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Getting Hooked on News: Uses and Gratifications and the Formation of News Habits Among College Students in an Internet Environment

Arvind Diddi and Robert LaRose

The present research proposed a theory of news habit formation based in the uses and gratifications paradigm and applied it to emerging patterns of news consumption among college students. Five distinctive patterns emerged: hometown newspapers, comedy news, cable news, Internet news, and broadcast news. A sixth consumption pattern included diverse sources specializing in depth news coverage. Surveillance and escapism gratifications were the most consistent predictors of news consumption behavior across these patterns. However, habit strength was the most powerful predictor of news consumption overall. Consumption of depth and hometown newspaper sources were related to current events knowledge.

The question of how people select among media news sources has long been of interest to both political scientists (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Moy, Pfau, & Kahlor, 1999; Scheufele, 2000; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001) and to uses and gratifications researchers (Henke, 1985; O'Keefe & Spetnagel, 1973; Parker & Plank, 2000; Vincent & Basil, 1997). Factors leading to the choice between media types, especially between print and television news sources, have been of particular interest (Becker & Dunwoody, 1982; Culbertson & Stempel, 1986; Holbert, 2005) owing to profound differences in the nature of news coverage between the two types of media (Bogart, 1985; Larson, 1998; Project for Excellence in Journalism [PEJ], 1998) and their differential effects on their audiences (Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Culbertson, 1992; Culbertson, Evarts, Richard, Karin, & Stempel, 1994).

Following the uses and gratifications tradition, audiences actively select among news sources based on their ability to gratify their needs for information, entertain-

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ment, social interaction, and escapism (e.g., Henke, 1985; Lin, 1993; McDonald, 1990; Parker & Plank, 2000; Vincent & Basil, 1997). The uses and gratifications approach stems from Lasswell's functionalism of the 1940s (Lasswell, 1948). It attempts to explain why people use various forms of media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1999) and what their motivations are when selecting among media channels and their contents (Ruggiero, 2000). All forms of news media are said to be selected by those with surveillance needs seeking in-depth information and local news, whereas the gratification of surveillance needs has been closely associated with the print media, and television is preferred by those with entertainment and escapism needs (Henke, 1985; O'Keefe & Spetnagel, 1973; Vincent & Basil, 1997). Recent research extended uses and gratifications to the "new medium" of the Internet (e.g., Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000) and offered new conceptualizations of media attendance that become salient in a media environment that includes interactive options (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Therefore, a rapidly changing media environment and new theoretical approaches to the problem of media attendance pose challenges to the existing view of news consumption.

The New Media News Environment

Indeed, the dichotomy between print and television is perhaps no longer a useful one in a highly competitive new media environment that includes the Internet, multiple 24/7 cable news channels, televised news magazines, talk radio, and even comedic news programs (Pew Research Center, 2004a). At their best, prime-time network television news magazines and network news channels deliver at least some of the in-depth coverage and commentary that was formerly the exclusive domain of print (PEJ, 1998). At their worst, print news outlets imitate the "if it bleeds, it leads," soft news and news byte style often associated with broadcast news (Overholser, 2000). On the Internet can be found the full text of daily newspapers prepared by the best professional journalists and editors from the world over, in addition to unfiltered news items delivered by search engines, and unvarnished rumor and speculation in blogs (Palser, 2002) and news chat rooms (Lynch, 1998). It is thus no longer necessarily the case that the serious news consumer will turn the pages of a newspaper and the more casual consumer will turn on the TV. And, where does the Internet fit in that dichotomy?

Forming News Habits

The extremely varied media environment that now confronts the news consumer might be thought to stimulate active selection of news sources more than ever, simply by virtue of presenting so many new choices, most of which are accessible at all times of the day and night. However, a new theory of media attendance (LaRose & Eastin, 2004) has been proposed that suggests exactly the opposite: When confronted by a

myriad of media choices, the consumer lapses into habitual patterns of media consumption in order to conserve mental resources, rather than repeatedly engaging in active selection.

Building on earlier explorations of the role of habit in media usage behavior (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; Stone & Stone, 1990), the model proposes that active selection processes of the sort assumed by uses and gratifications researchers operate primarily in the early stages of media selection. Once news consumers learn that they can get their "daily news fix" better from *The New York Times* (or from *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central) than from the *CBS Evening News*, they quickly stop agonizing over the news selection decision from day to day and moment to moment, as the uses and gratifications paradigm insists they should. Instead, they fall into a pattern of repeated media behavior that is not subjected to active self-observation, a media habit.

