

# THE FUTURE OF NEWS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Fred Fletcher

July 7, 2007

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

For media theorists, following Habermas, the modern news media, at each stage of their development, have altered the nature of the public sphere. From the coffee houses of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through the emergence of daily newspapers, news services, the electronic media and the subsequent dominance of television, each has altered the nature of the public discourse so necessary to modern liberal democracies.<sup>2</sup> The latest development, which presents a rapidly moving target for researchers, is the online public sphere. My focus here is on the implications of this changing mediascape for the public sphere which, since the emergence of mass media, has been for the most part a reflection of the news media.

Media theorist Robert Hackett divides media and democracy theories into three broad groups:

- 1) **liberal theories**, which argue that the economic media market and the free market of ideas are essentially linked;
- 2) **deep democracy theories**, which argue that the commercial media are part of the state apparatus and are essentially not redeemable; and,
- 3) **public sphere theories** which recognize the flaws in the mainstream media but argue that democracy can be best served by reform, regulation, and the development of alternative sources, including public service media, to supplement the mainstream outlets and diversify the range of perspectives available.<sup>3</sup>

For those interested in media policy in representative democracies like Canada and Australia, the public sphere model is the most fruitful. Although this paper draws on data from Canada and the United States, the broad trends that I have identified are present in Australia and, indeed, throughout the industrial democracies. Broadly speaking, Australians and Canadians live in similar media worlds. Both have:

- relatively high levels of media ownership concentration
- similar – and relatively low – newspaper readership per capita
- relatively high levels of Internet access, but with persistent digital divides (by age, education, income, place of residence)
- a shift from television watching to Internet use, especially for those under 30

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper benefited from the research assistance of Scott Ewing, Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Kristin Wozniak, now at the CBC, and Frederick L. Fletcher and from the lively discussion at the Institute for Social Research Seminar, July 28, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of this argument, see Pieter Boeder, Habermas' heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society, *First Monday*, 2005 (peer-reviewed journal on the Internet) at [http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue10\\_9/boeder](http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_9/boeder).

<sup>3</sup> This categorization is based on Robert Hackett, "Is there a democratic deficit in Anglo-American journalism?" in Stuart Allan (ed.), *Journalism: Critical Issues* (London: Open University Press, 2005).

- public service broadcasters that, despite declining audiences, continue to be important

However, there are some important differences. Canada has much higher cable penetration and, therefore, many more TV channels and, as a result, a longer history of audience fragmentation. The widespread availability of cable service has also facilitated broadband access, which is now among the highest in the world. With respect to the Internet, therefore, Canada is a step ahead of Australia and trends in Canada may provide a glimpse of future prospects as well as current trends here.

My general thesis is that the Internet has challenged the dominance of the traditional media, presented information in novel ways and raised questions about established definitions of news and the role of journalists and, above all, created a new public sphere. As with other new media, news on the Internet is taking on new forms, involving audiences in new ways (as both seekers for and providers of news and commentary), and is altering news consumption patterns. My focus is not so much on the content makers – as professionals – but on the content users.

In April 2007, Edward Greenspon, Editor-in-chief of the *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), Canada's national newspaper, pointed out that the "erosion" of daily newspaper circulation predated the Internet and argued that the Web should not be seen as competition, but rather "as an exciting new means of telling Globe stories to Globe readers." The data from two Canadian studies –Credibility of Canadian News Media and the Canadian Internet Project<sup>4</sup> – confirm that the Internet and traditional news media are more complementary than competitive. By itself, however, this generalization overlooks crucial changes in the mediascape. It is essential to recognize the changed environment that the pervasive availability of online news – in all its variety – has created. The advent of bloggers and "citizen journalists" has led to unprecedented scrutiny of mainstream reporting and commentary, not only identifying errors and presenting alternative perspectives, but also uncovering stories that have been overlooked or ignored. Audiences can with relative ease bypass the traditional gatekeepers to access news from a wide range of sources and can seek out competing perspectives on a wide range of subjects. We are no longer certain just what constitutes news -- and newswriters are struggling to define a continuing role for themselves in coping with this avalanche of information.

Similarly, with audiences splintering over more and more complex platforms, news organizations are trying to find ways to deliver their core product – arguably based on credible processes of verification and interpretation – through multiple channels, by repackaging and repurposing the news.

