [and] the traditional shape and function of the public sphere itself ... has been substantially remodelled." (Lumby, 1999, p. xi) She goes on to argue that the contemporary media sphere is now a much more "inclusive forum in which a host of important social issues once deemed apolitical, trivial or personal are now being aired" (Lumby, 1999, p. xiii). Other researchers have attempted to deal with this ideological minefield by trying to categorise news articles into "hard" and "soft" news. These terms lead to even more difficulties. Boczkowski (2007), sidestepping notions of inherent quality, draws on Tuchman's (1978) view to state that hard news deals with unscheduled events, with its publication seen as urgent, while soft news does not need to be published urgently.

In order to situate our classification system outside these important and valid but, for the moment, unresolvable debates, yet within notions of "encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs ... and as a mobilising agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process" (Norris, 2000, p. 12), we devised our own categories of news article classification to pilot in the present news census (see Table 1 below). Articles that could be categorised into our "Category A" classification correspond to more traditional notions of public affairs; whereas articles classifiable as "Category B" contain content that represents the inclusiveness of discussions taking place in the contemporary media sphere. Because these topics are no less "important

social issues" (Lumby, 1999, p. xiii), we consider them under the rubric of public affairs. The use of these two categories will enable us to see what would be excluded from the category of "public affairs" if a more traditional notion of the term were used. In addition, we decided to add the descriptors N and W to denote national or world news, as this is significant information and could be used in later studies when we go on to compare Australian online news coverage with that of international "newspapers of record", such as *The Guardian*, or *The New York Times*. Category C articles were those that did not deal with public affairs. Two researchers were used for the classification process, randomly cross-checking each other's categorisations for consistency (which was 100 per cent).

Table 1: Description of categories

Category	Article content
A	Public affairs of a political nature, including party politics, economics and defence.
B	Articles dealing with public affairs of a civic or non-political nature, including social, moral, ethical, health and environmental issues.
C	Articles dealing largely with content other than the public affairs topics listed above.
N = national news, W = world news	

This unique form of categorisation is specifically tailored to the research aims of the current study, and, to our knowledge, has not been used before. Boczkowski (2007) previously considered "whether a story was about a public affairs subject – including politics, economics, and international news – or a non-public affairs matter – such as sports, crime, culture, science, technology and medicine, and natural disasters and accidents" (Boczkowski, 2007, p. 172), all of which are more commonly used categories in news research (see the APC report, for example). But these categories were not specific enough for our research aims; for example, in the paper edition of February 13, an article indexed on the front page, but appearing in the Sports section, was by Aboriginal footballer Syd Jackson, featured in this index by the line "I wonder where I would be without football". Clearly this is a personal account of his life, made particularly successful by his career as an elite footballer; but it is also an account that reflects on the disadvantage of many other Aboriginal Australians, a subject that should most certainly be considered as public affairs. As such, both researchers agreed that this article would be in the Category B classification. Other classification systems, such as Boczkowski's, would classify such an article as "sports", and therefore "non-public affairs".

Analysis and discussion of findings

Any analysis that includes what newspaper websites "are like for their user/viewer/ readers" (Barnhurst, 2002, p. 481) is going to be very concerned with the "front page", and in the case of the web version, the home page. Unlike the paper front page, however, the home page has only about one quarter of its content visible on a computer screen at any one time. On an average 17-inch desktop computer screen (using standard browsers such as Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox), until the viewer scrolls down, the "bottom" of the computer screen is just below the horizontal row of five photos/graphics underneath the main news headlines and summaries. Instead of headlines, each of these five graphics has a generic or descriptive label, such as (on February 13) Travel, Rowing (a sub-group of sport), People, Film, and Blog, underneath which is a brief and apparently deliberately tantalising summary of the (usually Category C) story. For example, on February 13, we see: "Mills reportedly had an affair while dating Sir Paul", and "George Lucas to bring new Star Wars to theatres", among others. Each of these lines of text, both title and summary, is hyperlinked to its full article on another level of the website. Indeed, most

material highlighted on the home page actually appears, as Barnhurst (2002, p. 482) has noted, on another level of the website, often under "topical" headings (national, world, business, and so on). So the web page functions, in effect, as an "elaborate index" (Barnhurst, 2002, p. 482) with illustrations.

