

Conceptualising Online News Use

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Abstract

This paper is based on the first results of the FLEET-project (Flemish E-publishing Trends), started in March 2006 and focussing on the transition of newspapers to online news sites. The scope of this paper is to investigate the existing concepts used in media studies to analyse the use of news and to refine and complete these concepts in order to develop an up-to-date conceptual framework for the study of online news. The starting point is the changing relationship between newspapers and their readers. The traditional roles of newspapers i.e. agenda-setter, watchdog and content provider are revisited in relation to the possibilities online media offer their readers in terms of participation: share, rate, tag, comment, produce news, etc. As newsreaders become news users they take over these roles or parts of them from the newspapers and mass media in general. By looking at this changed relationship concepts like participation, trust, community, lean-back/lean-forward and prosumer emerge as important differentiating factors and hence are explored as relevant concepts for the study of online news. In order to come to these findings, the literature consulted for this paper will be completed with the outcome of a series of interviews with experts in the Flemish e-publishing sector.

Introduction

When the World Wide Web was introduced, doom scenarios predicting the end of newspapers and television made their appearance. Twenty years later, both are still here. Even though research has made clear that online news is used in a complementary way with newspapers, not substituting them (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000), the Internet is still seen as one of the major reasons for the decrease in newspaper readers. Different technological aspects of the Internet have been studied as possibly attracting features for readers. A lot of research has been done on hypertextuality as changing the role of the newspaper to a news hub through which readers can access other information sites what makes reading a newspaper non linear (Cohen, 2002). Multimedia and interactivity have also been pinpointed as the main features attracting people to the online medium, whereas research on on-screen reading has proven it to be a strong threshold for consuming information on the computer and hence online (Beyers, 2002). This however is a rather technology-centred approach that does not take into account how people react on these new possibilities. Why would anyone watch the news online when image quality is still better on his or her television? The reasons for turning to the Internet for news have to be found in a much wider framework than just these technology-based aspects and the possibilities they offer. The interaction between these possibilities and the way people use them is very complex. In contrast to what the hype on web 2.0, new

media and social software would like us to believe, the participatory, personally customized in-depth news is far from being commonly used and expected, even if the technological means are available (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). Often however, studies on these new possibilities of the Internet¹ analyse the ad hoc consequences of these technological possibilities whereas the long-term effects still need to prove whether these services are as revolutionary as they are often claimed to be. The social structure of (online) publishing is not changing as fast as the constantly improving technological capacities of the online medium (Kling & Callahan, 2003). This social structure is the starting point of this paper that wants to investigate the existing concepts used in media studies to analyse the use of news and to refine and complete these concepts in order to develop an up-to-date conceptual framework for the study of online news. This conceptual framework must allow us to look at technological change from a less technology-oriented view but rather point to the changes in the relation between the newspaper and its readers. In order to come to this framework, the paper will analyse one aspect of this changed relationship i.e. the roles that are traditionally ascribed to newspapers and mass media in general. New media give people an increasing possibility to challenge these roles. By looking at the newspaper as an agenda-setter, a watchdog and a content provider, the impact of these new technologies will be framed in a wider context. These are certainly not the only roles that have been attributed to the press or the mass media in general through the development of mass media theory and the scope is not to give an in-dept overview of the theory on these roles as this has already been accomplished (McQuail, 2000), but rather to use these three roles as a way of conceptualizing the changes that might possibly occur in the relationship between newspapers and readers from a theoretical perspective. By doing so, the focus does not lie on the technology itself but on the way people are – or are not – using this technology and how this affects this social structure. First of all this will throw new light on the evolutions in the newspaper sector. Secondly, the blanks in the existing conceptual framework will become clear. As was mentioned above, the participatory possibilities offered by the new media seem to be of interest only to a minority of users. What remains unclear is whether, when and for which reasons the readers will use these available tools to alter or keep this relationship. In order to address these questions, the right conceptual framework is needed. The media-sector is being forced to view its relationship with the customer through a different mindset in order to anticipate and understand these changes. When investigating this relationship, researchers also need to take into account the factors that play a role in this new mindset.

¹ People like Tim Berners-Lee who was at the origin of the World Wide Web do not find web 2.0 a good term as the technology to make these new services possible was already available in the early days of the Internet.