Over time, habit strength builds, perhaps aided by the process of classical conditioning in which news consumers return to their preferred news source to relieve their vague sense of unease about not knowing what is "going on" in the world. Habits persist until there is a change in their other daily routines, for example, when young people leave home to go to college or when a change in information needs occurs, perhaps occasioned by a major news event such as the Iraq War, or by a maturational change (e.g., by progressing from a college freshman to college senior; Vincent & Basil, 1997). If a uses and gratifications researcher were to ask whether current news consumption behavior fulfills a need "to find out about daily life," for example, respondents might with some effort recall a day in the distant past in which they last actively considered their news media options. Or, if they cannot remember that day at all they may come up with a post hoc rationalization for the researcher: They are rational people, that sounds like a reasonable explanation for news consumption, so they agree with it. However, that response would likely produce only weak correlations with media consumption, consistent with findings of uses and gratifications research (e.g., Vincent & Basil, 1997). The truer answer might often be that they no longer actively think about their news media options very much at all.

The automaticity (cf. Bargh & Gollwitzer, 1994) of habitual media consumption behavior distinguishes this phenomenon from so-called ritualistic gratifications (Rubin, 1984) in that the latter still assumes active information processing (e.g., to gratify needs to pass the time) is taking place. The formation of media habits is intertwined with the development of media addictions, more properly called media dependencies, or problematic media use (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003). The process is conceptualized in relation to the self-regulatory mechanism of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), involving self-observation of behavior, judging behavior in relation to personal or social norms, and applying self-reactive incentives to regulate one's own media consumption. This formulation thus revisits an early conceptualization of habit in the uses and gratifications tradition, in which habit was a distinct construct from gratifications sought/gratifications obtained (cf. Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985, p. 17).

Habitual media behaviors may be initiated as actively planned and actively reasoned choices as the uses and gratification model would have it. However, with repetition, media behaviors become less subject to active self-observation as the media consumer conserves mental energy for other, more pressing, daily concerns. As long as media consumers judge their overall consumption levels to be within acceptable levels and the context of media usage remains relatively unchanged, they may cease to give active consideration to their consumption patterns and will not apply self-reactive incentives (such as feelings of guilt) in attempts to modify their patterns of usage.

Habitual media consumption covers a wide range of overall usage levels and is not necessarily associated with excessive amounts of consumption. Someone who turns on a morning news program for 5 minutes every day engages in habitual behavior just as does someone who watches 5 hours of CNN every night. There is not necessarily anything dysfunctional about either pattern of behavior. Indeed, to the extent that news consumption plays an important role in the lives of individuals and the functioning of society, news habits may be regarded as "good" habits that should be cultivated.

Still, media habits can become problematic if the pattern of usage itself causes dysphoric moods. For example, anxious or depressed moods might be stimulated by the nature of the news coverage itself (Mundorf, Drew, Zillmann, & Weaver, 1990) or from negative personal consequences of media consumption, such as major disruptions of important relationships, school, or work activities. If the news consumer then resorts to further news media coverage to alleviate negative affect, usage may become a conditioned response, and a downward spiral of increasing dysphoria followed by increasing media consumption may result. Thus arrives a theoretical construction of what is popularly known as the "news junkie" phenomenon: people who are seemingly obsessed with the news. Cases in which news consumption becomes a true dependency would be rare and are the province of clinical psychologists rather than media researchers. However, deficiencies in self-regulatory mechanisms are quite common and have been shown to explain media consumption behavior across a wide range of consumption levels (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; LaRose et al., 2003).

News in the Life of College Students

College students constitute an especially important population in which to study news consumption behavior. The news consumption patterns of a lifetime form around the time young people leave for college (e.g., Al-Obaidi, Lamb-Williams, & Mordas, 2004; Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998; Schlagheck, 1998), and many media selectively target college students (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998). Motivations for media usage vary by age, with motivations to escape or pass time usually highest among younger viewers (Greenberg, 1974; Rubin, 1979). College students are susceptible to depression (Rich & Scovel, 1987), making them especially vulnerable to

the formation of media habits that relieve dysphoria through attendance to escapist media content.