Figure 1: "First screen" of home page of *The Age* online version, February 13, 2008



In common with the top of the paper's first page, the masthead appears at the top of *The Age's* home page at <http://www.theage.com.au>, below which are hyperlinks to traditional news sections and classified advertisements. There is so much material in this top quarter, constituting the reader's whole computer screen, all of which seems visually framed to appear self-contained and complete, that it seems likely many readers would confine themselves to the links and their second-level stories in this top quarter, and not scroll further down or use the Page Down key to find the National and World news sections, which both lie below the first screen seen in a regular browser (although they are still on the same website level). Someone clicking on the sports story in this row of graphically presented links at the bottom of their computer screen would then find links to all the current sports stories on the news page, thus obviating the need to return to the home page to scroll down to the sports section. A similar reading strategy applies for entertainment news. Given that the format encourages this reading practice, the online newspaper facilitates Althus and Tewksbury's view that readers can create "information environments" (2002, p. 196) tailored to their personal interests, avoiding all other topics including public affairs. Although for this pilot study we confined our census to this first screen, it needs to be noted that this layout militates against readers accessing National and World public affairs content which is below the "first screen" visible in a standard browser (see Figure 1 for example of the "first screen").

In collecting the stories for categorisation from the home page, we started with the top centre article (See Figure 1), which was the most significant headline on the page, appearing bigger than the others and in bold type. We termed this first article no. 1, and worked down the list of headlines, numbering the articles as we did so. It is likely that the majority of readers also start with

this list since, as Holmqvist et al (2003, p. 668) showed, readers are most attracted to the middle area of the screen. There are usually five headlines in this first, central list, with short summaries below each hyperlinked headline. Below this list appears another dot-pointed list of five articles (nos. 6-10), with hyperlinked headlines in smaller type and no summaries. We then moved left, to the main picture which is always placed on the left of these stories, immediately under the paper's masthead, and we collected the story (no. 11) which accompanies the picture; we continued numbering down the page in the section called "Breaking News" that is positioned immediately below the picture. In this section there are typically headlines/links to three stories. These are usually attributed to the Australian Associated Press agency. Each of these links leads to a story page with a long list of AAP items, with times of arrival, under the heading News Wire.

Returning to the homepage, we can see that the right-hand third of the screen consists mainly of lifestyle, entertainment and celebrity stories and advertisements. The top item in this section displays rapidly changing news items, with graphics, usually about celebrities. Beneath this is an item headed "Video News", with a small colour still picture and three to five hyperlinked headlines, linked to videos of political or public affairs news items. On February 13, this section's first story, alongside a photo of film star Reese Witherspoon, was entitled: "Reese: bullying 'good for kids'", followed by the summary: "Reese Witherspoon wants her children to be bullied at school". In the section underneath it, headed "Video News", were four hyperlinks. They were: "Giant leap for reconciliation", "Hear Rudd's sorry speech in full", "Scientists track space debris", and "Sri Lanka on the board (cricket story)". These video news stories sometimes have content that we categorised as A or B, either National or World, but are predominantly sport and Category C material. Thus, all of the right-hand third of the screen, apart from "Video News", is material that could not be described as public affairs.

On the front page of the paper version, the articles are much more clearly demarcated, and ascribed a level of relative importance – by the physical boundaries of the page, and also by layout and size. There are some articles appearing only in indexed form on this front page also, such as the one by the Aboriginal footballer, mentioned above. Such indices are analogous to the indices on the web home page, although a click is a much simpler action to perform than turning to a numbered page, and manipulating and folding large sheets of paper. For this reason, it is more likely that once readers are looking at the paper front page, they will read an article, or some of it, before turning the page. There are usually two to three, and sometimes four, articles on the front page, most of which are continued on a later page inside the paper. Other articles are indexed by a headline and summary, and an arrow indicating the page where this article will be found.

The table below summarises the results of our categorisation of the items found on the front page of the paper version of *The Age* over three days (including items briefly summarised with the reader referred to other pages), and the first screen of the home page of the online version.

