

Web-based News Consumption: The Case of Greek Journalism Students

by

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In less than a decade, the Internet has been transformed from a technological curiosity to the place where millions of people shop everyday, socialise, read news and get information, to the place where people get entertained and do serious business. The Internet's growth and penetration has been remarkably high. Its roots run deepest in the United States where penetration in April 2002 reached 68.8 percent¹ of the population presenting a use growth of 111.5 percent² between 2000 and 2005, while within the European Union penetration amounts to 44.8 percent³ and use growth during the same period is estimated at 121.3 percent⁴.

It is argued that modern society is information-oriented and is moving away from traditional mass media exposure, and towards a lifestyle marked by the more interactive collection of communication media and commercial interfaces represented by the Internet (Stafford & Stafford, 1998)⁵. In 2004, for instance, it was found that one in five people under 30 view the Internet as the main information source, while it was estimated that *Google* gets 138,000 requests per minute in 90 languages (The Media History Project, 2004).

The popularity of the world wide web seems to be going hand in hand with increasing demand for online news. In the United States, the UCLA reports 'Surveying the Digital Future' demonstrated that 'reading news' has been in the third position of the most popular online activities reaching 55.6 percent, 47.6 percent and 51.9 percent in 2000, 2001 and 2002 respectively. In Western Europe, online users placed retrieval of news second from the top (after e-mail) in the list of their favourite online activities⁶. According to the same survey over 70 percent of Internet users surf the Net to keep abreast of important developments relating to business and world affairs.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE NEWS

Media analysts claim that people rely a great deal on the Internet for retrieving information and that those aged 18 to 34 are indeed the most avid user group of this technology (OPA, 2004). College students, in particular, not only are they early adopters of the world wide web, but also heavy users of it compared to the general population. Use of the Internet is part of the college students' educational experience and daily routine (Leung 2001; Pew Internet & American Life, 2002; Metzger et. al, 2003). This should come as no surprise since young people take up modern technology and incorporate it in their everyday lives more rapidly and more unceremoniously than others. Youths are generally more 'open' to the latest developments because they are more curious and eager to learn (Tully, 2003).

Apart from being a functional academic tool, as well as a serious communication and entertainment platform (Pew Internet & American Life, 2002), the Internet is the medium having the most success attracting young people to news, something that traditional media were having trouble with before the Internet even existed (The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). The *Newspaper Association of America* (2000) reported that the percentage of 18-34 year-olds who go online to get news four to five times a week has tripled in the last three years⁷. In Europe, according to *Eurobarometer* (2001), Internet usage rate was estimated to be 81 percent among the 18-25 age group, 64 percent among the 25-39 age group and only 17 among users aged above 55.

According to a study by Dallas-based *Belden Associates*, online news sites did better in the 18 to 34 age range⁸. Researchers found that young adults preferred the web mainly because they liked the control it gave them over their media experience⁹. It was also revealed that instead of being intimidated by a wide variety of media offerings, as older adults tend to be, today's young adults welcome the influx and are more likely to use multiple media sources at one time than any other generation¹⁰. Those aged between 18 and 24 show a unique preference for the Web over traditional informational media: 59 percent said they consider the Web 'more useful than newspapers' and 53 per cent find it 'more useful than TV for receiving information'¹¹.

Compared to traditional sources web-based news appear to be more appealing among the members of Generation X and Y, who having developed the necessary skills and familiarity with the Internet, obviously prefer online news. However, few of them comprise regular news consumers, but rather 'news grazers'¹², (The Pew

Research Center, 2004). Nowadays, the creation of cynical and sceptical attitudes about politics and the media have resulted in the moral claim of the informed citizen to have been diminished. Such a development was reflected in the Pew Survey (2004) which recorded a decline in the amount of time people spend consuming news at all age levels, but the steepest drop is among the 18-24 year-olds. 19 percent of those aged under 30 watch news regularly compared to 53 percent of senior citizens. Poindexter and McCombs (2001) argue that the younger people are, the less likely they are to believe that they have a civic duty to stay informed about public affairs. This finding is confirmed by the news habits of young people aged 18-24, who are considerably more disengaged from the hard news category than their elders (The Pew Research Center, 2004).

Generations X and Y not only do they condemn newspapers and view less television news than earlier generations (Raeymaeckers, 2004), but overall they feel less connected to traditional institutions, both government and media, and less well-served by conventional definition of news; they view journalism as dishonest and clueless (Step, 1996).

THE CLAIM FOR THE INFORMED CITIZENRY

Contemporary versions of democracy theory suggest that citizens have a duty to acquire information about events in the public domain and to use that information in their political decisions (Schudson, 1998)¹³. There is abundant experimental evidence demonstrating that exposure to information in the media can cause information gain. Eveland and Scheufele (2000) found a positive correlation between news media use and political knowledge. Reversely, aggregate-level media variables, such as rising rates of TV viewing and declining figures in newspaper readership, have been offered to explain the downward trajectory of the civic culture indicator (Shaw & Jenkins, 2001).

“Having relatively equal amounts of information assures neither a consensual nor a particular outcome, but it does assure that whatever decisions are reached provide the most democratic approximation of the public will” (Delli Carpini & Ketter, 1996:6)¹⁴. In reality, however, the attentive audience for political, international and financial news tends to be better educated and middle-aged, while young people demonstrate a very low interest in political affairs (The Pew Research Center, 2004).

According to early proponents of new communication technologies the new media would raise the quality of democracies. The chief mechanisms for democratisation

would be the wide availability of information in the new media and audiences' consequently decreased reliance on centralised content producers (Corrado, 1996¹⁵). Given that political knowledge is stratified by socioeconomic resources, and that traditional media are known for their lack of detachment concerning political and economic interests, the Internet as an additional avenue to political knowledge, stands out to compound this gap (Riedel et. al, 2003). Besides the promise of increased knowledge, the digital world contains the promise of increased political interest and engagement (Katz, 2001; Shaw & Kwak, 2001; Tumber, 2001; Riedel et. al, 2003).

