

Print and Online Newspapers in Denmark

NIELS OLE FINNEMANN

Oct 8, 2003 was a quite ordinary day. Among the news of the day only few appeared in all the major newspapers across Europe. The most widely reported story told that the film star Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected as Governor in California. The same day a minor, but unusual event was performed by a group of scholars who collected and archived a number of print newspapers and online news sites from 16 European countries. The aim of these coordinated efforts was to provide comparable sets of materials, which could form the basis for studying the relation between print- and online news media. To do so a codebook including a detailed list of definitions of thematic units were generated and a test case was performed in the preceding year. Afterwards the archived materials was described and analyzed quantitatively and finally the data were put back into the different social and cultural contexts from which they originated. The overall project and the findings are now published in Richard van der Wurff & Edmund Lauf (eds.) *Print and Online Newspapers in Europe*, 2005.

In the following I will address some of the questions intrinsic to projects of this sort and try to put the project into perspective by discussing the Danish case.

The project was developed within one of the working groups in the COST Action 20 on “The Impact of the Internet on the Mass Media in Europe” running from 2001 to 2006.

The overall framework of the Action was the – at the time – rather moderate idea that the mass media in Europe were large-scale economic and social institutions that would not immediately be replaced by, or converge as a result of, the rapid development of the Internet. Instead it was assumed that “the processes of social change involved would be relatively protracted, and that there were major issues of economic viability and social inscription that would require time to resolve”. (Final Evaluation Report p. 3).

Within this wider framework the point of departure for the working group on newspapers and their online editions was taken in the assumption “that the presence of online newspapers not only added to the quantity and quality of the available news supply, but also initiated changes in the supply, production, management and use of traditional offline newspapers. We were interested in how these changes affected the viability of the newspaper industry in general and online newspapers in particular, the availability of different types of information, and the vitality of the public sphere”. (Final Evaluation Report, p. 7).

During the first years a more elaborate set of assumptions and hypothesis for study were developed. Among the research questions was questions on the – competitive or non-competitive – relations between off- and online newspapers; the online papers use of interactiv features, hypertext, multimedia and other features considered to be characteristics of digital media; to what extent online newspapers add value by offering high-quality breaking news and revitalizing the public sphere; or whether the most significant impact of the internet was on the mindset of the publishers, who found themselves compelled to experiment with new online possibilities while keeping costs low?

Given the arduous character of international comparative research, a limited focus for the overall study was also required. For this reason it was decided to limit the scope to study a) major quality newspapers and their online editions plus the most important online only news sites in each country, b) the content of front pages and the pages referred (or linked) to on these front pages and c) one day only. Still, a lot of work was needed to synchronize and specify not only the research questions but even more the notions and concepts to be studied. How for instance, do we label different sorts of linking within a website? How do we label the various sorts of textual units on a print front page in a uniform way but still allowing us to identify different structures and patterns? How do we describe the many

different sorts of relations between images and text-units? The questions were solved by developing a codebook including definitions of all sorts of relevant units and features. The codebook passed a number of revisions. Finally the coders' interpretations of the definitions was controlled in a preliminary test (performed by the coders in all countries on a more limited and identical set of coded materials). The final version of the codebook is included in the publication.

Content analysis of this sort does not go deep into the content, but sticks to quantifiable structural and compositional patterns. Of course the figures and quantities could be directly compared, but not without contextual knowledge. Take for instance the use of multimedia features: These figures showed in general that the use of multimedia features were very low with a few exceptions in Southern Europe. The significance of these exceptions becomes more evident when you recall that the broadband penetration in Northern Europe was much higher than in Southern Europe, which means that multimedia use would be more likely in Northern Europe than in Southern Europe. Since the findings pointed in the opposite direction we may conclude that multimedia use on online news sites is not as much a function of broadband-penetration as of cultural tradition.