Audience patterns in the US and Canada show a clear demand for two kinds of news and information not readily available from the mainstream media: **hyper-local** – reports on the the immediate community -- and what we might call **glocal** – local

---

<sup>4</sup> Reports on these two studies may be found on these websites: Canadian Media Research Consortium ([www.cmrcrm.ca](http://www.cmrcrm.ca)) and Canadian Internet Project ([www.cipic.ca](http://www.cipic.ca)). Both were national surveys of Canadians, based on a representative sample of about 3000. The confidence interval (margin of error) for the whole sample is +/- 1.8%. Question wordings are not included in this short paper but may be found on the websites. Unless otherwise indicated, the Canadian data reported in this paper is from these two surveys.

perspectives on international events (from outside the news consumer's country of residence).

Not surprisingly, therefore, people who report a strong interest in keeping up with the news tend to use a wider range of sources. There is a clear relationship between interest in national and international news and getting news online, while Canadians with a strong interest in local news are more likely to rely on television news and newspapers. In the United States, nine out of 10 print newspaper readers read a local newspaper, whereas only about half of online readers do so.<sup>5</sup> However, local newspapers and television news broadcasts rarely qualify as hyper-local.

## **WHERE DO CANADIANS GET THEIR NEWS?**

As in other liberal democracies, television is still the predominant source of news for Canadians (as it is for Australians). If we think of those who access a news source at least several times a week as regular consumers, television still leads the way. The Canadian figures in 2003 were 88% for television news, 71% for radio news 65% for newspapers, and 27% for the Internet (rising to 36% in 2004). The numbers fluctuate a little, but the rankings persist over time. (See Table 1.)

Is the Internet an important news source, a supplement to traditional news sources, or something entirely different? The answer is yes ... to all of the above. For the most part, Canadians go the Internet for specific kinds of information, supplementing traditional media, but they also look to the Internet for new kinds of information and, according to the Canadian 2004 survey, have shifted some of their media time from traditional media to the Internet. For example, Internet users spend on average about 3.3 hours less time watching television than non-users and this shift increases with hours spent online. (Recent Australian data suggest a similar pattern here). Internet users spend on average about an hour less per week than non-users reading newspapers and magazines offline, but they more than make that up by spending more than an hour (83 minutes per week) reading newspapers and magazines online!

## **GETTING NEWS ONLINE**

Between 2003 and 2004, the proportion of Canadians getting news from the Internet every day increased from less than one in five to almost one in four. More important, perhaps, by 2004 more than half of adult Canadians and nearly 80% of those with regular access to the Internet had gone online for news. Nearly two-thirds of the online community reported using the Internet to get news at least weekly. (See Table 2.)

However, online news reading is, in important ways, different from reading news in print or watching TV news. Online news consumers tend to be "news grazers," checking in for updates or searching for specific kinds of information rather than "news junkies" who watch news or listen to news at a regular time (as a habit).

---

<sup>5</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. News Consumption and Believability Study, 2006, pp. 7. <http://people-press.org>.

Fully 60% of regular online news users in Canada in 2003 classified themselves as grazers (compared to 40% of the national sample). Age is the most important factor here. More than two-thirds of those under 25 are grazers, while more than 70% of Canadians over 55 have the news habit. (See Table 3.) Another way of looking at this is in terms of time spent. On average, Canadians and Americans who get news online still spend more than twice as much time reading hard copy newspapers as they do reading online (about 47 minutes and 22 minutes daily).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is a reflection of the finding that only a tiny fraction of respondents – less than 2% of Internet users in both Canada and the United States – reported subscribing to an online newspaper or magazine. Although Canadians and Americans may go to certain websites regularly, they are reluctant to sign up, **especially if payment is involved.**

The most common pattern among the news grazers who rely on the Internet appears to be checking the Internet for headlines, and for alternative viewpoints, but turning to television for major breaking stories and to hard-copy newspapers for depth. It appears that news grazers use the traditional media to follow up on the news they get online, while habitual news users use the Internet as a supplement to their regular “fix” of news. The 2006 Canadian data from the annual industry-funded NADbank survey report that 51% of adults had read a newspaper the previous day and 72% had read a daily newspaper during the previous week. About 16% had read a Canadian newspaper online during the week.<sup>7</sup> In the U.S. in 2006, 38% reported reading a hard copy newspaper yesterday, while 6% read a newspaper online and 3% read newspaper reports on another site. In total, 43% reported reading a newspaper in some form the previous day, a figure somewhat lower than for Canada.<sup>8</sup> Hard-copy Newspaper readership in Australia has been declining slowly, as it has in Canada,<sup>9</sup> and it appears that online readership is growing at least as quickly