JOURNALISM STUDENTS AND ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION

Journalists, as Joseph Pulitzer made it clear, whether reporters, writers or critics, are first and foremost, citizens¹⁶. In that sense, journalism students should be exposed to political information not only as part of their civic obligation, but also in order to be fully equipped to make essential contributions as analysts and brokers of news.

Journalism education should embody the notion of journalism as "a practice of knowledge production" (Skinner et. al, 2001:353). In order to produce that knowledge, a journalist must be fully aware of the social, political, economic and cultural situation on a national and international level. Research indicates that there is a strong predictive correlation between social understanding and online news consumption and newspaper reading (Patwardhan and Yang, 2003). Shaw et. al. (2001) concluded that the relationship between new media and social capital is dynamic and highly contextual, especially among members of the Generation X.

Journalism education cannot be confined to college years. Being a journalist requires an education for a life, which calls for an immersion in news and news judgment. The coordinates of a good journalism education comprise, like the practice of journalism, a fundamental concern with 'news', and a corresponding concern with the acquisition of complex methods of knowing, representation and analysis. The aim is to shape not just reporters, but 'reporters, writers and critics'. The reporter in the journalist is concerned fundamentally with the news as it is discovered, breaks and unfolds, and with the gathering of fact to support its description; the writer in the journalist creates faithful documents with superior literary skill; the critic in the journalist judges the significance of things and adds layers of meaning and explanation to their description (Adam, 2001).

It all comes down therefore to the doctrine that journalism professors have asserted to formally: journalists-to-be benefit from general study and extensive news consumption and thus should engage in them (Adam, 2001). As De Burgh (2003) put it succinctly, "journalism education should incorporate simulations of real working experience and engagement with the world" (p.95).

The journalists' role in the new era may be transforming from the role of the gatekeeper to that of the trusted guide (Bardoel, 1996; Tumber, 2001). For that reason the journalist of the future must have -maybe even more than in the past- deep knowledge and social understanding and be very comfortable with the tools, material and infrastructure of the trade.

ADOPTING THE INTERNET AS A NEWS MEDIUM: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within the mass communication literature two major media theories have mostly been engaged to determine the profile of Internet users, to explain the motives for which people use the Internet and investigate the specific uses of the new medium. On one hand, the *diffusion of innovations* model stands out as a theoretical tool since it enables researchers to explain the variables that influence how and why users adopt a new information medium, such as the internet (Lin, 2001). Diffusion theory provides tools for assessing the likely rate of diffusion of a technology, and additionally identifies numerous factors that facilitate or hinder technology adoption and usage.

Classical diffusion theory, as proposed by Rogers (1985), focuses on five elements: First, innovations possess certain characteristics, which as perceived by adopters, determine the ultimate rate and pattern of adoption. Those characteristics are summarized as relative advantage, compatibility with one's existing values, beliefs and current needs, complexity, observability and trialability¹⁷. A branch of this perspective is the *technology acceptance model* -known as TAM. TAM emphasizes two specific attributes of the information technology saying that adoption of an information technology is a function of individuals' perceptions that the technology is easy to use and useful to them (Davis, 1989)¹⁸. TAM predicts that favorable perceptions of the ease of use and usefulness of an information technology strongly influence subsequent intentions of use (Stafford & Stafford, 2004).

Second, when individuals consider adopting an innovation, a decision-making process occurs. The adoption unfolds as a series of stages (flowing from awareness of the innovation through persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation). Third, the individuals-adopters have certain characteristics, which make them

likely to adopt an innovation. For instance, some potential adopters are more innovative than others, and can be identified as such by their personal characteristics (cosmopolitanism, level of education, age, income, 'openness' to new channels of communication and media exposure). Fourth, opinion leaders exert influence on audience behavior via their personal contact, but additional intermediaries called *change agents* and *gatekeepers* are also included in the process of diffusion. Fifth, the diffusion process usually starts out slowly among pioneering adopters, reaches 'take-off' as a growing community of adopters is established and the effects of peer influence kick-in, and levels-off as the population of potential adopters becomes exhausted, leading thus to an 'S-shaped' cumulative adoption curve. The adopters during these stages are classified into five types: the innovators, the early adopters, the early majority, the late majority and the laggards.

It is important to note that adopters, rather than making a binary decision to simply adopt or reject, may very well choose differing levels of IT use (Bayer & Melone, 1989)¹⁹. As far as web usage is concerned, such an observation would explain the different patterns of use, both in time and content. For instance, drawing upon Roger's model, Conway (2001) extended the theory on the subject of online news and concluded that the process of diffusing the innovation can be separated into three different arenas. The first innovation is computer use. The second stage is access to the Internet, and the latest innovation is using the Net as a news medium. Applied to the internet in general, the adoption is just the beginning, not the end of the process. Adoption involves more than acceptance or rejection; the post-adoption process (i.e. use) involves an even larger number of motivations, such as information-seeking, relaxation, social networking, ego actualization and so forth (Zhu and He, 2002).

Besides the diffusion of innovations model, the *uses and gratifications theory* is of relevance here since it is considered particularly robust and useful in the development of theoretical dimensions representative of consumer motivations for media use (Stafford & Stafford, 2004). It focuses on individual use and choice by assessing why people use media and the gratifications obtained from that media.

Researchers of this approach are specifically concerned with the social and psychological origins of individual needs, which generate expectations of the mass media, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in need gratifications and other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (Katz et. al, 1995). The core concept of the uses and gratifications tradition is that people

are intentional and selective in their use of media and make distinct selections across a multitude of media channels and content choices. Underlying this perspective is the assumption that people evaluate their available media options and choose among media on the basis of those evaluations. To the extent that a medium is perceived as superior for meeting a particular need or serving a particular function, people should be likely to choose that medium over another for fulfilling their needs or achieve their goals.