Table 2: Results of our classification

Paper			Online		
Category	No. of items	% of total items	Category	No. of items	% of total items
AN	8	58%	AN	6	18%
AW	3		AW	1	
BN	6	31%	BN	15	41%
BW	0		BW	1	
CN	2	11%	CN	12	41%
CW	0		CW	4	

N = National news W = World news

Public affairs content of the two formats

Given that the first online screen contained more stories – or links to them – of all kinds, than the paper’s front page, yet less reading matter on the whole, what conclusion can be drawn in answer to the first of our questions – What is the relative quantity of public affairs content of the two formats of *The Age*?

First, the paper version clearly shows a stronger bias on its front page towards stories of a public affairs nature, particularly those about politics (Category A). The online version contained only seven stories about politics against the paper version’s 11, for example, and we found that 41 per cent of online stories contained no public affairs content; that is, we placed them in Category C. Against this finding, it could be argued that the online version linked to 23 articles with political/public affairs content, while the paper version contained only 17. But it remains unclear whether absolute numbers constitute the only conclusive factor here. The sensibility of the response given to the first question depends partly on the answer to our second question about the arrangement of news. We did not seek to judge the value or importance of any kinds of stories, but it may be worth investigating in future studies the nature of stories in Category C in order to sub-classify them.

Second, it is clear that stories in Category C had little place on the front page of the newspaper version; the Category C stories we found were, in fact, hard to categorise. For example, one was about the Australian Football League’s plans to expand into Sydney’s west and the Gold Coast, which we rated as a sports story, even though its content was serious and possibly interesting, if not vital, to many in the community; another was an item about the largest-ever donation to the National Gallery of Victoria, which we deemed to be of interest to some readers but not of public affairs significance.

The particular nature of the main story covered on February 13 and 14, 2008, also affected the numbers in our table; the paper version gave its front pages in entirety to Sorry Day, with the exception of a few items notified on the bottom of the page. It was reasonable to predict that on “normal” days the paper would have published two more stories on each day, most likely in categories A and B, thus increasing the percentage of actual stories in those categories.

There is no doubt that in the online version there was notification of more public affairs stories overall than in the paper version: 23 against 17 over the three-day period. We did not ask if there was more homogeneity of content within categories in both versions of the paper, but this question would have been useful in making the comparison in terms of public affairs. For February 15, for example, the table below shows the items on the front page of the paper version in categories A and B:

Table 3: Front page items – paper version

1. Tax cuts on way – and higher rates	Article: substantial text	Category: A (N)
2. Salary freeze for Federal MPs	Article: substantial text	Category: A (N)
3. Betting scandal claims racing chief	Article: substantial text	Category: B (N)
4. Teenager wrote his ‘will for jihad’	Referral to another page	Category: B (N)
5. Splits emerge in Rudd’s new deal for Aborigines	Referral to another page	Category: A (N)

On the same day, the online version contained on its first screen at 1pm the following news items which we categorised as A or B:

Table 4: "First screen" items – online version

1. Terror accused 'on security list'	Main "headline" area in centre	Category: B (N)
2. Judge tightens Underbelly ban	Main "headline" area in centre	Category: A (N)
3. Tight security as PM lands in Dili	Main "headline" area in centre	Category: A (N)
4. Woman's fury at Nelson's speech	Dot point section below	Category: A (N)
5. Mullett to quit union job	Dot point section below	Category: B (N)
6. Scientists' strike hits surgery	Dot point section below	Category: B (N)
7. Perpetual funds fall 8% in January	Breaking news section	Category: B (N)
8. Rudd pledges support for E. Timor	Breaking news section	Category: A (N)

In this case, items 4 (paper) and 1 (online) were about the same subject, the trial of 12 men in Melbourne accused of plotting terrorist acts. Items 5 (paper) and 4 (online) were very broadly about the same subject, the National Apology or Sorry Day, although they focused on completely different aspects of the politics involved. Albeit with different headlines, items 1 and 5 from the paper version could be found in the online version, but one had to scroll down to the "National" section on the second screen. However, no reference to stories about a salary freeze for MPs or a betting scandal (paper items 2 and 3) were referenced anywhere on the online home page. It is possible that some of the stories from the online version appeared in later pages of the newspaper version. Some of the online stories must have simply come to light after the newspaper had been printed. For example, Prime Minister Rudd's pledge of support for East Timor was timed at 12.43pm, appearing in the "Breaking News" section, and could have been recorded in the next day's paper edition, albeit with the addition of further developments and perhaps with the benefit of time for rumination and comment and opinion to be added. This extra content could conceivably also be included in the next day's online version. Similar observations were made about the stories contained in both versions on February 12 and 13.