## WHO GOES ONLINE FOR NEWS?

Education is the strongest predictor of Internet news use. In 2003, about half of Canadians with a university degree reported getting news online at least once a week. By 2004, the number was about two-thirds. Not surprisingly, younger Canadians are more likely to go online for news than older Canadians; those 19-34 are about twice as likely to use Internet news as those over 55 years of age. Nearly three-quarters of Internet users in the 18-34 age group go online for news at least once a week. While older Canadians are more likely to report having read a printed copy in a typical week, younger Canadians are considerably more likely to have read a newspaper or magazine online; 60% in the 18-34 group reported having done so.

The Internet is an important source of news from home for Canada’s immigrant communities. Internet users whose primary language was neither French nor English were nearly twice as likely to go online for news as other Canadians. When asked about the importance of the Internet as a source of information, nearly two-thirds of

---

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. data are from The Pew Research Center for the People and Press. News Consumption and Believability Study, 2006, pp. 1. <http://people-press.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Press Release, Newspaper Audience Databank, Inc., 23 March 2007.

<sup>8</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and Press. News Consumption and Believability Study, 2006, pp 1-2. <http://people-press.org>.

<sup>9</sup> World Press Trends, 2006.

“third language” Internet users ranked it as very or extremely important, compared to the national average of 50%.<sup>10</sup> This pattern is most likely to be found in Australia as well.

As online news services improve, it is likely that the frequency with which people use the Internet on a regular basis will continue to increase. Indeed, checking news online appears already to be a routine element of Internet use for the heaviest Internet users. Fully 80% of Canadians who were online more than seven hours a week in 2004 reported getting news online at least weekly.<sup>11</sup>

## **WHICH WEBSITES ARE MOST POPULAR?**

The patterns in Canada and the United States are quite clear. Most online news consumers mention as their primary sources news compilers / aggregators – including Internet Service Providers that provide headlines on their home pages – and websites maintained by established news organizations. As Table 4 shows, MSN is the website mentioned most often in the Canadian surveys (2003 and 2004). Established news sites and compilers – whose sites draw their news reports from mainstream news organizations – account for nearly two-thirds of the sites mentioned in our 2004 survey. Overall, only about 6% fall into the alternative and specialized categories. Although some Canadian sites – such as CBC French and English – were at or near the top of the rankings, American / international sites, such as MSN, Yahoo News and CNN – also ranked high. Canadian and American news website consumers were most likely to mention (1) television network news sites; 2) portals (Yahoo, Google) and (3) international sites, such as the BBC.<sup>12</sup>

In general, the findings raise questions about audience fragmentation. Are audiences being re-aggregated through repurposing the same content for multiple platforms? Although news and commentary are increasingly being delivered through numerous channels, many of which are Internet-based, much of the content still originates from established content providers, such as major news organizations. It is this content that most Internet news consumers are using. A 2006 Pew Centre study sums it up this way: “websites that provide quick updates of major headlines ... dominate the web-news landscape.”<sup>13</sup>

No blog was mentioned by more than 3% of respondents in either Canada or the U.S. When asked directly, only 4% of Americans reported visiting blogs regularly; indeed, only 9% in the 18-24 age group did so.<sup>14</sup> A 10-nation BBC study in 2006 found that only 3% named blogs as their most important news source (even though the figure was 17% in South Korea).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> The third language group is also somewhat more likely than average to rank television as very or extremely important as a source of information: 64% versus a national average of 56%. However, the average disguises the major difference. English-speakers are at 50% and French-speakers at 62%. The differences among the language groups regarding the importance of newspapers are much lower.