Practically, the uses and gratifications perspective incorporates the concept of the media substitution theory, according to which functional displacement can occur when a new medium is introduced. A condition for displacement is similarity in functions between the new and existing media. A new medium competes with an existing medium that serves the same functions, resulting in either one becoming irrelevant or secondary since audiences choose between them by determining which one better satisfies particular needs. Evidence of functional displacement is decreased use of the displaced medium. Typically displacement occurs under three conditions: content superiority; technical superiority; greater cost efficiency. Lin (2002) added that in order for a newer and more functionally efficient medium to displace an older medium, the necessary economic and social conditions for such displacement have also to be met. Since the web can be seen as a functional alternative to traditional news sources, the potential for media substitution by the web hinges on identifying the particular constellation of needs currently supported by its functional equivalents (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000).

Within the uses and gratifications perspective, media use derives from a conscious effort to fulfill certain social or psychological needs (Rubin 1994). Previous research on the gratification of computer-mediated technologies suggested a broad range of motivations, such as surveillance, information seeking, education, entertainment, personal identity, social interaction, companionship, escape and diversion, reassurance, fashion and status, communication medium appeal (Leung, 2001). More specifically, research has concluded that there are two main reasons people are surfing the web: to look for information and to be entertained (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In particular, it can be used as mediated interpersonal technologies, which are for social bonding, relationship maintenance, problem solving and persuasion. The Internet can also be used as a mass communication medium, which is for informational and leisure purposes (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). Motivations for using the Internet for the former are isolation, dislocation, long-distance, social networking, lack of satisfaction of current

situation and sense of belonging. As far as the latter use is concerned researchers attribute it to motives of surveillance, economic security and self-education (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

In an attempt to identify the relationship between motivations and media content from the uses and gratifications perspective, Rubin (1984) argued that a variety of motivations can be divided into two types of media usage orientations: ritualised and instrumental orientation. He maintained that each media usage purpose is related to the consumption of different media content. On one hand, ritualised orientation (or medium-centered usage) indicates a more habitual use of a medium and is prompted by more 'emotional' motives and needs such as entertainment and escapism (Rubin, 1994). On the other hand, instrumental orientation is a purposive use of media content through which the person seeks information (Conway and Rubin, 1991). Therefore, this type of orientation relates to greater exposure to news and information content.

FACTORS AND MOTIVES FOR CONSUMING ONLINE NEWS

Forming the hypotheses and research question

Several studies have been conducted offering more specific insights regarding a) the profile of the Internet user, b) the various reasons why an individual chooses the Internet as a news medium, and c) the expected and obtained gratifications resulting from using web news.

As far as why a person selects the Internet as a news tool, a number of influential factors can be identified. The demographic characteristics of the audience, such as age, education, gender and income, are widely perceived as predictive of web news consumption (Shaw et. al, 2001; Anderson & Tracey, 2002; Lin, 2002; Zhu & He, 2002; Chang 2003; Li, 2003). Bibliography describes the Internet user as affluent, better educated than average, male and below the age of 35 (The Pew Research Center, 1999; O'Donnell, 2003). Literature suggests that when a technology has not reached its critical mass of the diffusion curve, demographics exert an important influence on the adoption likelihood of the technology. But when the adoption phase passes its early stages, the role of demographics is diminished. However, research shows that despite earlier findings of the online population going mainstream (The Pew Research Center, 1999), the online news audience still comprises of young, affluent and well-educated people with the exception of the gender gap which has narrowed significantly (The Pew Research Center, 2004).

Based on the above findings we can pose the first hypothesis as follows:

H1: demographic attributes will have an impact on online news reading

Second, in order to develop an online news habit, one has to overcome a financial barrier (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Havick, 2000; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). Online news consumption requires an investment in equipment, such as a personal computer, a modem and a server connection. Moreover, a fast connection, a high resolution screen and a powerful computer can induce the consumption of web news since the user can take full advantage of the web's possibilities. It has been found that high-speed users expanded their web activities to a large extent, doing seven things online (Horrigan & Rainie, 2002²⁰). Accordingly, in a US based survey it was revealed that 23 percent of the broadband audience relied on the web as a primary source of breaking news, while only six percent of dial-up users did so (MSNBC, 2001).

The second and third hypotheses therefore are formed as follows:

H2: Ownership of the necessary equipment is a predictive factor of online news consumption

H3: A fast connection is likely to induce online news reading

Owning the necessary equipment is one thing; having a descent level of comfort using the technology is another. "The electronic newspaper is obviously not a piece of computer equipment as much as it is a media product, but knowledge of computer systems seems a reasonable way to assess an individual's likelihood of adopting such a product" (Weir, 1999:64). Scholars argue that digital literacy²¹ represents more than the ability to expertly surf the Internet, but the ability to critically analyse the information individuals find there (Gilster, 1997)²². Studies have asserted that experienced users are more likely to consume news online (Havick, 2000; Nguyen, 2003). They have learned which sources to trust for information and have identified effective search strategies. Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) found that higher levels of computer anxiety were significantly and negatively related to time spent using the web for any purpose. The choice, thus, between the web and traditional news outlets is likely to be mediated by a person's familiarity and level of comfort with computer technology and Internet familiarity.

The fourth hypothesis, therefore, can be posed as follows:

H4: Likelihood of reading online news is closely associated with net proficiency.

The more familiar people become with different media channels, the more likely they are to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each (Riedel et. al, 2003). To the extent that the internet becomes perceived as superior to traditional media for particular tasks or activities, it seems that individuals valuing those attributes will increasingly turn to new media and away from traditional news outlets (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000). It is widely argued that the Net is the medium where people can turn to in order to get a richer news experience. That richness stems from the Net's immediacy, its depth and from its most powerful feature, interactivity (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Riedel et. al, 2003). In addition to that, the web caters for a creed of individualism that allows people to get the information they want, when they want it (Nozato, 2000). Besides its asynchronous nature, people like the convenience of the web, its availability at work, its speed for delivering breaking news and the appealing modes of presentation through multimedia features (Chan 2003; The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). It was found that the pervasiveness of the web is a key contributor to the prominent role it plays in the lives of 18-34 year-olds, particularly as their lifestyles underscore the importance of media use on their own time (OPA, 2004).