During their college years, citizens also first come of age as voters. Long-lasting political beliefs are shaped in adolescence (Chaffee, Ward, & Tipton, 1981; Langton, 1969; Newhagen, 1994). College students form patterns of voting as well as news consumption that may persist for a lifetime (Henke, 1985; O'Keefe & Spetnagel, 1973; Vincent & Basil, 1997).

Parker and Plank's (2000) study of media consumption by college students in the new media context underscored the growing importance of the Internet as an information source. Applying the theory of networked community to examine the patterns of Internet and traditional news media use of college students, Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) argued that the Internet use is woven into the fabric of their daily lives and that student communities use the Web for news as well as for entertainment. A national survey of media consumption found a substantial gain for Internet use between 1995 and 1999 (Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000). None of these studies, carried out during the initial phases of the Internet's development, found any evidence that traditional media forms were being abandoned for the new media. Another study by Metzger, Flanagin, and Zwarun (2003), however, did suggest that college students rely very heavily on the Web for both academic and general information, including entertainment and news, and that this usage is expected to increase over time. More recently, the question of media displacement has become somewhat moot because the same news organizations that dominate the old media world also dominate the new (Kayany & Yelsma, 2000).

Still, today's college students are the first "Internet generation." According to a study by Pew Internet and American Life (2002), college students are early adopters and heavy users of the Internet, and by the time they were about 16 years old, nearly all present-day college students had started using computers. As with the Baby Boom "television generation" cohort (Morton, 2001) that spawned them, today's students may be expected to undergo a sea change in news consumption patterns coinciding with the increasing use of this new medium. In a recent national survey (Pew Research Center, 2004b), cable was the leading regular news source for Americans under age 30, but one in five said they regularly got campaign news from the Internet, and about as many (21%) named comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*. In addition, the effectiveness of conventional news sources may be waning along with their viewership. The percentages who said they regularly learned something about elections from network news, local TV news, and newspapers were down sharply from previous surveys. The bigger question is not whether the Internet is displacing conventional news sources but rather whether it and other new media options such as 24/7 cable news channels are creating emergent news consumption patterns that differ in their nature and effects from the conventional print/television dichotomy.

To explore the larger question of emergent news consumption patterns, the present study employs a unique and theoretically relevant group of people, the college stu-

dent audience, to explore the question of emergent news consumption patterns among future users. There has been ongoing debate whether it is appropriate to use college students in social science research (see Basil, 1996; Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1983; Courtright, 1996; Peterson, 2001; Potter, Cooper, & Dupagne, 1995; Sparks, 1995). Critics argue that the unusual and homogeneous demographics of student samples, and the fact that the student life is different from usual life in many ways, makes the generalization to the "real world" impractical. This study argues that the college student sample is suitable for the exploration of patterns of media use through the eyes of the first Internet generation.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Therefore, the first question is whether emerging patterns of news consumption still fit the conventional distinction between print and television sources. Previous research on the news consumption habits of college students (Vincent & Basil, 1997) was conducted at an early stage in the development of the Internet and failed to produce reliable distinctions among news consumption patterns.

RQ₁: What are the news consumption patterns of college students?

Based on past uses and gratifications research that examined differences in print and electronic media sources (Henke, 1985; Lin, 1993; McDonald, 1990; Parker & Plank, 2000; Vincent & Basil, 1997), the following hypotheses were posited:

H₁: Surveillance needs will be positively related to the consumption of all types of news.

H₂: Escapism and entertainment needs will be positively related to the consumption of television news forms.

In line with previous research on television viewing by Greenberg (1974) and Rubin (1977, 1979) and by a recent study on the Internet by Parker and Plank (2000), Internet news usage will be related to escapism needs.

H₃: Escapism needs will be positively related to the consumption of Internet news forms.

All forms of news consumption patterns should also be susceptible to habit formation. Although media habits have recently been explored in relationship to Internet consumption (LaRose & Eastin, 2004), there is no reason why other media forms should not be equally habit-forming.

H₄: News habit strength will be positively related to all news consumption patterns.

Consumption of the in-depth coverage found in print media should also increase the knowledge of readers (O'Keefe & Spetnagel, 1973; Vincent & Basil, 1997).