Methodological approach

In order to argument these hypotheses a literature study was undertaken including academic sources as well as relevant (online) media sources. This literature is complemented by expert interviews. Recently, this qualitative research method has been gaining momentum as a fast access to a new or unknown field (Flick, 2002; Froschauer & Lueger, 2003). Experts often have high insight in aggregated and/or specific knowledge about ongoing processes, strategies or evolutions that are difficult to explore through other methods. According to Meuser and Nagel an expert is a person who has privileged access to information about groups of persons or decision processes or who is responsible for the development, implementation or control of solutions, strategies and/or policies (Meuser & Nagel, 2002). Expert knowledge has three dimensions (Dunn, 2004). The first is technical knowledge, very specific information on a certain field like details on operations, laws,... that influence the field. Process knowledge covers information on routines, specific interactions and processes. The expert holds this information because he/she is directly involved in it. Subjective interpretations of relevance, rules, beliefs or ideas and ideologies are explanatory knowledge. The expert him/herself is then the focus of the interview. For this paper, eight experts were interviewed. All of them have access to relevant information on the evolutions in the print sector because of their actual or previous employment or expertise in the sector. Some of them hold strategic positions within the media company they represent and therefore wished to remain anonymous. The author chose to keep all of them anonymous for the sake of the paper's uniformity. Because the experts' responses are relevant as an information source rather than as a respondents answer, this does not compromise the methodological process. The scope of the interviews was to gain explanatory and process knowledge on the Flemish situation as well as insight in what people actively involved in the sector experience as the most important bottlenecks towards the newsreader. This information nuances the theory and literature and refines the Flemish situation². Furthermore, in a second stage of the research, this information will be used for preparing interview topic lists for ethnographic research. Because expert knowledge is not neutral, it is important to work both with experts and counter experts (Dunn, 2004). Experts being people who take part in the societal debate, it is needed to be careful not to give more weight to one specific side of the debate. The selected experts were therefore chosen in a way that their opinion on the whole represent different views within the debate on the definition of the problem (i.e. media – user relationship). Hereby, we seek to respond to the methodological critique one might have on the fact that the obtained knowledge is not neutral as the debate is characterised by power relations balancing the argumentation between conservative and innovative affinities. Other classic critiques on qualitative interviews as a method for data-collection include the fact that the interview setting influences the information obtained and that the effects

² This paper is partially based on the first output of the FLEET-project (Flemish E-publishing Trends). The experts however were selected in such way they provided information on the Flemish context as well as on the more general evolutions in the media-sector.

of interaction between interviewer and interviewee are rather high. With expert interviews the risks are quiet high that an asymmetric relation in favour of the interviewee resides because of the discrepancy in knowledge. Bogner and Menz call this the interviewer as layperson. The advantages are a high level of confidence by the interviewee, which generates a pressure to explain. On the other hand, the interviewer is not empowered to guide the interview. The interviews however took place after the author finished an in-depth literature study, which prepared him to face the interviewees rather as an expert outside the field (Bogner & Menz, 2005). Furthermore, the author being a media scientist, the possible discrepancy between both is reduced. This generates the advantage for the interviewer of being able to guide the interview. Moreover, a high level of discussion and information sharing is generated, were high explanation of motives and orientation is possible.

The relationship between newspapers and their readers

Previous research shows that various evolutions in the media market have an impact on how newspapers and their readers relate to each other. Market-driven journalism, as McManus pointed out, has been jeopardising the media's role as an independent fourth estate since the eighties (McManus, 1994). The rise of free newspapers in the late nineties alongside the boom of free online information sources have weakened the position of newspapers forcing them to jump on the trend of more compact news, infotainment and tabloidisation which erodes their role as watchdogs. People's ever more rushed lives and the growth of new and often complementary media (radio and television, computer programs, Internet, games, dvd, mp3...) have reduced the time people are able to spend to newspapers and the attention they can pay to the articles. The newspaper sector is being challenged by a series of new players. This was already the case when radio and television appeared, but the introduction of the Internet takes this a step further because of the digitalisation of content. As the Internet is a medium for text, audio and video, newspapers, television stations and radio become direct competitors. Because virtually everyone has access to the Internet, these traditional media also must compete with other content providers like companies and governments engaging in direct communication with their customers, news sites like nu.nl, Google News, msn.com and the blogosphere. As an expert put it, "*from the point of view of a content provider, the medium through which the content reaches the consumers is not important*". The overall discussion in the newspaper sector tends towards the question how newspapers will remain viable in this context or in the words of the Economist, "*who killed the newspaper?*" (*The Economist, 2006b*). It is the scope of this paper to look beyond the market and the way new players, including the readers, are competing with the newspapers to scrutinize the more fundamental changes in the role of newspapers. These roles have

traditionally been attended with a very normative theory building on how the press should operate if certain social values are to be observed and attained (McQuail, 2000). Even though this kind of theory is quiet important, it would take a paper on its own to deal with the normative ideas that come along with new media. This goes beyond the scope of this paper; even though some arguments made may be linked to certain values attributed to the media through their role.