A significant and differentiating factor of web news is that it provides audiences with substantially more control over the flow and delivery of information than they enjoy with traditional media. With enhanced control, and in front of a theoretically limitless news hole of up-to-date information as well as background material, much of it in raw form and not previously digested by journalists, online readers are particularly likely to pursue their own interests and they are less likely to follow the cues of news editors and producers (Chan 2003; Tewksbury, 2003). More importantly, the Internet, operating almost unfettered, offers users the opportunity to find interpretative material. It contains a wide range of views, attitudes and beliefs. "The Internet possesses a freedom of activity and thought that minimises norm enforcement. In fact, it offers a habitat for views and activities that differ from conventional views and behaviors" (Havick, 2000:280).

Attitudes about the web indicate a growing reliance on the medium as an intrinsic source of news and information with online users increasingly coming to trust the accuracy of the information they receive online (The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). Research suggests that people are generally skeptical of news emanating from all three media channels, but do rate newspapers with the highest credibility, followed by online news and television news respectively (Kioussis, 2001). Other studies concluded that Internet users judged online political

information sources as more credible than traditional media counterparts (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Those developments come as no surprise since newspaper and television audiences have begun shrinking, while the credibility of traditional media has been put in serious question (Guido et. al, 2000).

According to the above evidence the fifth hypothesis can be formed as follows:

H5: The comparative advantages of online news will be positively associated with online news reading

Most research has focused on comparing users and non-users. However, at times of serious Internet penetration, it is important to pay attention to the different patterns of usage between newcomers (newbies) and veteran users. The length of Internet experience may play a critical role both in online behaviour and evaluation of information. The more experienced a user gets, the more familiarised he becomes, and consequently is more capable of navigating in a more efficient way. Studies found that the web was the most preferred surveillance medium for daily users of the Internet (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000).

We can assume therefore that:

H6: More experienced users are more likely to consume online news

The amount of news that people consume from traditional media can also be indicative of a person's tendency to use online news sources. Data suggest that online news readers are also regular consumers of traditional news media. They may be getting ample public affairs news offline and supplementing it with other information online (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Tewksbury, 2003). Rathmann (2002) argued that frequent print readers also read online newspapers more frequently in order to obtain additional and timely information. In general, a correspondence between the amount of online and offline news consumption has been identified. Heavy consumers of online news are also heavy consumers of newspapers. Similarly, medium consumers of online news report midlevel usage of newspapers (UCLA, 2002; The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004). On the other hand, light users of the Internet are more likely to watch TV for current affairs, while Internet users watch less TV than non users (Neustadtl and Robinson, 2002). This finding confirms the fact that an important component of the Internet value to a user depends on the user's literacy-based interests (Havick, 2000). Information in TV news may be more accessible to those with weaker cognitive skills and less background information, while media (i.e. newspapers and the

Internet) which present stories with greater depth, analysis and complexity should favour citizens with greater information processing abilities and more complex preexisting structures that allow them to process information more quickly and efficiently (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000).

Therefore, the seventh hypothesis comes as follows:

H7: Increased news consumption will be positively correlated with online news usage

The level of political knowledge a person maintains is another significant determinant of media choice. People with higher levels of political knowledge typically follow news of public affairs much more closely than those with lower levels of political knowledge. Furthermore, individuals with high levels of political knowledge seem to be drawn toward relatively more information-rich news sources, like newspapers, and away from relatively information-poor sources like television. This tendency has been used to suggest that higher levels of political knowledge may be associated with a 'need for information' best satisfied by news outlets such as newspapers or online news that contain high levels of public affairs coverage and are amenable to active information-seeking strategies (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000).

Prior knowledge has been shown to facilitate the processing and recall of information (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). It is argued that those with prior knowledge have probably developed more advanced schemas, which, on one hand, facilitate interpretation, storage and recall of new information, and on the other hand increase political interest. The level of political interest is considered to be a predictive factor of hard news consumption from information-rich news sources. Poindexter and Heider (2001) in their research on non-users of Internet news concluded that the primary reason for avoiding news on the Internet is lack of interest.

In this light the following hypotheses can be made:

H8: Online news sources are to be particularly appealing, and therefore adopted by those with relatively high levels of political expertise and sophistication

H9: Increased political interest should be predictive of online news consumption

Finally, in consistence with the uses and gratifications perspective, an individual's motivations and gratifications can affect greatly his/her decision to adopt a particular news medium. As mentioned in the literature earlier, there cannot be an

inherent predetermined direction for a medium's development, but rather an ongoing give-and-take between psychological needs, social needs and technological possibilities (Avigdor & Wilzig, 2002). Bentley (2001) identified curiosity and interest as motives of reading online news, while Mei Lu (2002) argues that usage of web news can originate from psychological factors such as habit and addiction, social interaction with other people, situational encounters with media information as well as information seeking motivations.

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found that the most salient use of the Net reflected an instrumental orientation, often having to do with information seeking, and characterised by utility, intention, selectivity and involvement. Weir (1999) argues that perceived benefits are important indicators of online news consumption. The term can include a variety of benefits starting from social approval and leading to more concrete benefits such as self-education and awareness of what is happening on a national and international level. The gratifications that are mentioned here comprise a part of the range of possible gratifications that one could derive from online news usage, and were chosen as being -according to the literature- of particular relevance in the case of journalism students.

The surveillance gratification seems particularly important for understanding audience choices among available news media (Lin, 2002). Similar to the surveillance gratification is the social understanding dimension; it refers to one's need to know about and interpret the world or community and evolve as a person (Patwardhan and Yang, 2003). Identification of strong surveillance and social understanding goals would lead individuals to increased information seeking behaviour, and therefore we can hypothesize its predictive relationship with online news reading.

Parallel to the above is the 'information need' concept. The basic idea is that there is a perceived, i.e. subjective, difference between the available knowledge and the knowledge that is needed to perform an activity. The size and type of the difference between available knowledge and knowledge that is required determines the type and size of the information need (Bouwman and Van De Wijngaert, 2002). As mentioned earlier, journalism calls for a life education and for immersion in news. The information need thus for young journalists-to-be is substantial, and we can assume that their news diet will include regular use of online news as an information-rich source of hard news and political knowledge. Self-education, in terms of not merely following the news, but also monitoring in detail the way news are written and presented (as if simulating a real job

experience) in the medium that seems to be prevailing in the near future, is an important reason for journalism students to consume online news.