The fact that the newspaper is unalterable once it has been printed while the online version changes regularly during the day means that the public affairs content is not really homogeneous; there is a rather small overlap, which probably decreases during the day. It is, of course, possible that some of the stories in the online version appeared in later pages of the newspaper version, which we did not survey. A survey of this nature would usefully complement a study such as ours. The survey would, in fact, really need to compare the online version with the content of the papers of the same day and the following day, allowing for breaking items to find their way into print in the hours after publication on the website. Such a survey could also compare the amount of detail and level of prominence given to the stories in each version, as these could influence the degree to which the public's knowledge of public affairs is influenced. Of course, these conclusions can be qualified by pointing to the inherently different "structural norms" (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2002, p. 5) of paper front page and home page. It is in the nature of news websites to direct readers via links to new levels where they can read the text of the articles; the first screen is an index of what is available to the reader if the links are clicked.

A final observation about the numbers of public affairs items centres on the rapidity with which items in all categories find their way on to the website. By the time a serious public affairs issue or event has reached the front page of the paper version, it may have become the subject of follow-up pieces, background articles and comment and opinion, thus placing the "story" in a context which may be better able to provide readers with deeper public affairs knowledge and understanding. It could be argued that sheer numbers of articles are not as important as the context in which they appear; speed is not always paramount. The mere fact of the print version of the paper being published only once for the day constructs a sense of a major story's importance, as if that news, that front page, has become "solidified". In contrast, the online version has an inher-

ent need to be updated regularly, and so a major news story may be "lightened" in treatment or displaced in the rolling list of headlines by something apparently more immediate and dramatic.

Public affairs information and reader access

This consideration of context leads to discussion of our second question: Is public affairs information arranged in ways that maximise readers' access to it? This question hinges on the different natures of the two media. Web-based news sites that rely on traditional sources such as the main news agencies may in their current format simply be less suited to the presentation of public affairs content. Market research may have already told management that their typical readership is more interested in other kinds of material, or material presented in different proportions or formats. They may, for example, be known to like their public affairs news juxtaposed with pictures and videos of celebrities, or with news about freak accidents or brutal murders. The online version of *The Age* does, in fact, seem to utilise this format, suggesting it might see its readers as belonging to a different segment of the population to those who read the paper version, perhaps preferring to read news stories in a different setting or with different content from the paper version. Some readers may access online content in addition to reading the paper version of the news.

The first and most obvious point to make about the arrangement of stories, whether they be public affairs based or not, is that it takes a decision, an effort of will, to find and read a story of any sort in the web version; a link must be clicked which takes the reader away from the headlines of the moment to another page with more links and advertisements, and usually another link to a second page, or one which allows the reader to see all the story on one page. It might be argued that the paper version requires a turning and scanning of pages to find stories of interest or importance; but even the most casual reader would be likely to turn over at least several pages of the newspaper looking for items of interest. The data in our table indicate that even on the front page alone some in-depth coverage of public affairs news stories exists, despite two of our copies of *The Age* manifesting the infrequent phenomenon of full-page coverage of one story. We found that the online version invited one to read many headlines and very brief summaries on the first screen, but that the one or several mouse clicks to gain access to the full text would usually lead one well away from the main page.

Second, we observed that there are many distractions from public affairs stories on virtually every level of the web pages. For example, one can click on a story of national or world significance, and be taken to a page that also contains the Top Ten "most viewed stories". A casual glance at these over our three-day survey period showed them to be overwhelmingly rated as Category C stories. This is the template at work; even the main story link "February 13, the Sorry Day speech by the Prime Minister", led the reader to encounter the Top Ten beside the text of the speech. Further, on the first screen, the main stories of the moment are surrounded by graphically highlighted links to lifestyle, entertainment and sport stories, which could well distract many casual readers. It should be pointed out, in defence of the online version, that it did publish the full text of Mr Rudd's Sorry speech, whereas only extracts could be found in the paper version, although these included the very prominent one on the front page.