The role of newspapers in a democratic society

From its early days, the newspaper was an actual or potential adversary of established (democratic) power, especially in its own self-perception. In this regard, the term "fourth estate" is used in literature, later on joined by "public watchdog", a notion covering ideas of the press as representative of the public, critic of government, advocate of policy and policy-maker. The power of the press arose from its ability to give or withhold publicity and from its informative capacity (McQuail, 2000). The ability to give or withhold publicity or information of any kind in general to reach the audience brings us to another role of the press i.e. the one of gatekeeper, selecting which facts will be reported. This role is closely linked to the agenda setting process or the possibility to decide on what news is covered and which issues are emphasized. As David H. Weaver, who has worked on studies of media agenda setting since 1972, argues this area of research is closely interconnected to framing and priming. Framing can be defined as the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration. When focussing on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion the term priming is used to describe that media may suggest which issues to use in evaluating political actors (Weaver, 2007). Finally, the press is an important news provider, a window on the world for its readers. More than other mass media, *"a responsible press should provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning"* (McQuail, 2000). As the interviewed experts unanimously stated, newspapers must apart from bringing the news, offer the readers the background information and other informational means to fully understand and contextualise what happens. Still, one expert emphasized the fact that both on national as international level, news is a commodity. As another expert said: *"when the sector is looking at the new possibilities new media are offering, the main issue is not how to improve journalistic quality, but how to develop a well functioning and stable business model for those new services"*. According to Denis McQuail, the new media provide the means for highly differentiated provision of political information on ideas, almost unlimited access in theory for all voices, and much feedback and negotiation between leaders and followers (McQuail, 2000). It is clear that all three roles are challenged by the new media, as will be explored in the next section.

Newspapers as an agenda setter

Agenda Setting and online news

Agenda setting and the gate-keeping process linked to it is one of the roles of newspapers and media in general that has been thoroughly investigated in communication science and is widely recognised (McQuail, 2000). In her study of news reading in 1988, Doris Graber concluded that story importance clues supplied by editors and the match between story topics and their own interests are the most important criteria used by newspaper readers when choosing the stories to read. These cues are article location, the size of headlines and visuals and story length and repetition. Articles that are more upfront or which have large and catchy headlines are more likely to be selected to read. These criteria are however, according to Graber, easily overruled by the interest readers show in a certain topic (Graber, 1988). These criteria however are medium-based. The way to access articles on a website is different. Websites offer people a more direct way to access stories of their interest by organising the news into topical categories or by offering easy search functions. As Althaus and Tewksbury put it in their research on the role of the medium on agenda setting, these features limit the potential that online readers will be exposed to the particular stories that a newspaper's editorial staff deems important (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). In that same study on how agenda setting might be influenced by the medium for delivering news content, the authors discovered that print readers partly modify their agenda's differently than online readers do. When comparing readers from the paper and online version of the Times, the former seemed to systematically come away with different perceptions of the most important problems facing the country. The authors conclude 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 larger flows of public information in society further fragmenting the news audiences. In other words, readers are able to set their own news agenda. The features of Internet however not only make it possible for readers to be more selective in their readings, but also to share the news that comes high on their personal agenda with their fellow readers and this on a large scale, creating a parallel peer-driven news agenda.

Agenda setting and online communities (of interest)

On digg.com people can post news items for the readers to rate. The best-rated articles come on top of digg.com's homepage. Readers can also select the best-rated stories amongst different categories of interest. The New York Times holds a list on his site of the most e-mailed and blogged articles. Citizen journalism sites like OhMyNews.com in Korea and news sites like nieuws.skynet.be in Belgium offer readers a most-read selection of the news. These are only but a few examples of the way readers are generating

an own agenda of important topics. Not only are the intrinsic features of websites playing a role in the way the agenda set by editors is perceived by readers, communities of readers, either because they actively participate or because their online reading pattern is easily monitored, are able to define an own agenda of interests. An expert put it as follows: *"web 2.0 is an answer to the limits of looking for the right news. If 10.000 people with the same interests as me are making the same search every day, then it is more fruitful to organise this search and to share it with them"*. The members of a news community become the agenda-setters for that community. As was mentioned before, news is everywhere. As another expert stressed, *"users do not feel like making a selection on their own out of an overload of information and expect that from their newspaper"*. By doing this, the newspapers and media in general are able to set an agenda of newsworthiness. Users online, through applications as digg.com, rss readers or Google News Alerts, are now able to set their own agenda. As a third expert countered, *"the user could have read this information package in the paper where he would be sure the information would have been double-checked. A newspaper is more than a news provider but also a label of quality"*. A fourth expert emphasized the importance of good filters in the increased news offer, believing that *"this role could be taken by traditional, generic news media who could "filter" what is seen as "the news" for a majority of users"*. What is clear is that there is a struggle for the appropriation of this role and that different players could take different parts of this role depending on the news wanted. These aspects are closely linked to the normative discussion on the newspaper knowing what is good for you to know versus the reader who can choose for himself but then risks to lose out on some relevant information. In certain cases, user communities have been proved to be able to use the Internet (or more specifically the blogosphere) to put what they think is relevant on the news agenda. In June 2002 e.g. two 14-year-old schoolgirls were run over by an armored US military vehicle north of Seoul, South Korea. OhmyNews, an alternative online news startup, picked up the story and put it on the national news agenda by garnering millions of visits on their site. The emergence and success of alternative online news services challenged the dominance of major – mostly conservative – national newspapers in shaping the public opinion (Song, 2007). Such spontaneous reactions of the public are nothing new, but it is undeniable that Internet as a medium can play an important role in the fast, easy and cheap spreading of user-generated information as an alternative news source. In this case, however, it is also important to note that even this rather sophisticated and 100% user generated content site has a heavy editing process of the content that comes in from approved "contributors" from around the world (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). This editing authority still has the role of gatekeeper. When talking about communities build round a newspapers' site, an expert coined the term gatewatching, *"letting the participative happen en just watch whether the delivered content is acceptable in terms of privacy and deontology"*.