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller review of these numbers, see Charles Zamaria, Andre Caron and Fred Fletcher, *Canada Online 2004!* (Canadian Internet Project, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Pew 2006, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Pew, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Pew, 2006, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> BBC/Reuters/Media Centre Poll, “Trust in Media,” p. 5

## **THE INTERNET: IMPORTANCE FOR INFORMATION**

While the advent of the World-Wide Web has revolutionized information-seeking, the traditional media remain important sources of information for both the online community and those not heavily into the Internet. Although the Internet has developed primarily as a communication and information medium, the advent of high speed broadband access may be changing that focus. Internet users with broadband tend to consume a wider range of online services than those without and entertainment and self-expression are growing uses.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the new capacity for video streaming is putting pressure on news providers to deliver a full range of video and audio services to supplement text. Nevertheless, most of the most common and time-consuming uses of the Internet are related to communication and information-seeking.

In the 2004 Canadian internet survey, respondents were asked to rank the importance of various media as sources of information. (See Table 5.) While television tops the rankings for the total sample, with about 56% rating it as very or extremely important as an information source, the Internet actually ranks second, slightly ahead of newspapers and radio. Among Internet users, however, the Internet ranks first, at 62% and newspapers move into second spot. The difference is accounted for largely by the fact that Internet users are younger and better educated than non-users. This group can reasonably be described as heavy users of information.

If we use age as a predictor of change over time, we can conclude that the Internet's importance as a source of information for Canadians will continue to grow. In the 18-24 age group, 69% regard the Internet as a very or extremely important source of information, compared to 45% for the 45-64 group and 50% for the total sample (2004 survey). There are no striking age differences in the ranking of newspapers or television. There is no doubt, then, that younger Canadians are turning to the Internet for news and information more often than older Canadians and that they regard it as a more important information source. However, the data make it clear that they have not turned their backs on the traditional media but rather that they are beginning to use all media in ways that differ from previous generations.

## **CREDIBILITY AND EXPECTATIONS**

The credibility of news sources is important not only for its influence on consumption patterns but also, and more importantly, for the health of the public sphere. Does the online community regard the news and information they get from the Internet as credible? Do Canadians who go online for news distrust the traditional media more than other Canadians?

In most of the liberal democracies, there has been a long-term decline in public confidence in the mainstream media.<sup>17</sup> In our 2003 survey, we found a modest relationship between going online for news and scepticism about the mainstream media on a number of dimensions: concerns about accuracy, fairness and balance,

---

<sup>16</sup> Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, *Broadcasting Policy Monitoring Report*, 2006, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> BBC, p. 3; Pew 2006, p. 46.

political and corporate dominance. For example, Internet users were more likely to report finding inaccuracies in the news and to see fairness and balance as a problem than Canadians who did not go online; the more frequently they went online for news the more likely they were to see problems in the mainstream media. Internet users also slightly more likely to perceive mainstream media as not independent (80%), a view shared by most Canadians (73%). In focus groups of young adults (18-24) conducted for the Canadian Media Research Consortium, we found considerable distrust of the mainstream media.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, as we have seen, even younger respondents continue to value the established media for depth and certain kinds of news. Distrust of traditional media appears to be an important reason for going online, but mainly to check up on and supplement mainstream sources, rather than to replace them. We have no specific data on motives for going online, but American studies focus on the convenience and accessibility of Internet news, mentioned by 39%, as well as depth and diversity, mentioned by about 11 and 10% respectively.<sup>19</sup> In our focus group study, we found that young adults value the Internet because it is up-to-date and allows them to find information quickly and easily. Also mentioned were the “accessibility of a wide range of sources that are mainstream or alternative, local or foreign,” the ability to follow links and obtain specific information on demand. As Boily reported: “The sites visited by Web surfers are often operated by mainstream media that offer a free electronic version of the day’s major events. Alternative media sites are also appealing to many respondents who are attracted by their [diverse] points of view .... They clearly seek out independent sources.”<sup>20</sup>

Many focus group participants reported visiting “sites conducive to discussions between users and created by interest groups or by individuals. Their objective is not necessarily to take part in discussions, but to obtain a wide range of views ... so they form their own opinions.” Alternative newspapers / websites “rarely constitute the main source of information” for the participants; “they are “regarded as complementary.” It was clear that information is a form of “social currency” for young adults and they turned for validation to their social networks as much as to news sources.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Canadians in general have more confidence in the mainstream media than in the Internet to deliver some important aspects of the news. In our 2003 survey, the Internet trailed all three traditional media – newspapers, television and radio – in “providing better explanations and details that help you understand what is going on,” delivering “a better overview of the important news of the day,” and “presenting different points of view on controversial issues.” (See Table 6.) Even regular Internet news consumers tend to rely on the mainstream media for these services, though they do view the Internet more positively on these dimensions than other Canadians.