Studies have indicated personality traits (Stromer-Galley, 2002), lifestyle orientations (Chan, 2003) and fashion (Anderson & Tracey, 2001) to influence one's media usage and consumption. Young people, and in particular students are usually technology-situated and accustomed and need to experiment. A significant element which can provoke the adoption of online news is the trait of innovativeness (Rogers, 1995; Li, 2003). The term signifies an individual's tendency to seek novelty and to be more receptive to new ideas and new technologies.

In western civilisations in general, transformation of the media world has given birth to a new culture that combines different media as a sign of social inclusion or exclusion (Morrone & Zannella, 2004). So, beyond instrumental uses, media can be chosen due to their symbolic value, such as status enhancement, to feel important and/or to impress people (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). In order for young journalists to satisfy their social integrative needs and feel part of the journalistic group, they need to familiarise themselves with the necessary tools of the trade. In this light, journalism students are more likely to engage in regular use of online news.

The last hypothesis, therefore, can be formed as follows:

H10: Perceived gratifications of online news usage should motivate online news consumption

THE RESEARCH

Extending past research on the uses and gratifications model as well as the diffusion theory in relation to the Internet, and having reviewed the predictors of online news usage, the present paper attempts to shed light on if, to what extent and why greek journalism students consume online news. Before moving on, it would be useful to sketch the news situation in Greece. Television remains the main news source, although only 39 percent of the audience claim to actually trust television news (Eurobarometer 1998:18). This comes as no surprise considering firstly, the interplay between media owners and politicians, and secondly the main features of the television journalistic approach: a shift away from hard news, convergence with a tabloid agenda, emphasis on human-interest stories and journalists acting as interpreters and professional mediators (Papathanasopoulos, 2001a).

The above approach begun from television, but soon became a model for all media. The printed press is relatively more objective, yet identification with a partisan camp is clearly seen. The crisis of the greek press reflects not merely the outcome of competition with other media, or structural changes such as stagnating incomes and low political interest, but it also reflects newspapers' failure to attract young readers. Newspapers have been unable to defend their comparative advantage in providing comment and in-depth analysis and the net result is a serious decline in readership (Papathanasopoulos, 2001b).

As far as Internet use is concerned 19.7 percent of the population claim to be users and a percentage of 4,3 percent is seriously considering getting a connection in the near future. The most avid user group is those aged 15-17 where Internet usage reaches 50.8 percent, followed by those between 18 and 24 years-old with 38.5 percent. Autonomy of web use prevails as 41.7 percent claim to surf the web only at home.²³ 16.8 percent are newbies, while 18.9 percent have been using the Internet for over five years. E-mail ranks first in their favourite online activities with 21.5 percent, while reading news comes third with 11.7 percent (V-PRC, 2004).

In general terms, the dysfunctional newsmedia environment in combination to the rise of cynical and alienated attitudes towards politics have resulted in a serious decline of political interest, especially among the younger generations, and subsequently to decreased consumption of hard news. According to a survey Greek citizens claim to distrust both politicians and journalists (PRC, 1995²⁴). Mouzelis (1995) argues that the greek society constitutes an atrophied civil society in which individualistic attitudes as well as a clientist manner of doing things have dominated.

In this light, it is interesting to investigate what role do 'perceived utility' as well as other motives and predictors play in greek journalism students' decision to overcome certain cultural and political traits, and indulge in an 'adequate' journalism education which entails systematic consumption of hard news from information-rich sources.

Drawing upon the various hypotheses that were posed, as well as the main features of the newsmedia situation in Greece, the research question comes as follows:

R.Q: To what extent can demographics, ownership of the necessary technology, net proficiency, experience, perceived advantages and positive attitudes on online news, level of news consumption, level of political knowledge and perceived gratifications of online news usage, predict online news consumption?

METHODOLOGY

Research data was collected through a structured questionnaire with pre-determined options and was processed by SPSS. The sample²⁵ consisted of 85 journalism students. 51 study at the Department of Journalism & Mass Communication of the Aristotle University (corresponding to 12 percent of the student body of the Department) and 34 study at the Department of Journalism at the public Institution of Professional Training of Epanomi (I.E.K) (corresponding to 80 percent of the total number of students), both based in Thessaloniki.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF VARIABLES

Demographics: this section included elements such as gender²⁶, age, income and education.

Ownership of equipment: availability of home connection and type of connection were used to assess ownership of equipment.

Net proficiency: a question referring to one's ability to efficiently surf the web and find the information he/she needs, was used to measure net proficiency.

Perceived advantages of online news: respondents were asked to rank their agreement with a series of eight characteristics describing the appealing properties of online news.

Online experience: online experience was measured by asking respondents a) how many years have they been Internet users and b) how many hours do they spend surfing the web on a weekly basis.

News consumption: students were asked to state the frequency of news attendance in any medium.

Political knowledge: respondents were asked to grade their level of political knowledge on an international and national level.

Political interest: political interest was measured by asking students to determine their degree of political interest.

Perceived gratifications and motives: respondents were asked to rank their agreement with eleven statements describing the perceived gratifications a journalism student could derive from using online news.

The above data was correlated with the question which sought the frequency of news attendance on the Internet. Four options were available: 1) every day, 2) 3-5 times a week (which both referred to systematic use of online news), 3) 1-2 times a month, 4) never (which referred to non-systematic consumption of web news). Of

course, as it will be shown in the following sections, supplementary elements were also investigated in the questionnaire in order to draw a more complete picture of the findings.

RESULTS

In order to assess the contribution of the variables under investigation, a principal components factor analysis was run to determine the exact influence of each on likelihood of online news consumption by journalism students. The data extrapolated is shown in the following tables.