An interesting concept in agenda setting theory in this perspective is the inter-media agenda-setting model, the process in which media coverage of a certain topic increases after major media players give prominent play to it (Song, 2007). This is an interesting concept because it plays an important role within the alternative news source community. We could speak of the inter-blog effect. As an expert stated, "*the impact of blogs is relative to the collective effect. A blogger's story only has an effect when it is picked up by other bloggers. In the blogosphere this effect is less structured, less predictable and more dependent on the quality and newsworthiness of the posted story than between newspapers.*" Through initiatives like OhMyNews, Global Voices or digg.com users' views are aggregated and canalised in a way their impact can grow bigger. Of course, many of these sites or features might not be more than a '*news idol*', an entertaining feature that will boost sensational and socially less relevant stories to the top of the homepages.

On the other hand, these sites "*attract serious citizen reporting which tries to serve as society's democratic watchdog, a role that mainstream media have more and more abandoned*" (Hauben, 2007).

Newspapers as a watchdog

In media theory mass media and hence newspapers have been regarded as a kind of fourth estate watching over the integrity of the executive, legislative and juridical institutions. As an expert stated, "*when a newspaper publishes a study that is relevant, then the public opinion will acknowledge it and react. The involved political and corporate actors will react, allowing the newspaper to play its role in society*". However, John McManus pointed out in his book *Market-Driven Journalism* already in 1994, that the press has evolved in its 150 years of existence, making news a *commodity* in the news *market* (McManus, 1994). According to McManus this business logic is crafting journalism to serve the market and not democracy. What is at stake is the survival of a public knowledgeable enough about current issues and events to govern itself (McManus, 1994). The press has been assisted in his watchdog role by nonprofits, nongovernmental organisation or civil society groups. The exponential growth of these organisations in the last decennia led Stuart E. Eizenstat to term them as "Fifth Estate". One of the reasons for this growth according to Eizenstat is to be found in the use of Internet, e-mail and mobile phones that allowed groups to build advocacy networks and to coordinate global campaigns to an extend that would have been impossible even as late as the 1970s (Eizenstat, 2004). Without getting caught up into technology deterministic reasoning, it is not too harsh to say that the Internet has drastically facilitated the way for people to publish whatever information online. Moreover, it also makes it easier to communicate over large distances at high speed. What the Internet, websites and email did for the civil society, web 2.0 is doing for

the people in general, turning the Internet in a viral platform for people to share and aggregate information and opinions. Already, this aggregation has led readers to call into account the media. Recent examples are the Rathergate scandal in the United States where Dan Rather reported in his highly respected news show *60 minutes* on CBS September 2004 about a number of documents accusing president George W. Bush of having misused his family ties to skip military orders. Only three hours after the show was aired Scott Johnson launched in the blogosphere a post challenging the authenticity of the documents based on anachronisms in the typography. Two weeks of speculations later, CBS admitted that the documents were not authenticated by their experts as they had reported, eventually leading to the firing of producers Mary Mapes and several senior news executives (Van Brackel, 2004). "The old media model was: there is one source of truth. The new media model is: there are multiple sources of truth, and we will sort it out," says Joe Kraus, the founder of JotSpot, which makes software for wikis (The Economist, 2006a). An important principle here is collective intelligence: even if the media have their own experts double-checking their sources, it is likely that between the thousands of media users, there will be a number of people with the same or higher level of expertise. Scott Johnson e.g. is a lawyer at a prestigious law firm in Minneapolis and vice president of a bank. Such people have a certain authority that can compete with that of a news agency. An expert stressed the fact that *"journalists could let evolve an article on the blogs, letting people participate, correct and add information, giving it more social relevance so it can be picked up by politicians"*. In this perspective, newspaper's watchdog role can be reinforced with the help of the public.