H₅: Consumption of print-oriented news sources will be related to current events knowledge.

Finally, anticipating that the new media environment may produce several complex patterns of news consumption, the authors ask:

RQ₂: What are the relationships among news consumption needs and news consumption patterns?

Research Methods

Respondents and Procedures

Respondents were 303 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory communication class at a major midwestern university. The sample was 68% male and 32% female, with a median age of 19, consistent with the demographic composition of the class from which it was drawn. Respondents were recruited via e-mail during November 2002, with the promise of extra credit to complete the survey online. All procedures were approved by the university human subjects ethics committee.

Operational Measures

Uses and gratifications measures used in prior news media research (Vincent & Basil, 1997) were replicated. Seven-point, Likert-type scales were used. Habit strength questions suggested by previous research (LaRose et al., 2003) were combined with the uses and gratifications measures before subjecting the entire set of items to a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation that explained 68% of the available variance. The habit strength items¹ constituted a separate factor ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 15.38$, $SD = 5.71$), whereas the remaining items fell into surveillance² ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 36.82$, $SD = 7.18$), escapism³ ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 21.88$, $SD = 7.23$), pass time⁴ ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 18.0$, $SD = 5.56$), and entertainment⁵ ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 10.10$, $SD = 2.52$) factors. The latter were typical of uses and gratifications research, and so the details of the factor analysis will not be reported here.

Measures of news media consumption were also adapted from Vincent and Basil (1997). Respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 0 to 7, how many days in a typical week they consulted each of 27 different news sources. They were instructed to enter a zero for a source if they consulted it for some reason other than keeping up with the news. This procedure failed to produce reliable news consumption factors in previous research, perhaps because competing news sources (e.g., the three broad-

cast network evening newscasts) were listed separately. Low intercorrelations between competing sources, and hence unreliable multi-item indexes of news consumption, could be expected because one would not normally consume all of them at the same time. Accordingly, competing sources were combined into single items (e.g., "Network evening news [ABC, CBS, NBC]"). New media sources were added. The results of a principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation are presented in Table 1 and are detailed in the results section that follows. Because the objective was to identify meaningful patterns among sources rather than to refine multi-item attitude indexes, items were retained even when they fell below commonly used rules for inclusion (e.g., factor loadings or reliabilities under .6). In all such cases, the items with low loadings were deemed to be consistent and interpretable with the other, higher loading items and so were retained.

Finally, a 10-item news quiz was constructed from true-false items drawn from news coverage in the weeks preceding the survey. The total number of correct answers was tallied for each respondent ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.45$).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Version 11). Bivariate Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to evaluate the research hypotheses. A factor analysis of news sources was performed to answer RQ₁ (see Table 1), whereas a canonical correlation analysis was performed for RQ₂ (see Table 3).

Results

Table 1 shows the results of a factor analysis of news sources. As seen in Table 1, the first factor, depth coverage, included a wide variety of sources that cut across various media channels—print, television, radio, and Internet—and all of them provide depth coverage and commentary about national and international events (e.g., *The News Hour*, *The Wall Street Journal*, newsmagazines, *National Public Radio*). The second factor consisted of cable television news channels featuring 24/7 coverage. The broadcast news factor included local news broadcasts and the morning and evening news programs of the Big Three television networks. A fourth factor included what might be termed Internet mass communication sources, online venues that distribute news to mass audiences using conventional (e.g., Web portal) and unconventional (e.g., e-mail alerts) forms of one-to-many communication. Comedic news sources (late-night comedians and Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*) constituted a separate factor. The campus newspaper and a regional newspaper appeared on the sixth factor. Because the regional newspaper was based in a metropolitan area that was the permanent home to most of the students, this was interpreted to be a "hometown" newspaper dimension.

In terms of media consumption, the campus newspaper, followed by Internet portal sites, and late-night comedians were the most frequently consulted news sources.

Sources providing depth coverage of national and international events were seldom consulted, generally less than one day per week.

H₁ predicted that surveillance needs will be positively related to the consumption of all types of media. Surveillance showed a significant positive correlation with four patterns of news consumption—cable TV, broadcast, Internet, and newspapers ($r = .184, .173, .224$, and $.136$, respectively, $p < .05$ or better in all cases). See Table 2. The hypothesis was partially supported.