---

<sup>18</sup> Claire Boily, “Canadian Young Adults and Information.” Paper presented at the Canadian Media Research Conference on Youth and the News, Vancouver, April 3-4, 2006. Some 60 young adults in Canada’s three largest cities participated in the groups in late 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Pew, 2006, p.25-27.

<sup>20</sup> Boily, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Boily, 2006

## CREDIBILITY OF ONLINE INFORMATION

In general, Canadians have a reasonable scepticism about online information. A little More than one out of three Canadian Internet users believe that most of the information on the web is reliable and nearly three out of four believe that at least half of it is accurate. This is a lower level of trust than in many other countries in the World Internet Project surveys.<sup>22</sup> Heavy internet users have the greatest confidence in online information, with 43% of those online more than seven hours a week expressing the opinion that most of the information is reliable and accurate and only 14% expressing grave doubts. When we control for time online, age is not a factor.

In the U.S., confidence in the reliability and accuracy of Internet information has been trending up. The proportion reporting that half or more of online information is reliable has grown from 44% in 2003 to 49% in 2004 and 55% in 2006.<sup>23</sup> This trend, it has been suggested, reflects growing confidence in the individual's choice of websites, rather than in the web in general. The most trusted sites (U.S.) are those maintained by established news organizations and governments.<sup>24</sup> Even students trust television (45%) and newspapers (23%) more than blogs (10%).<sup>25</sup>

Canadians and Americans are relatively optimistic about the capacity of the Internet to increase their understanding of politics. In 2004, about 45% of Americans and 38% of Canadians agreed that "by using the Internet, people like yourself can better understand politics." However, about one-third disagreed. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that nearly half of Internet users in the 18 to 34 age group agreed, indicating that the Internet will become increasingly important as a source of political information. More experienced and heavier Internet users also tend to view the Internet as an important source of political understanding.

As of 2004, Canadians were not heavy users of websites offering political information. Only about 20% reported visiting either a political party website or an independent website offering political information in the previous 12 months. However, heavy Internet users (28%) and those who had been online longer (25%) were more likely to report having visited an independent site.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, these findings suggest strongly that, as the Internet is increasingly integrated into the information mix, Canadians will use it more often for political information. Our qualitative research suggests that younger, better educated citizens will continue to search for diverse viewpoints online.<sup>27</sup>

## CANADIAN SOURCES

---

<sup>22</sup> See *Canada Online 2004!* Ch. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media 2007*, p. 20. [www.stateofthemedial.org](http://www.stateofthemedial.org). For details, see *Highlights: USC Annenberg Digital Future Project 2007*, p. 5 at <http://www.digitalfuturecenter.org/pdf/2007>.

<sup>24</sup> *Highlights: USC Annenberg Digital Future Project 2007*, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> "Teens Tune in to News on the Internet, Knight Foundation Study Shows," John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, September 22, 2006. Cited *The State of the News Media 2007*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, younger users were more likely to have visited an independent political website and older users (55 and older) were more likely to have visited a political party website.

<sup>27</sup> Boily, 2006.

Even though Canadians, especially English-speaking Canadians, have traditionally devoted a large share of their media time to American popular culture, they have retained a strong commitment to Canadian-produced news and information. This preference for home-grown information has played an important role in the preservation of a Canadian political community and the possibility of a deliberative democracy in which citizens are able to express informed opinions on issues of public policy and electoral choice.<sup>28</sup> As the Internet continues to develop, therefore, it is relevant to ask whether or not the world-wide web is reducing Canadian loyalty to Canadian news sources. The future of the national public sphere – in the face of audience fragmentation and the “customized news” made possible by the Internet – is an important issue in all of the democracies, but especially those like Canada and Australia with substantial immigrant communities.