Newspapers as information/news providers

As we noted in the introduction, the newspapers have to deal with a heavier competition from other players, especially online, offering the latest news. This, in combination with the explosion of offline free newspapers like Metro, has turned news in a free commodity accessible almost everywhere in a constantly updated form. Quite a strange thought is that, by following this trend of free news online, newspapers are cannibalizing their own paper editions. The core product of a newspaper, as the name says, is where competition is the strongest and where they seem to be losing ground. What became clear from the expert interviews, is the fact that newspapers bring more than just news and should concentrate on offering background and context information of a high quality. *"What I am doing"*, an expert said, *"is not making a newspaper, but selecting, collecting, analysing, controlling and commenting news, whether this is on paper, on a site, or in the future on a watch or digital television."* As another expert put it, however, *"if you receive an entire walking diner for free and you then have to pay for a gastronomic diner, you will not be hungry anymore."* There lays the problem facing the newspapers. The content they can offer as the best,

qualitative news, background, analysis and context, is not what a large majority of consumers is seeking. They want the news and they will find it everywhere and mostly for free. When newspapers report on their own future, blogging and citizen journalism are often seen as negative evolutions, keeping readers' (scarce) attention away from the professional journalism they stand for. Even though newspapers seem to embrace the blogosphere by creating own blogs for their readers and journalists, they do so to please or win back their audience, not because they embrace the possibilities of it. The articles found on newspapers' websites are often nothing more than 'shovelware': an unmodified copy of those in the printed paper (Boczkowski, 2002). Many journalism practices approach these new possibilities in a conservative and rigid way and tend to avoid as long as possible the renegotiation of what is conventional and normal in journalism. As the newspaper affiliated experts stated, blogs are merely online diaries that are of interest only to the blogger's entourage and bloggers do not have the means and professional rigour to thoroughly investigate a certain topic. However, in these spaces, there is room for writers to have their stories read online, including journalists who want to nominate creative, investigative reporting for public consumption outside the constraints of media firms (Cohen, 2002). Certain kinds of information lend themselves more to be handled by the public, as different experts pointed out. Bloggers can become a source for readers to consult opinions about certain news facts and the way their peers think of it e.g. the blogs of politicians or public persons, but also of fellow bloggers and journalists, that by doing so may counter "the commercial and political pressures on institutional news media" (Godwin, 1999). Furthermore, as mentioned above, according to the principle of collective intelligence, journalist should welcome readers who represent an authority on certain issues to complement and check their articles, because they will also challenge the ability of professional journalist to give background and context on a certain topic they, as experts, know better. As an expert stated: "*press agencies more and more take the role of daily news providers offering their news feeds through a whole range of news websites, but do not offer this service for the more thematic and regional or local news*". Hyper-local news is a third kind of information user might be more suited for to bring than newspapers. A hyperlocal news site (also known as local-local or microsite) is devoted to the stories and minutiae of a particular neighbourhood, ZIP code or interest group within a certain geographic area. Such sites have been springing up on the Internet for some time now, initially as independent start-ups, created and maintained as labours of love by founders who work on a shoestring budget (Shaw, 2007). Not that they were not able to do this before, but the organisation of a local paper is a costly and highly intensive activity in terms of infrastructure. Blogs, fora and websites make this a lot easier. Furthermore, the video and photo applications in cell phones become more widespread, which facilitates local citizen journalism even more. Several of the interviewed experts stressed the fact that journalism is becoming a conversation rather than a monologue. *An article is not the finishing point of a*

journalist's work. It is only the beginning, as one expert stated. The readers becoming providers or producers of content is what Boczkowski coined "distributed construction", challenging newspapers' traditional role of news-producer and gate-keeper (Boczkowski, 2004).

Conceptualising new user roles

As became clear by analysing the changing role of the newspaper readers are taking over certain parts of these roles. Central to newsreaders' (-viewers' and -listeners') changing role is that they start doing more with news than only read it. They start using it in different ways: they comment it, share it, rate it, tag it, and even produce it. Therefore, we prefer to talk about news users. The concept of a news user is also more suited in a world where the digitalisation has not yet finished to converge data (meaning every form of information). Especially when we look at the use of the Internet, which is becoming a platform suited for text as well as audio and video, the concept of a newsreader is not adequate anymore for research. News website often already offer videos and podcasts next to the written news. This convergence of technology, at this point represented best by the connected computer, leads to a convergence in media users what in turn changes the meaning of a newsreader, listener and viewer. In the same line of thoughts, Mark Deuze, building on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modern society (Bauman, 2005), states that contemporary changes in the economical, political, societal and technological sphere put the user in a virtual space where he is continuously surrounded by different but connected media. This raises the convergence between the different spheres of action of daily life, blurring the difference between work and private but also between consumption and production, between passive and active consumption of media. In other words technological convergence is leading to cultural convergence, which has its own logic (Deuze, 2006). Web 2.0 has made it easier for users to share their thoughts and ideas through text, audio and video over the net. This in addition with the technical means of content production becoming ever more accessible for a larger public through democratic prices and the appreciation of the public, has led to a boom of user-generated content, one of the sector's big buzzwords. The consumer is in other words moving up in the value chain becoming a producer as well, what futurologist Alvin Toffler predicted in his book *The Third Wave* and coined with the term *prosumer* (producer-consumer) (Toffler, 1980). In the case of the newspaper, this phenomenon is translated in the citizen journalist or the blogger. Still, further reflection on this concept is needed.