H₂ predicted that escapism and entertainment needs will be positively related to the consumption of television news forms. Escapism positively correlated with television news forms including cable TV ($r = .154, p < .01$) and comic news ($r = .141, p < .05$). However, escapism was also correlated to depth coverage ($r = .169, p < .01$), which included both television (e.g., *The News Hour*) and nontelevision (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal*) sources. But, entertainment was not a significant predictor of consumption of television news forms. The hypothesis was partially supported.

H₃ predicted that escapism needs will be positively related to the consumption of Internet news forms. Entertainment and escapism positively correlated with the consumption of Internet news forms ($r = .180$ and $.172$, respectively, $p < .01$). The hypothesis was supported.

H₄ predicted that news habit strength will be positively related to all news consumption patterns. Habit strength correlated with all six measures of news sources ($r = .195, .282, .149, .284, .149$, and $.200$, respectively, $p < .01$). The hypothesis was supported.

The final hypothesis (H₅) predicted that consumption of print-oriented news sources will be related to current events knowledge. Current events knowledge positively correlated with the hometown newspaper factor ($r = .150, p < .05$) but also with the depth coverage factor ($r = .170, p < .01$), which included both print and electronic media sources. The hypothesis was partially supported.

RQ₂ asked about the relationships among news consumption needs and news consumption patterns. Table 3 shows the results of a canonical correlation analysis of news sources and news-viewing motivations. Two significant canonical roots were found. The first significant root (Canonical $R = .382$, Wilks's $\lambda = .724$, $\chi^2[30] = 94.75$, $p < .001$) related consumption of new electronic media (Internet and cable) to habit strength and surveillance, entertainment, and escapism needs. The second significant root (Canonical $R = .315$, Wilks's $\lambda = .847$, $\chi^2[20] = 48.52$, $p < .001$) related news media specializing in depth coverage to escapism and surveillance needs. However, the relationship to surveillance was negative, indicating that low surveillance needs were associated with consumption of depth news coverage.

Discussion

Thus, the introduction of new sources of news has indeed created a complex media environment. At least among college students, the new media environment has pro-

Table 1
Factor Analysis of News Sources

News Source	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Depth	Cable	Broadcast	Internet	Comic	Papers
Depth coverage ($\alpha = .88$)	6.73	9.39						
<i>The News Hour with Jim Lehrer</i> on PBS	0.41	1.17	.792	.034	.154	.067	.018	-.008
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	0.55	1.29	.723	.315	.108	.041	-.011	.194
Newsmagazines (<i>Time</i> , <i>Newsweek</i> , <i>Business Week</i>)	0.59	1.34	.691	.183	.112	-.070	.255	.296
National Public Radio	0.58	1.39	.685	.089	.146	.018	-.081	-.022
<i>USA Today</i>	0.68	1.42	.678	.175	.229	.065	.127	.146
Internet news/discussion groups	0.74	1.51	.621	.091	.036	.348	.168	-.142
Internet chat rooms	0.26	1.03	.579	.055	.050	.378	.091	-.342
Local newspaper	1.17	1.69	.563	.155	.069	.218	.142	.317
TV newsmagazines (e.g., <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i>)	0.83	1.37	.561	.087	.485	.109	.110	-.061
<i>The New York Times</i>	0.94	1.70	.506	.309	.018	-.031	.027	.268
Cable news ($\alpha = .84$)	7.38	7.25						
CNN Headline News channel	2.04	2.11	.176	.817	.185	.133	.133	-.006
CNN news channel	2.04	2.07	.117	.803	.221	.168	.181	-.004
MSNBC news channel	1.02	1.60	.431	.587	.272	.089	.040	.116
CNBC news channel	0.83	1.49	.534	.562	.153	.000	.090	.185
The Fox News Channel	1.44	1.88	.311	.428	.254	.087	-.106	.372