With the online version's headlines constantly and rapidly changing in the course of the day, it could be inferred by readers that new items are somehow of a more "urgent" nature and therefore should be prioritised. After all, traditionally "hard" news has been seen to refer to events that require urgent publication (Tuchman, 1978). But does our categorisation of the content support the view that if it is "fresh" news it is "hard news", and therefore of public affairs significance? We have found that this is far from the case, despite the constant updating of headlines as items arrive in the newsroom, giving a superficial impression of "urgency". **Items in the headline area**

in the middle of the page at the top assumed an air of equal importance, yet many were identified as Category C stories.

The articles published in the paper version show how other news can be excluded from the front page when a story or stories of historic significance emerges, such as those on Sorry Day. In this case, on the two days, February 13 and 14, the whole front page of the paper was taken up with coverage of this important event, thereby aiding in the construction of its historic status. This variability, recognising the public significance of the occasional urge to raise a matter such as Sorry Day to a level of over-riding importance, has no parallel in the online version, although we are yet to see whether this would change in the event of a local catastrophe or advent of world war, for example. The massive graphical dominance of the story on page one of February 13, with a quote from the Prime Minister's speech in very large type, might have created a much more immediate and powerful awareness in readers' minds, to the exclusion of other news items which were referred to at the bottom of the page with 25-word summaries. In the online version, this main story was allocated no more than the usual amount of space given to the topmost item. Nevertheless, the coverage of only one, albeit major and historic, event, on the front page of the paper version was abnormal and skewed our findings somewhat, although at the same time it served to contrast with the online homepage which treated the story much like any other major event, by putting it at the top of the central list as well as under the main picture.

Conclusion

In summary, it seems that in terms of absolute numbers, there is as much if not more public affairs news included or referenced on the first screen of the online version as on the front page of the paper version. But the online version also contains many items of no public affairs significance at all. The paper front pages surveyed showed a much greater leaning towards public affairs than towards Category C items – sport, entertainment, crime, accidents, lifestyle, celebrities, and so on. These front pages revealed an overwhelmingly greater proportion of public affairs stories than their online counterparts. The paper version provides substantial text and detail in its front page coverage and rarely points to stories from Category C in the following pages, except in advertisements placed in a banner above the masthead. It would be wrong to think the absolute numbers of articles in our public affairs categories – A and B – indicate the online version's superior ability to convey knowledge and understanding of these matters. In fact, the nature of the website, where readers must click on the links to follow a story to its end, and the broader setting of these items among many distractions, may inhibit learning about current affairs.

Our study finds, in brief, that the paper version suggests to its readers that public affairs is more important than other topics; and while readers of the online version have access to much of the same material, they likely receive the impression – from the format, presentation, and plethora of choices – that public affairs is no more important, or even less so, than stories about crime, personal tragedies, entertainment, celebrities, and other ephemera. Much more comparative research needs to be undertaken in Australia, however. For example, apparently no figures yet exist on, and we have not been able to consider in this study, the implications of the idea that many readers read news in both formats, a practice that would ameliorate any constructions about relative importance of stories.

As we have noted, the current survey is but a start for future research in this area and could lead to a larger study, involving a wider corpus comprising a probability sample collected over a six-week period, and using a range of common metrics. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the periods of time that a story remains in the topmost position on the home page, or to track its movement through the changing list of headlines throughout the day. Studies of the audiences engaging with each format are also urgently needed, as flagged above in our comment about people

reading both types of newspapers. Meanwhile, if we return to Norris's (2000, p. 23) focus on the Schumpeterian perspective, in which a measurement of the efficacy of a democracy is whether its news media encourages pluralistic debate about public affairs, acting as a watchdog as well as a mobilising agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process, how well can we say that Australian online newspapers (at least as represented by our small sample) are achieving this? Until more research, along the lines we have suggested, is carried out in Australia, we can say only that it seems probable from our sample that online newspapers do not encourage as much public learning and participation in public affairs as their paper counterparts.

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