

Why don't we Understand the News?

The day the result of the 2016 United Kingdom EU Membership Referendum was announced, the googletrends reported a 250% increase in searches for "What happens if we leave the EU?". Much like the case of David Leonhardt's 2008 article in the New York Times in which began, "Raise your hand if you don't quite understand this whole financial crisis," national news commentary had focused on little else in the preceding months.

Some months after Leonhardt's article was published, Journalism Professor Jay Rosen voiced his agreement with its premise in a blog post on the failure of journalism during the financial crisis; "there are certain very important stories – and the mortgage crisis is a good example – where until I grasp the whole I am unable to make sense of any part."NationalExplainer

It has become apparent that prolific coverage alone is not enough to engage and support the public in understanding the complexities of current events. Historically, news media has been limited in the volume of content it can produce by physical constraints such as printing costs, but the rise of the internet as a platform to deliver it has lead to an explosion of content, both through existing media channels and through competing social media websites and blogs.

The term ambient news was coined by newnewsoldnews to describe the ubiquity of news in the current information landscape. Others have commented in a more critical light; describing the proliferation of competing news media as "as pervasive–and in some ways as invasive–as advertising." [p.2]overloadjournalismsbattle

In 2007, The Associated Press conducted an extensive field study anewmodelfornews into the news consumption habits of young adults. Among their key findings were three points which essentially summarise the news overload issue; itemize

"Consumers are experiencing news fatigue."

The study found participants were debilitated, and that their levels of dissatisfaction lead to a decrease in the effort they put into news acquisition. This is consistent with multiple other studies newsandtheoverloadedcustomer, UnderstandingTheParticipatoryNewsConsumer, InformationAccessinComplexPoorlyStructuredInformationSpaces which found participants across every demographic were overwhelmed by the amount of news content available to them and agreed it prevented them exploring news on less familiar topics.

"Story resolution is key."

Participants' consistent enjoyment of sports and entertainment news was due in part to the formulaic storytelling which characterises these types of journalism, with clear chronology to provide contextual back story. The feeling of enjoyment gained from reading procedural stories directly contrasts with what the same participants experienced reading World news, where they struggled to find resolution to stories which were unfolding at the time.

"Consumers want depth but aren't getting it"

It was observed that participants, in their efforts to discover below-the-fold content (defined in the context of the AP's model, [p.37]anewmodelfornews) from particular headlines, often found themselves reading the same summary-level content from different news sources. It was recommended that news providers support this by "designing innovative formats and creating easier pathways to deep content." [p.49]anewmodelfornews