In our 2003 survey, we found a clear preference for domestic news sources. In all of our credibility rankings, Canadian sources were ranked as at the least on a par with American sources and usually seen as far more credible. In 2004, we asked Canadians how important it was for them “to get information and news from Canadian sources.” The response was quite strong: 60% said it was very or extremely important and only 11% responded that it was not important. It is striking that this preference is fairly consistent across the sample, for age, education, income and online behaviour. The fact that there are no meaningful differences by age, experience online or time spent each week on the Internet means that the committed online community is as concerned as other Canadians about getting news from Canadian sources. In short, there is no trend away from the established preference for domestic news sources. Both the 2003 and 2004 surveys found that when asked about preferred sites, Canadian Internet users are as likely to mention Canadian as American websites. A recent CRTC study, found that Canadians spend about half of their online time with Canadian sites.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, a majority of Canadians said they had no particular preference for Canadian-produced entertainment.

## **THE WEB: A SUPPLEMENT TO TRADITIONAL MEDIA**

As we have seen, the most experienced and heaviest Internet users, while expressing confidence in the web as a source of information, are also quite heavy users of older media. Web-based sources of news and information provide convenience, accessibility, ease of navigation, and a range of information and opinions, especially from other countries, not readily available in the established media. However, the vast majority of news and information accessed by online-news consumers originates with mainstream news organizations, whether it is found using search engines, news compilers / aggregators, or the websites of newspapers and television networks. For example, while local newspapers dominate hard-copy newspaper readership, most online readers are checking national or international newspapers. Although blogs and

---

<sup>28</sup> F. J. Fletcher and Robert Everett, “The Mass Media and Canadian Politics in an Era of Globalization,” in M. Whittington and G. Williams, eds., *Canadian Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Toronto: Thomson, Nelson, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, forthcoming, ch. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, *Broadcasting Policy Monitoring Report*, 2006, p. 130.

alternative news websites reach relatively small audiences – even in the latest US data<sup>30</sup> – they provide both a check on and an alternative to the mainstream press.

In general, established news websites are not taking full advantage of the online environment. According to a recent study of 38 major websites by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the best known news websites are developing distinctive identities and making it easier for consumers to customize their news diets, but are not for the most part providing depth nor engaging audiences in the news process. Few provide easily navigable links to original source materials or alternative viewpoints and most do not provide discussion forums, nor opportunities to contribute news and commentaries.<sup>31</sup> A review of Canadian sites in Spring 2007, indicates that the situation is similar, with one or two exceptions. Although there are many blogs, including three guides to Canadian blogs, and alternative websites, providing alternative perspectives to a minority of online news consumers, the consolidation of news websites by the national news organizations – television networks and newspaper chains – is noticeable. Canadians who are seeking local news must often go through a national site. Many news websites are not much more than a convenient means to access and customize conventional news content.

It seems likely that the coming generation of online news consumers will demand more, especially if they are expected to pay for it. Indeed, Christopher Harper suggested in the early days of news website development that the Internet could “reverse the tide of public disdain for the media by providing a user experience that is immediate, interactive and intimate,”<sup>32</sup> but this is not yet common. Indeed, the most recent U.S. studies suggest that the Internet news use has peaked, with about 30% of the population as regular online news consumers.<sup>33</sup> The traditional media are adapting to the demands of the Internet generation, albeit slowly and incompletely.

It is important to note, however, that public broadcasters are providing some of the most advanced and most trusted sites. The BBC and the Canadian and Australian Broadcasting Corporations all offer sites that provide serious news and commentary in a user-friendly way, with effective use of links to background information, and opportunities to participate in discussion forums and to interact with journalists.

## **THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE**

Despite the fact, with respect to news and information, the Internet is still primarily a supplement to and alternative delivery system for traditional news, it is nevertheless true that it is changing the nature of the public sphere. As one American analysis recently put it, “journalism is becoming a smaller part of people’s information mix. The press is no longer the gatekeeper over what the public knows.”<sup>34</sup> The Internet is indeed changing the nature of information seeking and news consumption, with news

---

<sup>30</sup> Only about 4% of Americans (8% of online news consumers) regularly visit blogs. Pew, 2006, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Project for Excellence in Journalism, “Digital Journalism,” *The State of the News Media 2007*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Harper, *And that’s the way it will be: News and information in a digital world*. New York: NYU Press, 1998, ch. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *The State of the News Media 2007, Online*, p. 1

<sup>34</sup> *The State of the News Media 2007*, p. 2.