The prosumer

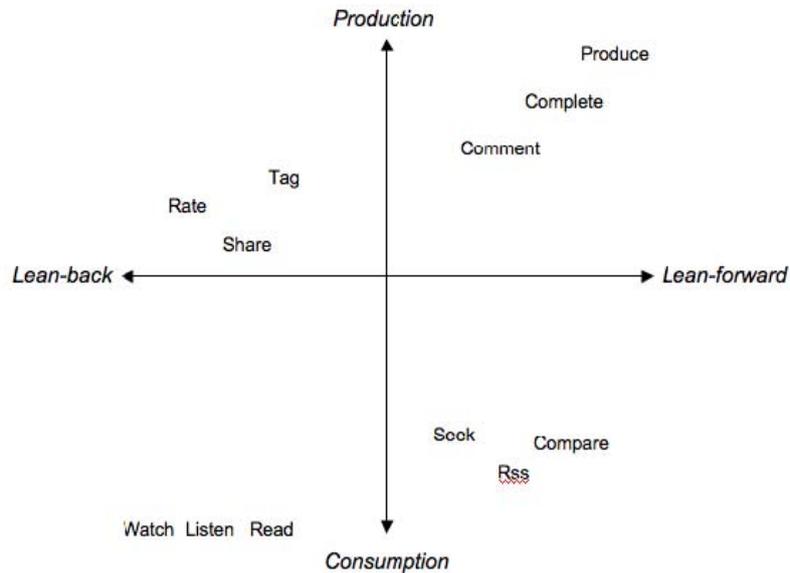
The concept of prosumer was introduced by Alvin Toffler in 1980. He stated that by the new millennium

consumers would get highly involved with the design and production of goods so they could be delivered according to everyone's personal needs and specifications. He formulated arguments for a new marketplace where products are not dumped by industry but where consumers participate in the creative process (Toffler, 1980). This term is not to be confused with the concept used in marketing where it stands for *professional consumer* or *professional amateur*, being someone with an interest in a certain hobby that big that he wants to be one of the first having the latest products in that branch. In a new media context where user generated content is believed to be important both for its product value as for its exchange value, the consumer contributes to the news making process in different ways (see above). In this framework, the concept of prosumer however needs to be refined. First, a prosumer is a consumer. This implies that he is buying a product or service for a certain prize. However, one of the big questions concerning user-generated content is how to make it profitable. The essence of user-generated content is not commercial in contrast to Toffler's vision where the prosumer defines the specificities of the product he eventually wants to buy. When looking at newspaper blogs or free news sites the consumption aspect of user-generated content is obvious. When looking at online citizen journalism communities, their audience consumes the information but not (yet) in an economic-value generating way. The concept of the prosumer implicitly refers to modern market logic. When looking at user-generated content in general we could talk about the *producer* (producer – user) instead: users who use content in such way it generates additional content. In this regard, speaking about news users makes it easier to conceptualise the newsreader's changing role: he does not merely consume news, but also shares it, rates it, searches it and produces it. He is using the news in various ways. The production of news becomes a part of the consumption of news. The boundaries between both blurry or disappear. News user therefore seems a good concept to analyse this group because it incorporates the two dimensions: he uses the news in a variety of ways consuming and producing it at the same time.

Dimensions of participation

The news user thus uses news in many different ways sometimes producing as well. Traditionally, watching television is termed as a lean-back activity, whereas sitting in front of a computer is rather lean-forward. (Jansz, 2005; Körber & Maknavicius, 2003). When looking at online news, this lean-back/lean-forward continuum seems to offer an interesting instrument to look at how online news possibilities are used.