Broadcast news ($\alpha = .79$)	8.70	6.76						
Late evening local TV news	2.07	1.88	.029	.321	.765	.105	.111	.043
Early evening local TV news	1.98	1.83	.111	.292	.760	.067	-.033	.111
Network evening news (ABC, CBS, NBC)	2.20	1.87	.080	.354	.655	.157	.065	.189
Morning network news (<i>Today</i> , <i>Early Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i>)	1.42	1.81	.306	.003	.605	-.025	.117	.090
Local radio news	1.03	1.76	.383	-.061	.474	.185	.099	.197
Internet news ($\alpha = .56$)	5.41	4.02						
E-mail alerts, listservs	1.24	1.97	.313	.004	.047	.699	-.070	.127
Internet portal sites (e.g., AOL, MSN, Yahoo)	2.79	2.31	-.075	.231	.181	.640	.088	.164
Internet news sites run by major media organizations	2.19	2.00	.085	.451	.121	.503	.030	.128
Comic news ($\alpha = .59$)	4.14	3.40						
<i>The Daily Show</i> on Comedy Central	1.64	2.03	.258	.148	-.031	.072	.789	.069
Late-night comedians (Leno, Letterman)	2.50	2.01	-.010	.108	.293	-.013	.775	.128
Hometown paper ($\alpha = .48$)	4.86	3.28						
Campus newspaper	3.63	2.25	.025	.114	.143	.176	.125	.665
Regional newspaper	1.23	1.76	.316	-.008	.341	.199	.155	.527

Note: Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. 60% variance explained.

Table 2
Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Between Variables

	Depth Coverage	Cable TV	Broadcast	Internet	Comic News	Newspapers
Surveillance	-.046	.184**	.173**	.224**	.057	.136*
Escapism	.169**	.154**	.109	.172**	.141*	.095
Pass time	.011	.004	.003	.031	.142*	.061
Entertainment	-.040	.061	.056	.180**	.054	.105
Habit strength	.195**	.282**	.149**	.284**	.149**	.200**
News quiz	.170**	.093	.113	.051	.026	.150*

* $p < .05$, two-tailed. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

vided a wide range of choices in getting their daily news fix and that has created some distinctive news consumption patterns. Specifically, the dichotomy between print and broadcast sources that has attracted much of the attention of communication researchers may now be defunct, at least among the college students in the present sample. Recent survey data suggests that this is a general trend among college students nationwide (Pew Research Center, 2004b).

College students may differ from the general population in news consumption because of the availability and access to the Internet, college newspapers, and other news sources at the library. Although most of the college students incorporate news consumption in their lives, they are not consuming news at the rates of older people.

Table 3
Canonical Correlation Results

	Root 1	Root 2
Canonical loadings for news consumption patterns		
Depth coverage	.391	.809
Cable	.808	.241
Broadcast	.530	-.111
Internet	.869	.005
Comic	.272	.268
Hometown paper	.533	.058
Variance	.366	.133
Canonical loadings for news motivations		
Surveillance	.768	-.547
Escapism	.461	.400
Pass time	.111	.078
Entertainment	.515	-.291
Habit	.894	.347
Variance	.376	.134

In addition, college students are less likely to read newspapers than older people and less likely to watch network news (Bennett, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2002). According to the Pew Research Center, older people also differ from college students in news tastes as the former show high level of interest in news related to health and religion, whereas the latter are more interested in following sports and entertainment news. College students are more likely to use the Internet for news and read more news magazines when compared to youth with no history of college. With myriad options of news outlets, including the Internet, college students are emerging more as "news grazers," which means they check news periodically but do not have a particular time for news consumption (Pew Research Center, 2002).

The Internet emerged as an important news medium, both in its own right and as part of a multimedia depth coverage consumption pattern. Among the college students in the present study, Internet portal sites were among the most frequently consulted news sources, second only to the campus newspaper (Table 1).

The present findings shed new light on the somewhat paradoxical relationship between new media consumption and conventional media consumption. Consistent with Stempel et al. (2000), Levins (1998), and Parker and Plank (2000), college students rely on the Internet for obtaining news. Yet, no evidence emerged that college students are abandoning traditional media for the new media forms. Traditional and new media seem to be serving as complements to each other, the point also argued by Stempel et al. (2000) and Holbert (2005).

Why has the Internet not replaced conventional media even among the Internet Generation? An answer to this question may be provided by this study wherein habit strength was found to be a significant predictor of all types of news consumption. College students, who are information seekers (Parker & Plank, 2000), are getting in the habit of checking e-mails and news headlines on Internet news sites and Internet portal sites like Yahoo, MSN, and AOL. However, they also have habitual consumption patterns with respect to conventional news media, and these habits may predate their contact with the Internet as a news source (Pew Research Center, 2002).