grazers seeking more customized news and consulting multiple sources, in an information environment that is more open, more global, and includes a wider range of information and opinion. In the best case scenario, the news media will become less purveyors of knowledge and more **providers of context and meaning**. Journalists will spend less time collecting information and more time “directing the social flow of information and public debate.”<sup>35</sup>

As Canadian media historian Kenneth Goldstein has put it, “the fundamental reality about media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is that technology now threatens to challenge media’s roles as intermediary – because content producers, other consumers, and advertisers will be able to send media-like content directly to consumers.”<sup>36</sup> The traditional news media are, increasingly, one voice among many in a multi-media environment in which the competition for attention continues to grow with each new innovation. In this context, the role of the citizen is changing, with each of us having greater capacity to select the information we consume and to engage with and add to the information mix. However, as many commentators have noted, the traditional news media have specific strengths – reach, consistency and continuity, professionalism – that are not easily matched. Our data demonstrate clearly that even heavy users of the Internet rely on mainstream sources for verification, context, and interpretation.

Nevertheless, the new online media, as long as they remain open to dissenting counter publics, will provide a check on the influence of powerful media organizations and, perhaps, contribute to the reinvigoration of the public sphere, or an overlapping series of public spheres. In fact, in a study of the emergence of global challenges to the “neo-liberal consensus” in the mainstream media, I found that alternative news and advocacy sites tend to measure their effectiveness by their influence on the public – read mainstream media – agenda!

The emergence of the social media online—through commercial services like YouTube and MySpace and citizen-operated sites -- is in some ways a return to the pre-television information flows, when news was mediated not only journalists but also by inter-personal networks shaped by geography, kinship, occupation, and religion, among other factors. The new social media transcend geography and some of the older networks but still rely on the professional news media for much of their current affairs content.

Among the changes enabled by the Internet, perhaps most worrying for public sphere theorists are:

- The rapid growth of private, high-cost subscription-based intelligence services – **news that is not public** – an increasingly lucrative element of the news business that may draw resources from public reporting. This development, along with audience fragmentation challenges the viability of public news services, with the consequent loss of newsgathering capacity, potentially reducing the store of common knowledge.

---

<sup>35</sup> Broeder, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth J. Goldstein, *Media 2012*, presentation at CMRC Conference, January 2007.

- The loss of interest in public news. As many as one in five North Americans reports not being interested in news and a similar number reported in 2006 that they had not consumed any news the previous day.<sup>37</sup>
- With the increasing commodification of news in the global media system, the failure of the major transnational media to find new revenue streams threatens to weaken significantly the **newsgathering process**, which depends on their capacity to fund newsgathering and distribution around the world. Can citizen journalism replace public-service oriented professional journalism?

The challenge for politicians and public interest groups is to find ways of speaking to and for the broad public in ways that facilitate common understandings and informed debates about crucial issues. Finding the appropriate mechanisms will be a challenge not only for these groups but also for the news media that depend for their existence on finding ways to aggregate the kinds of audiences necessary for the successful functioning of the public sphere in contemporary democracies.

As our focus group study demonstrated, younger citizens are more interested in social networking around values and causes than in traditional politics. Communication systems hoping to keep them engaged in a democratic public sphere will have to come to terms with these preferences.

In this paper, I have treated the Internet primarily as one of many competing media, comparing its users to consumers of newspapers, television and radio news, as most studies have done. However, it is important also to see the Internet less as a specific medium or channel and more as a “platform for and extender of other media,” as Ken Goldstein suggests.<sup>38</sup> Viewed in this way, we can consider how it is changing the nature of the information it delivers and our relationship to that information. For example, it is fashionable to consider Web 2.0 – the new broadband-based social networking and platform-based (user content oriented) services – as competition for the news media. In terms of competition for attention, this is certainly a sensible perspective, but it is important to note that for those who use them, the new forms of social media are primarily about conversation, relationships and self-expression not news reporting or informed commentary.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, serious blogs and discussion streams often feature sharing of and commentary on reports and commentary in traditional media. Conversely, the established news media increasingly monitor blogs and even cite them as sources. In these ways, the social media and the traditional media are helping to create a dynamic new media environment, open to a wide-ranging online community.