Fig. 1 Dimensions of participatory media



At one end of the continuum we will find the people who actively search for news, look at different sites, use rss readers to receive information, write news stories, place comments and rate items, on the other end we will find the people reading online versions of their trusted newspapers, trusting the news selection of a certain provider, preferring television or printed news to online news. However, actively look for information is a lean-forward way of using news, even if it does not engender any kind of content production. Therefore, in order to fully understand new news practices, this continuum should be given an extra dimension, namely the one discussed above concerning the prosumer. In the online world, consuming is not by definition lean-back, and also prosuming can be done in different degrees from less to more lean forward, as is shown in Fig 1. When analysing the Internet as a more lean-forward medium, we must not be blinded by the hype. As the State of the Media 2007 study shows, What we found in the sites studied is that the participatory nature of the Web is more theoretical than a virtue in full bloom (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). But, as an expert stated, *“media must offer the possibility for interactivity without it getting pervasive or obtrusive for the passive user”*. Consumers must have the right to be passive. By using the above continuum to analyse news practices, we do not need to see participation as something people do or do not, but can do in different degrees, allowing us to get a far more specialized view on how people look at these possibilities. Production in this context must be seen as contribution. When rating news e.g., people are producing a hierarchy that can influence the news agenda.

Communities of interest in news

When studying online news, the aspect of community plays a greater role than offline. The sites that have been mentioned through this paper are only but a few examples of news sites that thrive on a community of users that actively participate in the production of content or passively use it as a news source. It is likely that these virtual communities are rather impersonal, not based on sharing the most intimate information but rather sharing thoughts and opinions on the relevance of certain news items. According to Katie J. Ward a characteristic of virtual communities is the fact that the audience is ephemeral, not making a long-term commitment to the virtual community. Rather they will be more instrumental in their approach to the community, staying as long as the community is providing a solution or fulfilling a need in their life (Ward, 1999). This is linked to Bauman's *Liquid Life*, as the ties in a virtual community are looser or "more liquid". In the context of news, these needs are informational, but not only to get information, but also to retrieve it, share it, rate it, comment it, produce it... The more interesting information the community has to offer, the more members it will attract (Edlund, 2000). The content that will differentiate one community from another is the content generated by that community. This exchange of information within these groups is the essential contributor to the social capital of such networks. A vital part of social capital is trust, what brings us again to the importance of this concept. A specific feature of computer-mediated communication is the lack of physical, social and other nonverbal information exchanged between group members. This anonymity has both beneficial as well as damaging consequences for the trust within a virtual community (Blanchard & Horan, 2000). On the one hand individuals can increase their first impressions or accentuate their characteristics with which they identify mostly with the group. The more you identify with a group, the more likely you are to trust the group. On the other hand, this anonymity and the lack of social and physical cues may cause deception because of the difficulty to establish the authenticity of information about the other members. Not all these elements apply to a news community, as the scope is not to get personal information from one another or to share deeply personal thoughts, but to share news and comments on it. Still, this anonymity can become harmful, as anyone can post news stories that can be false, especially on sites where no editing is provided. Furthermore, anyone can pretend to be an expert and also here it takes a critical user with enough knowledge to check the background of certain sources.

Refining existing concepts

Participation

Acknowledging the existence of collaborative intelligence, the idea of journalism becoming a conversation rather than a sermon is beginning to find its way amongst journalists and news companies. Major international news sites like the New York Times and in Flanders De Standaard Online amongst many others already offer their readers the possibility to add comments and to participate, and hence becoming a news source of information for journalists. This should evolve even more, according to an expert who said *"the newspaper should become more interactive, referring to the newspaper's site, giving readers the opportunity to discuss online certain topics launched in the paper and afterwards summarize the outcome of the online discussion in the paper. This makes the two media complementary instead of supplementary"*. But another expert added, *"The number of people actively posting information on Wikipedia is small. Most of Wikipedia's users are merely consulting the site"*. This is referring to the pyramid Bradley Horowitz, Vice-President of Product Strategy at Yahoo!, posted on his blog in February 2006. The top of the pyramid is populated with 1 creator, followed by 10 synthesizers; the body is made of 100 consumers. He states that 1% of the population is now initiating the production of content, 10% might actively participate by responding to that production and 100%, which he calls lurkers, will just benefit from the activities of the above group. He notes that it is not necessary to convert 100% of the audience into "active" participants to have a thriving product that benefits tens of millions of users. The barriers users have to cross to become creators work as a filter that can eliminate noise from signal (Horowitz, 2006). It is thus not for every user to become a producer. As became clear in the first part of the paper, the increasing possibilities users have to contribute and participate in the production of news is altering the relationship between newspapers and their readers. The dimensions of participatory media use as shown in figure 1 can help to understand how the user is taking up certain roles or parts of it from the newspapers or mass media in general, as is schematically shown in the following table.