Table 9: Strongest Predictors on Online News Consumption

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
1 TIME SPENT ON THE INTERNET ON A WEEKLY BASIS	.483
2 READING ONLINE NEWS IS A QUICK AND EASY WAY TO GET INFORMED ON CURRENT EVENTS OF MY INTEREST	.399
3 DEGREE OF POLITICAL INTEREST	.393
4 LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS	.370
5 FREQUENCY OF NEWS ATTENDANCE IN GENERAL	.354
6 ABILITY TO SURF THE WEB EFFICIENTLY	.342
7 LEVEL OF EDUCATION	.310
8 READING ONLINE NEWS CONSISTS AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR MY JOB AS I FAMILIARISE MYSELF WITH A NEW TYPE OF JOURNALISM	.303
9 READING ONLINE NEWS OFFERS VALUABLE KNOWLEDGE BY PROVIDING IN-DEPTH AND MULTI-FACETED PRESENTATION OF EVENTS	.302

At this point it ought to be mentioned that the results suggest that none of the variables of the present study reached the score of 0.5. The only block that almost scored the benchmark figure was online experience when assessed by 'time spent on the Internet on a weekly basis', which got 0.483. However, the results demonstrate some dominant trends, which we will show by ranking the most powerful blocks as they have been formed in the research. So, the next most significant predictor belongs to the perceived gratifications and motives category under the label 'reading online news is a quick and easy way to get informed on current events of my interest', which scored 0.399. Next in line, scoring slightly less, is the 'degree of political interest' with 0.393, followed by the 'level of

political knowledge' with 0.370. 'Consumption of news in general' proved to be another factor likely to induce online news reading with 0.354, followed by 'the ability to surf efficiently the web' that scored 0.342. The seventh position was occupied by the level of education which scored 0.310. The last two variables to be mentioned because they scored over 0.300 are included in the perceived gratifications and motives category, and are the following: a) 'reading online news consists an important tool for my job as I familiarise myself with a new type of journalism', and b) 'reading online news offers valuable knowledge by providing in-depth and multi-faceted presentation of events', that respectively got 0.303, 0.302. In more explicit terms, the following results came up:

Hypothesis one is partially confirmed as education was found to be the only variable influencing online news consumption, demonstrating that the higher the level of education, the more likely students are to resort to the web for news retrieval. The finding is of upper importance here since the sample consisted of students majoring in the same field, and indeed in a field in which students are 'obliged' to be exposed to news as part of their studies and supposedly interests.

As far as the age block is concerned the study showed no significant correlation between online news reading and age, while the income variable proved to have no effect on web news consumption. A first explanation would be that when it comes to money, most students are financially supported by their parents rather than earning that money themselves. In that sense they cannot be treated as professionals of an upper economic status, but rather as students getting a higher allowance.

Table 1: Demographics

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
LEVEL OF EDUCATION	.310
AGE	.183
INCOME	.075

The findings for the second and third hypothesis contradict the relevant literature as no significant correlation was found between the dependant variable and ownership of equipment. The type of connection proved to be more important than home autonomy in access, probably because students enjoy free access from university. Overall, it turned out that autonomy and a faster connection do not seriously affect systematic use of online news reading of journalism students.

Table 2: Ownership of equipment

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
HOME ACCESS AVAILABILITY	.038
TYPE OF CONNECTION	.162

Advanced surfing ability turned out as predictive of web news reading, confirming the relative theory that the more experience a user gets, the more likely he/she is to engage in online news consumption.

Table 3: Internet proficiency

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
ABILITY TO SURF THE WEB EFFICIENTLY	.342

Surprisingly online news attributes proved to have no effect when students decide upon their news sources. None of the eight attributes are present in the list of the most influential indicators. Easiness of navigation and ability to find quickly current issues stand out, but overall do not influence web news consumption. The result is noteworthy given that journalism students out of all people should be aware of the comparative advantages of online news over traditional outlets. Apart from the ignorance explanation, the result can also be attributed to the fact that respondents may be aware of the positive attributes of online news in theory, but probably have not confirmed them yet in practice. As the diffusion of innovations model suggests most respondents have not yet reached the stage of 'confirmation', and subsequently, 'reject' online news' theoretically seductive characteristics. In that sense the fifth hypothesis is contradicted by the study.

Table 4: Perceived comparative advantages of online news

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
1 INTERACTIVITY	.127
2 IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS	.003
3 POSSIBILITY TO SEARCH FOR TOPICS OF INTEREST	.165
4 PLURALISM OF SOURCES IN ONE MEDIUM	.088
5 EASY TO NAVIGATE AND FIND QUICKLY CURRENT ISSUES	.261
6 CREDIBILITY	.105
7 24-HOUR NEWS CYCLE	.135

8	INTERESTING PRESENTATION OF NEWS THROUGH MULTIMEDIA	.193
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Online experience in terms of 'time spent on the Internet on a weekly basis' turned out to be the most influential factor for online news consumption, supporting evidence that the web is the most preferred surveillance medium for daily users of the Internet (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000). Yet, the sixth hypothesis was not verified totally as being a newcomer or a veteran user does not seem to affect online news retrieval of young journalists-to-be.

Table 5: Online experience

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
YEARS OF INTERNET USAGE	.125
TIME SPENT ON THE INTERNET ON A WEEKLY BASIS	.483

The amount of news consumption proved to be a pretty influential predictor confirming the relative literature that regular users of news (and especially print readers) are more likely to be frequent users of online news as well (see hypothesis number seven).

Table 6: Consumption of news

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
FREQUENCY OF NEWS ATTENDANCE IN GENERAL	.354

Hypotheses number eight and nine were both supported by the data of the research. Both the degree of political interest and the level of knowledge on political, social and economic affairs are correlated with news consumption from information-rich sources such as the web.

Table 7: Political knowledge and Political interest

	FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS	.370
DEGREE OF POLITICAL INTEREST	.393

Out of eleven blocks included in the 'perceived gratifications and motives' category, three of them were present in the dominant nine-items list that was formed in the research. 'Reading online news is a quick and easy way to get informed on current events of my interest' is the second most influential predictor of the study. Considering the form of the research, we can say that the uses and

gratifications theory is verified as perceived gratifications of online news proved to be indicators of web news consumption proving our last hypothesis to be correct. However it ought to be mentioned that four statements received a negative sign, and the rest scored very low, demonstrating that the range of possible gratifications and motives for online news reading is very limited.

