

# Report: Non-traditional media gain ground

## Fact-checking ceding to 'journalism of assertion'

When Tom Rosenstiel met with a group of local TV news directors last week, they told him that viewers watch local news on average two to 2½ times a week — a far cry from just a few years ago when "Eyewitness News" teams drew viewers every day.

Now, local news anchors "can no longer say 'As we told you yesterday,' because chances are people weren't watching yesterday," says Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which releases its second annual State of the News Media report today.

The same phenomenon is affecting network news and newspapers, where viewers and readers are turning increasingly — and more regularly — to the Internet and cable for their news.

The report finds that most news consumers now get their news from four different types of media in a typical week.

"We as journalists need to communicate in an entirely different way if readers or viewers are only with us occasionally," he says. "We can't assume that they are loyal or that they trust us because they use us on a regular basis. We have to forge an entirely new relationship with people who are really no longer friends but acquaintances."

The report finds that, with the exception of cable news and talk radio, the notion that consumers have retreated to ideological corners for their news is exaggerated; Democrats and Republicans both get their news from similar outlets.

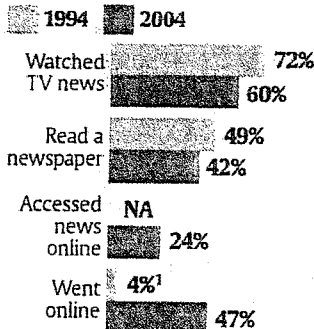
The report found that cable news stories are more thinly reported than other news media, and that a majority of the reporting on Iraq (55%) was largely neutral. But it also found that President Bush got three times the negative coverage of Sen. John Kerry (36% vs. 12%).

The 600-page report also finds that the traditional "journalism of verification" — in which reporters check facts — is ceding ground to a new "journalism of assertion," in which information is offered on radio and cable talk shows and via Internet bloggers, with little or no attempt to verify the facts.

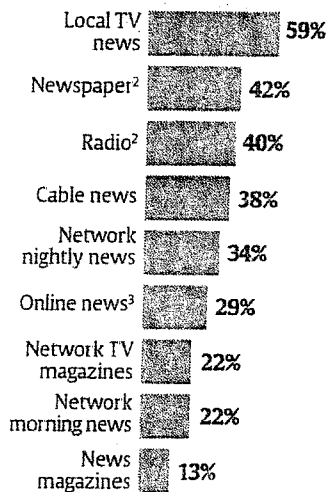
One of the consequences is that, increasingly, citizens can no longer agree on basic facts "because ev-

### State of the news

Percentage of people who said they did this "yesterday":



Percentage who said their regular sources of news include:



1 - 1995 2 - based on use "yesterday" 3 - at least 3 days a week

Sources: Project for Excellence in Journalism and The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press: State of the News Media report

By Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY

"Blogs and 'so's your mother'-style talk shows are distorting news in America beyond what anyone could have imagined 10 years ago," he says. "The public is finding it more difficult than ever to distinguish between legitimate news and unverified drivel. The problem is that most news consumers don't realize that mainstream media reporters work within strict policies and guidelines that these other outlets don't require."

Robert Lichter of the Center for Media and Public Affairs says that those who blame this new form of journalism on technology — the Internet — ignore misgivings about traditional media that the public has harbored for years.

It started in the '60s and '70s with Vietnam and Watergate, when journalists "decided they had a larger role to play in politics and society," he says. "They weren't just telling people what was going on. They were refereeing among the various contenders for influence by telling us who is telling the truth, who is lying and what the truth is. Once you start doing that, you have created journalism of assertion."

Lichter says traditional media were able to operate that way for decades because "they had no competition. The politicians could yell and scream, but journalists could say, 'We're the public tribunes. We have the constitutional right to tell the public that you are lying.'"

"Now the 'right' that professional journalists asserted in the '60s is being claimed by bloggers. Journal-

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Rosenstiel says the media have to carve out a new role for themselves. Instead of being so-called

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## The media mix

By Peter Johnson

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Rosenstiel says the media have to carve out a new role for themselves. Instead of being so-called

gatekeepers of information — deciding what the public needs or does not need to know — traditional media may have to evolve into "authenticators, to tell people:

"What here in this increasingly crazy world can I trust?" It's easier said than done."

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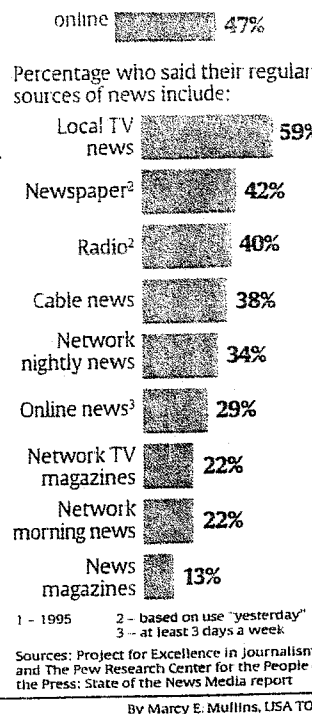
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One of the consequences is that, increasingly, citizens can no longer agree on basic facts "because everyone is consuming their own kind of personal mix of media. The chances that we know the same thing, even if we're sitting in an office in a cubicle next to each other, is less than it used to be," Rosenstiel says.

This is a dangerous development, says Joe Angotti, former NBC News executive who now teaches journalism at Northwestern University.



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