

Despite Gains, Internet Not Major Player as News Source

By Guido H. Stempel III and Thomas Hargrove

The increase in the use of the Internet over the last few years has been well documented. Stempel, Hargrove and Bernt showed an increase from 5.3 percent to 34.5 percent between 1995 and 1999 in those using the Internet four days a week or more.¹ Pew Research has asked respondents about "regular use" several times and found an increase from 41 percent in 1996 to 71 percent in 2002.²

As the daily use of the Internet has approached the daily use of newspapers, it has been widely assumed that the Internet was challenging the newspaper as a news medium

However, the evidence on this is mixed. Pew Research reported that in 2000, while 68 percent of the respondents reported using the Internet regular, only 42 percent said they used it to get news three or more times a week, and only 12 percent used it to get news in the daytime.³ Two local studies found that people were more likely to use the print version than the online version of a local newspaper.⁴

These studies leave unanswered the question of to what extent Internet

users actually use the Internet to get news. The purpose of this study is to answer that question.

Method

The Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University conducted a survey of 946 randomly selected respondents between January 20 and January 30, 2003. Telephone numbers were selected randomly, and then a respondent was selected randomly in each household reached. Interviewing was done by student employees of the center.

Respondents were asked about use of television news, newspapers, the Internet and the Internet for news. They were asked how many days in the past week they had used each. They also were asked for basic demographic information.

Results

Table 1 shows that television news and newspapers are still ahead of the Internet in daily use. Yet, the use of the

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Internet for news lags far behind. While 68.6 percent of our respondents had used the Internet at least one day in the past week, only 41.1 percent had used it to get news. Furthermore, when we look at the figures for 4-7 days, which we consider the regular users, use of Internet for news lags far behind. The percentage getting news from the Internet four to seven days, which we consider regular use, is half those who used the Internet. It is also less than a third the percentage that used TV news and less than half the percentage who used a newspaper that often.

Table 2, which shows the percentage using media four days or more a week, has a different pattern in use by age than earlier studies did. It used to be that those 18 to 34 were the heaviest users of the Internet, but now it is people between 35 and 54 years old. For the 18 to 36 age group, use of the Internet is greater than the use of newspapers, but use of the Internet for news is still far less than newspaper use.⁴

Table 1
How Many Days Respondents Used Media, in Percent

	0	1-3 days	4-7 days
Television News	7.2	23.2	80.7
Daily Newspaper	15.5	23.5	61.0
Internet	31.4	17.0	51.6
News from Internet	57.8	16.1	25.1

N=946
Differences 8.4 percent or larger are statistically significant.

The pattern for newspapers and television news use is the one that has been found for years—the older people are the more likely they are to use these media. For the Internet, however, use by those 55 or older is much less than for the other two age groups, and only one person in eight in that age group is using the Internet for news. Note that Internet use is greater than newspaper use for those 18 to 34 and 35 to 54, but when it comes to news, the Internet is far behind newspapers.

Conclusions

While the use of the Internet is rising, it still is not a major player so far as news is concerned. It lags both newspapers and television news substantially as a source of news. This is true because many people who use the Internet never use it for news. Internet use is now greater for those 35 to 54 years of age than for those younger than that, and this holds for news as well. This in part probably reflects the increased use

Table 2
Use of Media Four Days or More Per Week
By Age, in Percent

	18-34	34-54	55 and up
Television News	67.3	77.0	95.1
Daily Newspaper	48.4	57.7	76.4
Internet	51.6	60.9	31.1
News from Internet	27.2	33.9	12.5
Total	275	366	305

Differences 8.4 percent or larger are statistically significant.

of computers in the workplace. It also is probably in part because those who were less than 35 years old 10 or 15 years ago, when that group had the highest Internet use, are now in the 35 to 54 age group. However, use by those more than 55 years old lags far behind use of the newspapers and television news. Many in that age group simply have the habit of getting news that way, and it is still the most convenient way for them to get it.

Notes

1. Guido H. Stempel III, Thomas Hargrove and Joseph P. Bernt, "Relation of Growth of Internet to Changes in Media Use from 1995 to 1999," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (spring 2000): 71-79

2. "Pew Research Public's News Habits Little Changed by Sept. 11," <<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=156>>(9 June 2002).

3. "Pew Research Public's News Habits Little Changed by Sept. 11."

4. Bonnie Bressers and Lori Bergen, "Few University Students reading Newspapers Online," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, no. 2/3 (spring/summer 2002): 32-45; Hsiang Iris Chyi and Dominic Lasorsa, "Access, Use and Preference for Online Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal* 20, no. 4 (fall 1999): 2-13.