Consumer – Media interaction

<i>Action</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Agenda Setting</i>	<i>Watchdog</i>	<i>Content production</i>
Look for (alternative) information (rss, blogs, ...)		X		
Tag, rate and/or share news		X		X (metadata)
Correct, complete and comment news		X	X	X
Produce news (citizen journalism)			X	X

Trust*The trusted news brand*

A recent international study by the BBC, Reuters and the Media Centre (Globescan, 2006) shows that people's trust in the media is relatively high, giving more credit to the media than to their governments. 61% of the respondents trusted the media against 52% trusting their government. Television (82%) and national and regional newspapers (75%) are the most reliable sources according to the study. Blogs also seem to be consulted as a news source, though only 25% of respondent trust the information, South Korea (home country of OhMyNews) being the exception. Still, the outcome of the study suggests that it becomes more difficult for those information providers to hold people's trust. More than a quarter of the respondents said they stopped consulting a certain news source because they lost faith in the source's content. Even though television and newspaper still are the dominant news sources world wide, in terms of consulting news sources and trusting them, users are developing a more nuanced approach towards the media. 77% of the respondents prefer to check different news sources, something that is off course easier online. Still, as an expert pointed out, newspapers have strong brands or a certain history, which makes people associate news with them; *"Based on what people find important they choose the medium to use. This is the bond of trust a news provider develops with its audience. The more it can procure information on the concerns of its audience, the more successful it is"*. Another expert called this the seal of approval of trustworthiness. Hans Beyers, who did a lot of research on online news in Flanders in the past years, concluded that Flemish users often read the same newspaper online than in print (Beyers, 2002). When

they go online, readers remain loyal to their printed paper, or better, they remain loyal to a certain brand they believe is trustworthy. New players online will have to compete with the relationship of trust traditional media brands have build with their user throughout the years.

Communities of trust

Already in 1994 McManus acknowledges the impact communities of taste, peer groups and other external forces have on consumers' choice. He pointed out that when the journalistic quality is difficult to discern, consumers are compelled to rely on "brand names" or develop alternative information sources for evaluating news, such as direct civic involvement. In a connected world however this civic involvement is facilitated in that way that people have the same means than news organisations to reach high number of readers, namely the Internet. In other words, alternative news sources have always existed, be it in the form of colleagues commenting news during the coffee break or the alternative newspapers like *le Canard Enchaîné* in France, but the Internet, and especially web 2.0, with its increased user-friendliness, make it possible that these alternative voices reach a larger public with less means necessary. Because of the Internet's facilitating features in terms of distribution and reach, people might get more motivated to participate to these news sources, which in turn can makes these bloom and hence get more "news appeal" for news users. Some of these alternative news sites have already proven to be able to build a vast user community around their site like *OhMyNews*, *nu.nl* or *Agoravox.com*. The reason why this is quiet an achievement is that alternative discourses do not appear to carry the same authority as the traditional news organisations' online news (Cohen, 2002). An idea reached out by an expert was that "*newspapers should become community builders, offering more than news to please the community and listening to the community's demands. Gaining the trust of this community will*

then be essential. The community build around a newspaper can benefit the paper as well, not only in terms of bonding users to your brand, but also because they might contribute to the value of the newspaper by sharing their knowledge or signalling new trends". According to another expert "such a community is generated around points of interest. When the community serves the common good of its members, she will prevail". An example of such a trend signalisation is the web 2.0, a term that Tim O'Reilly coined in 2004, that was picked up by the mainstream media after a lot of buzz was created around it in the blogosphere. Trust is likely to become of increasing importance in a world where information is everywhere. As an expert stated, "it will be important that users can make the difference between user-generated news and professional news. Citizen journals need to clearly state that the articles are based on personal experience and not on investigation of professional journalists. This will be important fort the level of trust users will have in the online medium".

A new conceptual framework

When studying the way readers relate to the newspaper, it becomes clear that the possibilities offered by the Internet make it easier for readers to take over part of roles traditionally held by newspapers. As shown in the table above, the way in which readers are using the news defines the role they take. Due to the technological convergence, readers become viewers become listeners in the online news environment. Users, consuming and producing news, therefore seems a better term than newsreaders when looking at online news. This term allows the levelling of news use, as participation is something that can be done in different degrees. The producing user is not the terminus in the evolution of the consumer. Not everyone wants to become a creator. The lean-back/lean-forward and producer/consumer dimensions of this use offer a valuable tool to map and differentiate the activities of the online news user. It also makes it possible to identify possible barriers to participation. Another important aspect when analysing participation and especially the production of newsworthy information is the kind of content. Opinion, expertise and local news seem to be more adequate for non-professional users to produce than in-depth news coverage. The end of a newspaper as a content provider – not as a medium – is therefore rather exaggerated. As the news user is not by definition a creator, he is not by definition member of a news community either. However, as is the case for virtual communities, he will freely join a community if it fills his needs. A news community is typically a community where users will turn to when they need certain information. The impact a user will have on the role of newspapers however will be defined in terms of the number of users contributing (cfr. inter-media agenda setting). Important in that case will be the level of trust people have in the community members. Not only news brands but also these communities or the news brands that house them will have to gain user's trust. Authority, collective intelligence and the ability of users to differentiate trustworthy from false information will play an important role in this regard as will trust in the evolution of the relationship between newspapers and users.

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