Table 8: Perceived gratifications and motives

		FREQUENCY OF ONLINE NEWS ATTENDANCE
1	READING NEWS ONLINE IS IMPORTANT FOR MY JOB	.185
2	ONLINE NEWS IS MORE USEFUL THAN THOSE PROVIDED BY TRADITIONAL SOURCES	.166
3	ONLINE NEWS READING IS NECESSARY FOR SURVEILLANCE	.040
4	CONSUMPTION OF WEB NEWS CONSISTS AN IMPORTANT METHOD OF SELF-TEACHING	-.076
5	READING ONLINE NEWS IS A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY OF PASSING TIME	-.001
6	READING ONLINE NEWS OFFERS VALUABLE KNOWLEDGE BY PROVIDING IN-DEPTH AND MULTI-FACETED PRESENTATION OF EVENTS	.302
7	MY POLITICAL INTEREST IS ADEQUATELY SATISFIED BY READING ONLINE NEWS	.267
8	READING ONLINE NEWS CONSISTS AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR MY JOB AS I FAMILIARISE MYSELF WITH A NEW TYPE OF JOURNALISM	.303
9	READING ONLINE NEWS IS A QUICK AND EASY WAY TO GET INFORMED ON CURRENT EVENTS OF MY INTEREST	.399
10	BY READING ONLINE NEWS I CAN IMPRESS OTHERS	-.335
11	IT IS IMPORTANT TO EXPRESS MYSELF AND COMMUNICATE WITH OTHERS VIA WEBLOGS AND NEWSGROUPS	-.047

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DISCUSSION

As penetration of online sources into the news diet of young adults has increased dramatically worldwide, it is worth investigating the factors that induce or hinder consumption of online news and identify the possible contribution of each in the Greek audience. The study referred to a very special group that of journalism students, aiming at further examining if, and to what extent, can particular attributes of population groups, differentiate online news usage patterns.

Exploratory factor analysis failed to clearly identify some indicators of online news usage, but provided some clues as to which factors can facilitate regular consumption of web news among journalism students.

The first conclusion to be drawn is that 34 percent of the young journalists-to-be make systematic use of online news compared to the 11.7 percent of the greek population (V-PRC, 2004). The percentage is pretty high in comparison to the general statistics, although it was expected to be higher considering: a) that the sample consists of young people aged mainly between 18 to 24 years-old, an age group where the web is regarded particularly popular as a news medium reaching approximately 50 percent (Media Awareness Network, 2000), and b) that the respondents, as future analysts and brokers of news would immerse in information-rich sources. This finding demonstrates that the claim for the informed citizenry among the greek youth is pretty weak. The general feeling of indifference towards politics documented in the greek population (Tsagarousianou, 1994) as well as a sense of incapability to bring about any major changes to a media system of severe corruption (Papathanasopoulos, 2001a) seems to prevail among journalism students, resulting in the surveillance gratification to rank very low. Reversely, a high level of political interest and knowledge were found to be among the strongest indicators of online news retrieval. Furthermore, it is important to note that the first seven out of the nine-items list of predictors indicate that the main factors why journalism students read online news are not differentiated from the factors inducing an average user to resort to online news outlets (see Table 9).

Secondly, as expected, the diffusion of innovations model is firmly verified. The research proved that using the Internet as a news medium is not simply a matter of adopting or rejecting the web, but has to do more with patterns of usage. As such, the more time young journalists-to-be spend surfing the web, the more likely they are to become regular readers of online news. The results also demonstrate that those possessing certain characteristics (i.e. higher level of education, increased degree of political interest and knowledge, tendency to be regular consumers of news, and are capable of surfing the web efficiently), are prone to systematic consumption of online news. Thirdly, it was found that likelihood of online news adoption is associated with favourable perceived attributes²⁷ of web news, such as being a quick and easy way of getting informed upon one's news interests, or offering in-depth and multi-faceted presentation. From that perspective, the TAM theory is confirmed as perceived easiness and usefulness of web news induces usage among students.

The uses and gratifications theory is also supported since perceived gratifications were proven to be indicators of online news adoption. Respondents claim to resort to web-based news outlets, firstly, due to perceived easiness and speed of getting customised news, and secondly due to reasons of gaining knowledge as well as familiarising themselves with a new tool of their future job. In other words, students choose the web as a news source in order to satisfy specific needs and goals. In that respect online news usage is considered to be superior when seeking speed, control in selection, in-depth and multi-faceted presentation of news, willingness for self-teaching.

It is interesting to note that the motive of surveillance, which according to literature consists a major and very common determinant of instrumental usage of the web, was almost absent receiving 0.040. An explanation would be the rise of cynical and skeptical attitudes among young people, who lack any kind of institutional trust, and thus choose to abstain from active civic engagement. As such they feel like getting informed systematically from information-rich sources, but in no case do they perceive this activity as enabling surveillance of the government or other institutions.

Despite the fact that online news are perceived to gratify specific needs of journalism students, no displacement effect was documented in regard to newspapers, confirming our hypothesis that a higher level of news consumption from information-rich sources, is indicative of a person's tendency to use online news. In particular, it was shown that frequent readers of online news to a percentage of 66.7 resort to newspapers 'very often'. Conversely, there is evidence of decreased use of television news among regular users of web-based news; 22.2 percent of everyday consumers of online news choose television 'very often' as their main information medium, 42.5 percent of medium users choose television, while 60 percent of online news grazers select television 'very often' as their main information source.

Financial barriers seem to be out of the picture since both socio-economic variables with the exception of education, as well as superior technical apparatus, were proven relatively weak in predicting online news adoption behavior. It turns out that the money issue is of minor importance, while the amount of social capital plays a decisive role. The term social capital is used here to describe the level of education, the degree of political interest and knowledge and the level of political engagement as expressed by the amount of news consumption in general. Also it is worth mentioning that experience either in terms of substantial time spent on the

web per week or measured as ability to surf the web efficiently, consists a significant indicator of online news reading.