The new public sphere, then, involves new opportunities for participation and the formation of counter-publics to challenge dominant ideologies. For media democracy theorists, this is a positive development. At the same time, however, the emergence of more narrowly focused public spheres threatens the common public sphere upon which democratic discourse depends. If the sense of common citizenship is diminished, social cohesion is threatened. If increasing numbers of citizens do not share in a common public agenda and a widely shared vocabulary of precedents,

---

<sup>37</sup> Pew 2006, pp. 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> Goldstein, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> See Future Exploration Network, *Future of Media: Report*, July 2006, and Boily.

deliberative democracy is harder to achieve. In this respect, the convergence of the social media and the evolving news media is also a reason for optimism. It is essential, however, to remember that the online community is by no means open to all and, indeed, may never be equally open to all. The digital divides – whether by age, income, education, or location – may be shrinking in some countries but they still constitute an important inequality in the new public sphere, one that requires public access policies. Trevor Barr's plea for a vital role for the public sector in his book *newmedia.com.au* a few years ago remains as important as ever.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Trevor Barr, *newmedia.com.au: The changing face of Australia's media and communications* (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp. 216-222.

## TABLES

**NOTE:** The following tables are based on data collected for the Credibility of Canadian News Media (2003) and the Canadian Internet Project (2004), which were conducted by research teams in the author was a principal investigator. Reports on the studies may be found on these websites: Canadian Media Research Consortium ([www.cmreccrm.ca](http://www.cmreccrm.ca)) and Canadian Internet Project ([www.cipic.ca](http://www.cipic.ca)). Both were national surveys of Canadians, based on a representative sample of about 3000. The confidence interval (margin of error) for the whole sample in each case is +/- 1.8%. Question wordings are not included in this short paper but may be found on the websites.

**Table 1: Sources of news for Canadians, 2003 (N = 3012)**

Frequency of getting news	TV news	Newspapers	Radio news	News online 2003	News online 2004
<b>Everyday</b>	67%	42%	57%	17%	24%
<b>A few Times a Week</b>	21%	23%	14 %	10%	12%
<b>About once a week</b>	6%	21%	7 %	7%	11%
<b>Less than once a week</b>	4%	8 %	7%	12%	10%
<b>Never</b>	2%	6%	15%	55%	44%

**Table 2 Frequency of accessing news on the internet, 2003 and 2004**

Frequency of getting news on the internet	2003 total public N= 3012	2004 total public N=3014	2004 Internet users only N = 2165
<b>Everyday</b>	17%	24%	33%
<b>A few Times a Week</b>	10%	12%	17%
<b>About once a week</b>	6%	11%	15%
<b>Less than once a week</b>	12%	10%	14%
<b>Never</b>	55%	44%	21%

**Table 3 Percentage of news “junkies” and news “grazers” 2003 by age (N = 3012)**

Type of news consumer	Age 19-25 %	Age 26-44 %	Age 45-64 %	Age 65+ %
Habitual news watcher	32	48	67	81
Checks news from time to time	67	50	32	18

**Table 4 Internet site used most often for news (users who get news online)  
2004**

English-speaking respondents (n =1195)		French-speaking respondents (n=287)	
Internet news site	(%)	Internet news site	(%)
MSN	19.2	Radio Canada/SRC/RDI	15.0
Yahoo/daily press	10.1	MSN	13.9
CBC	9.5	Canoe	11.5
CNN	7.2	Cyberpresse	9.4
Globe and Mail	4.7	Yahoo/daily press	5.9
Specialized news sites	4.6	Specialized news sites	4.5
Google	3.8	TVA/LCN	4.0
Global/Canada.com	3.3	Google	3.1
Toronto Star	3.1	La Presse	3.1
Other local print	3.0	Other (less than 3%)	29.6
Other (less than 3%)	28.3		
Don't use	3.2		

**Table 5 Importance of various media as sources of information, 2004**  
% ranking medium as very or extremely important

News medium	Total public N = 2998	Internet users N = 2112
Newspapers	47.2%	59.5
Television	56.1%	54.4
Radio	47.2%	48.2
Internet	50.3 %	62.1

**Table 6 Comparing news media (2003): which medium is better at ...**

News medium	Providing explanations of events	Presenting an overview of important news of the day	Presenting different points of view on issues
Newspapers	43%	21%	28%
Television	36%	51%	39%
Radio	11%	18%	18%
Internet	7%	6%	5%