Moreover, the conventional news media feed online news habits by referring their audiences to Web sites, and this would encourage people to go to the Internet for news. Meanwhile, the most popular online sources are "powered" by content from conventional news sources. So, perhaps new consumption patterns arise while old ones continue due to persistent news habits and the cross-fertilization of those habits between media channels.

Consistent with prior research (Henke, 1985; O'Keefe & Spetnagel, 1973; Vincent & Basil, 1997), current events knowledge was significantly related to newspaper consumption. However, it can no longer be said that the print media are the preeminent sources of current events knowledge among college students (Al-Obaidi et al., 2004; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Newhagen, 1994). Those who draw upon a variety of in-depth print and electronic sources, including the Internet, are also knowledgeable news consumers. In addition, surveillance needs are most closely associated with Internet news sources.

Finally, how do college students get hooked on news and become so-called news junkies? If news junkie means someone who has strong news consumption habits, then cable television and the mass communication news forms found on the Internet are the most habit-forming. Indeed, frequent consumers of these news sources might be at risk of developing abnormal news media dependencies because they are also associated with escapist motivations. In social cognitive theory, these are understood to be self-reactive incentives, representing attempts to “treat” dysphoric states of mind with enjoyable media consumption (cf. LaRose et al., 2003). If that media consumption in turn leads to deeper feelings of negative affect—either flowing from disruption of important relationships or from the consumption of upsetting “bad news”—then the conditions for a downward spiral into problematic media usage might develop.

However, news junkies may be understood to be those whose news consumption is prompted by a need to escape from their everyday routines, more along the lines of ritualistic media use as described by Rubin (1984), as opposed to the instrumental orientation of those with surveillance needs. Those who consult sources featuring depth news coverage would best fit that profile.

Limitations

The generalizability of the present study is limited by the use of a college student sample from a single campus. The news consumption patterns described here were determined by the incomplete selection of sources presented to the respondents. Talk radio news shows and midday television news broadcasts were not included, nor were cable channels devoted to weather news and sports news.

Current events knowledge was tested with a small number of true–false items. Although this procedure followed that used in prior research (specifically in Vincent & Basil, 1997), a more comprehensive measure of news knowledge may have produced different results.

However, the authors argue that the news media use patterns found in the present Internet generation of college students are of great theoretical relevance to the emergent media consumption question. Because online technologies are woven into the daily fabric of life in student communities, news consumption choices are already based on criteria that will become more important across the general population as the Internet generation matures. The news habits developed within this community are not a product of an uneven social distribution of computer skills and access but stem from the unique needs that may be better satisfied by new media (cf. Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000).

Future Research

The current exploratory research suggests the emergence of new, complex patterns of news consumption. However, longitudinal studies of news consumers involving a

wider range of ages and educational backgrounds would be needed to document changing news patterns in the general population.

Emerging media consumption patterns also suggest a need for improved measures of news knowledge. Given the diversity of sources in the new media environment and the fragmentation of consumption patterns, a small number of items focusing on the salient events of the day may no longer be sufficient. More contextual, qualitative measures of news knowledge should be developed.

Our ability to explain news consumption behavior might be improved by adopting new theories and methods. Uses and gratifications associated with specific news sources, as opposed to one set of gratification items applied to news sources generally (as was the case here), might increase their predictive power. Reconceptualizing gratifications as the expected outcomes of specific future media consumption behaviors, as opposed to beliefs that gratifications are associated with a general category of media usage, increases the ability to predict usage. Finally, self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to successfully execute a behavior to achieve important attainments, could also play a role in news usage.

Notes

¹Items include "Because I am a news junkie," "Because I would miss it if I didn't," "Because it's part of my daily routine," and "Because it's a habit of mine."

²Items include "So I can understand the world," "To find about daily life," "Because it makes me want to learn more," "To learn about society," "To learn what might happen," "To keep up with government," and "To keep up with international news."

³Items include "To get away from everyday worries," "To cheer me up," "Because it amuses me," "To forget about school/work," "To relax," and "Because it's thrilling."

⁴Items include "When I have nothing better to do," "To pass time," "When there's no one else to talk to," and "When I am bored."

⁵Items include "Because it is entertainment" and "Because it is enjoyable."

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