Finally, it would be interesting to add some supplementary elements upon the news habits of the respondents in order to draw a more complete picture. For instance, foreign news sites are visited 'very often' or 'often' by 31.8 percent of the students, a percentage almost equal with the number of regular online news readers. This result conforms to the finding that increased levels of political interest and knowledge provoke a frequent and multifaceted need for information. People who look for a complete news diet are not confined to greek sites, but search for more news in foreign outlets as well. Yet, it ought to be mentioned that when choosing their news sources, whether greek or foreign, journalism students are going for the brands, confirming relevant research that brand loyalty is a strong determinant of website usage (Thorbjornsen & Supphellen, 2004). Thus, as newspaper sites are concerned *To Vima* came first with 28 hits²⁸, second was *Eleuferotypia* with 25 followed by *Ta Nea* with 23. In the portals section, *in.gr* ranked first with 47 hits, second was *flash.gr* with 17, and third came *mpa.gr* with 9. Regarding foreign sites²⁹, established brands also monopolised the students' preferences with *cnn.com* ranking first with 17 hits, followed by *bbc.com* with 16, while *reuters.com* received 11 hits. However, journalism students were expected to combine both well-known and alterative sources when searching for news.

Concluding it would be safe to claim that greek journalism students could be classified into the 'early adopters' category; yet conventional determinants, rather than factors corresponding exclusively to the sample, proved to be significant indicators of online news adoption. Apart from the financial barriers factor (corresponding to access, home autonomy and a fast connection) which was probably eliminated due to constant, free access from the university, the findings demonstrate no serious differences from any other sample.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study proved that young people majoring in journalism present relatively low figures of systematic online news reading. However, the study did not escape sampling problems as a larger number of respondents coming from the other two University departments located in Athens and other private IEK would yield more enlightening results. To sum up it would be interesting to compare the results with the news habits of students majoring in other disciplines in order to figure out whether the new medium has contributed to decrease the loose attachments of

young adults with news. Also, insights regarding the reading choices of young people from online sources would be useful so as to investigate 'what do they really look for' and how they feel about these choices.

NOTES

¹ source: Internet World Stats (2005a)

² source: Internet World Stats (2005a)

³ source: Internet World Stats (2005b)

⁴ source: Internet World Stats (2005b)

⁵ cited in Stafford & Stafford (2004), p. 266

⁶ data source: eMarketer Survey (2001)

⁷ source: Bentley, C. (2001)

⁸ source: Trombly, M. (2003)

⁹ source: Bowman, L. (2003)

¹⁰ source: Bowman, L. (2003)

¹¹ source: Media Awareness Network (2000)

¹² the term 'news grazers' refers to those people who check in on the news from time to time. Grazers are usually younger, less dedicated to news and have an eclectic news diet

¹³ cited in Tewksbury, D. (2003), p. 697

¹⁴ cited in Eveland & Scheufele (2000), p. 215

¹⁵ cited in Tewksbury, D. 2003 p.695

¹⁶ cited in Adam, S. (2001), p. 333

¹⁷ *Relative advantage* is the degree to which an innovation is thought to be better than its precursor. The more the perceived advantages, the higher the rate of adoption; *compatibility* is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences and needs of potential users; *complexity* is the degree of an innovation being viewed as difficult to understand and use. The more complex the idea is perceived to be, the longer it will take to be adopted. 'New ideas that are simpler to understand are adopted more rapidly than innovations that require the adopter to develop new skills and understandings' (Rogers, 1995:18); *trialability* is the degree to which an idea can be experimented with before adoption. An innovation that is trialable represents less uncertainty to the individual who is considering it for adoption.

¹⁸ source: Metzger et. al. (2003), p. 174-5

¹⁹ cited in Fischman R. (1992), p. 1

²⁰ cited in Rathmann, T. (2002)

²¹ Internet users vary in their possession of at least four kinds of relevant knowledge: recipe knowledge about how to log on, conduct searches and download information; background knowledge (i.e. of Boolean logic for designing search algorithms); integrative knowledge about the way the web operates that can enable users to navigate more effectively; and technical knowledge about software, hardware and networks necessary for troubleshooting the problems that invariably emerge, or for ensuring that one acquires the most up-to-date resources available. Taken together these four kinds of knowledge constitute what might be called 'Internet competence' (see DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001, pp.9-10)

²² cited in Johnson & Kaye (2003), p. 308

²³ the term autonomy in web use signifies access with no restrictions imposed such as time (when to use), time limits (how much time), monitoring (i.e. at work) or to compete with other users for using the PC (see DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001, p. 8)

²⁴ source: Papathanasopoulos, S. (2001b), p. 119

²⁵ In Thessaloniki (Greece) there are two public institutions to study Journalism: the Department of Journalism and Mass Media of the Aristotle University, which is a four-year course and where one obtains a Bachelor Degree, and the Institute of Professional Training (IEK) of Epanomi, which is a two-year course from where one obtains a certificate. In order to study at the Aristotle University one has to take exams, which take place at panhellenic level, while in order to study at the IEK, people simply apply and are accepted according to

their CV as well as criteria of unemployment. The former has approximately 430 students, while the latter has 42 students.

²⁶ In the end the gender variable was omitted because the sample was not representative as it comprised of 20 male and 65 female students. It turned out however that this type of gender proportion exists in those departments.

²⁷ The respondents' answers are a bit contradictory in the sense that when asked separately upon web news characteristics, the option 'easy and fast to find news of one's interest' did stand out above the other options, but did not reach the benchmark figure. However, when asked again in the perceived gratifications and motives category the option scored .399. Yet, the authors think that the trend is clear.

²⁸ The term 'hits' corresponds to how many times a name was mentioned. Respondents were asked to name freely (no list existed) from one up to three choices. The research found a substantial number of missing answers to these questions.

²⁹ As far as foreign news outlets were concerned no distinction was made in the questionnaire between newspaper sites and portals. Students simply wrote if, and which news sources they prefer.

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