

INTRODUCTION: IMPACTS OF THE INTERNET ON NEWSPAPERS IN EUROPE

This special issue of *Gazette* brings together articles that discuss the impact of the internet on printed media, and in particular newspapers, in different countries in Europe. The articles are written by scholars from five different European countries. They are the result of discussions and research carried out within the framework of COST Action A20 on 'The Impact of the Internet on Mass Media', chaired by Colin Sparks from Westminster University, UK.

The emergence of the internet as a news medium has at least two effects on the availability of news and information, on opportunities for citizens to discuss current affairs and on the vitality of the public sphere. On the one hand, online news services expand the available supply of news, information and discussion forums; on the other hand, they force traditional news media to reorient themselves and adapt their roles in information markets to a new competitive situation. The articles in this special issue discuss both effects, focusing primarily on online and offline newspapers. They support their arguments with evidence from different European countries, adding a welcome European flavour to the ongoing international debate on the impact of internet on mass media.

The Contributions

This special issue consists of six contributions. The first three articles discuss from a media economic, a media studies and a journalistic point of view how off- and online media interact and influence each other. The ensuing two articles focus in particular on the contribution of online newspapers to the provision of news and to (interactivity and hyperlinking as facilitators of) dialogic communication. The final article draws some conclusions from the preceding five contributions, integrating first results from an exploratory study of printed and online newspapers in four European countries.

The first article, on 'Online Competition and Performance of News and Information Markets in the Netherlands', written by Richard van der Wurff from the University of Amsterdam, shows how the emergence of online media triggers competitive responses from traditional media organizations. Using evidence from the Netherlands, he concludes that new online media intensify competition on information markets, of which information users are the main

beneficiaries. Leopoldina Fortunati from the University of Udine discusses in the second article, ‘Mediatization of the Net and Internetization of the Mass Media’, the interactions between off- and online media from a media point of view. She concludes that the full impact of the internet on traditional media in Italy can only be understood as an iterative process between media, in which technical requirements and user expectations play a role. Third, John O’Sullivan from Dublin City University discusses in his contribution, ‘Delivering Ireland: Journalism’s Search for a Role Online’, the practice of repurposing content from printed newspapers for online newspapers. He argues that many practitioners view the internet through traditional professional lenses – ‘A story is a story is a story’ – and concludes that recent experience in Ireland tempers expectations of the transformative impact of new media.

A similar conclusion emerges from the study of Ramón Salaverría, University of Navarra, in ‘An Immature Medium: Strengths and Weaknesses of Online Newspapers on September 11’. Observing that coverage of the 11 September 2001 events presented a litmus test for online newspapers, Salaverría provides a mixed conclusion. Online coverage hints at the potential of direct, on-the-spot multimedia online reporting, but also indicates that newspapers in Spain and elsewhere were technologically and editorially not sufficiently prepared. In turn, Tanja Oblak from the University of Ljubljana investigates in her contribution on ‘The Lack of Interactivity and Hypertextuality in Online Media’ to what extent the potential of interactivity and hypertextuality is used in online media. She concludes that the lack of interactive possibilities limits the contribution of online media to dialogical instead of monological communication.

These five articles show, from different theoretical and geographical perspectives, how the internet is changing the provision of news and information and how it contributes interactive opportunities for public debates. The final contribution gives an overall assessment of these developments. It summarizes the findings of the first five articles. It adds results of an exploratory study of front pages of printed and online newspapers in Ireland, Italy, Portugal and the Netherlands. This analysis shows that in all four countries online newspapers perform different functions at the same time. They market the print newspaper, provide daily news and make other information of the newspaper accessible. But they do not make other information sources accessible to users, nor do they offer much interactivity or communication.

Finally

The five main articles are based upon research carried out in 2002, in the framework of COST Action A20 on ‘The Impact of the Internet on Mass Media’. The exploratory study of printed and online newspapers presented in the final contribution was carried out by researchers of the COST network in 2003. At the time of writing (summer 2004), researchers of the newspaper working group of the COST Action are conducting a larger-scale follow-up study. Partly based on initial results of this study, and looking backwards in time, we observe that since 2002/3 not only has much changed on the internet, but also that the

main findings presented in this special issue still hold. Although the popular internet mythology tells us that 2004 is light years away from 2002 in internet time, the iterative development of print and online news media seems to take place at a slower – that is, more normal – pace.

Richard van der Wurff, Special Issue Editor