Not only broadband penetration but also internet penetration and the existing media systems are of relevance for the interpretation. The same goes for a huge range of cultural factors different from country to country. To optimize the interpretation of the findings, it was therefore decided to produce a book that described, analyzed and compared the results within their national contexts. For the same reasons I will focus specifically on the Danish case.

In this case we considered the most important distinctive contextual features to be a) a high rate of internet and broadband penetration, b) the dominance of a relatively homogeneous and well educated modern middle class (except for 4-5 % not well integrated immigrants) c) most of the news in all media were produced by print media, which were also strong on the internet, d) though electronic public service media were even stronger on the new platform, and e) that the development of the internet is part of a broader and more far reaching change in the overall media system also indicated by the rise of free print dailies, a growth in the number of short news programs in radio and television channels, increased use of teletext news, digital audio channels, RSS feeds, and SMS for mobile media etc.

This seemingly information overload, the same news are circulated over and again on all media plat-

forms, might be important in itself, but can also be seen as an indication of a stronger separation of news consumption from opinion building. The study does not inform us on this point, but it did show that discussion features and editorial contributions to public opinion building did not occur as significant part of the online news media. It also revealed the paradox that "print newspapers use their smaller size to publish longer and more complex articles, whereas online newspapers, which in principle have no limits to their size, provide (...) shorter articles". (Fortunati in Laud & Wurff: 179). Since we know that there are debates on all sorts of questions on a huge variety of websites we cannot evaluate the role of the internet as a means for public opinion building on the assumption that these opinions are mainly manifested on the news media sites of existing media.

The role of the internet as a medium for the – widening of – mediated public space and the public sphere also depends on the penetration rates. As a thumb of rule we can assume that where you find the internet you also find a modern educated middle class and vice versa. Since there are huge differences across Europe in this respect it makes comparisons difficult. Here we are also confronted with the question whether the different penetration rates should be seen as a digital divides (which will be diminished or should be overcome) or as the result of cultural diversity, which will persist or should be preserved?

If – for a while – we define culture as socially produced features, which cannot be changed directly by political decisions in a short term perspective we will probably have to admit that the differences in penetration rates are manifestations of cultural diversities rather than political – or commercial – decisions. If so, we should expect that the significant differences in the spread of the internet will persist for many years and consequently that the function of the internet as a news medium, as a medium for building of public opinion and many other purposes will also differ significantly. Among the many possible sources of diversification we need to focus more on the different governmental approaches and political efforts, on the role of public service media, of civil society activities and of course of the existing media systems.

Since the data only reflect a single moment on the timeline they cannot be used to identify developmental trends and dynamics. But since they cover what might be the most comprehensive selection of print media and their online editions in Europe from any given day, they may be used as a landmark for many future studies.

In this respect one should be aware that the study represents the state of the art just a few months before the appearance of adequate business models for the online activities of print media in Europe. Today most of the online news sites of print media is said to be profitable. But you can still choose whether you want to pay for your online news or want to have them for free. This is not only the case in countries where free content is delivered by strong public service institutions like BBC. It is also the result of the existence of news services such as news.google.com and many less elaborated news services including civil society initiatives whether in the form of citizens online news (Flix.dk) or more specialized news

services focusing on specific areas (sports, entertainment, politics etc.). The coexistence of paid and unpaid services on the internet is found in many areas: music, video/movies as well as encyclopedias. It is based on two tendencies, first the development of business models based on advertisements, not least targeted ads, and second that the internet allow civil society activities to develop into large scale projects such as napster, gnutella, wikipedia, and in fact also the very spread of the http://www-protocol itself. There are huge civil society resources ready to provide content for free. Commercial media whether print or online need to adapt.

References

Final Evaluation Report of the Cost Action 20. (2006) Draft Version. London.

Wurff, R.v.d. & Lauf, E. (eds) (2005) *Print and Online Newspapers in Europe. A Comparative Analysis in 16 Countries.* EU-COST a 20. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.