How Readers Perceive Journalists' Functions At Online Community Newspapers

By Deborah S. Chung

The exponential growth of online newspapers in the last decade[1] may be considered a function of the Internet's potential for interactivity, a key quality of new media.[2] Such interactive qualities of the Internet provide unique opportunities for online news publications to engage their news audiences with increased control, multimedia storytelling experiences and interpersonal communication opportunities. Thus, online news publications allow their news audiences to have increased levels of experiences in their news consumption. The use of interactive features raises new questions about whether there are potentially transforming roles for journalists. In addition, the increasingly active news audiences have particular views about the news media that engage in different levels of interactivity through online news publications.

This study examines an online community newspaper audience's perceptions of current journalists' roles, audience's uses of interactive features and associations between the two, if any.

Literature Review

From a sociology of news framework, this study examines the views of journalists' work practices and standards of behavior[3] to assess changing views of traditional gatekeeping functions of the media. Research shows that media professionals' views of their roles have evolved over time. Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman first found two clusters of role types: neutral and participants.[4] Weaver and Wilhoit continued Johnstone et al.'s research over three decades and first discovered three roles—interpretive, disseminator and adversarial[5] and then four role types—interpretive/investigative, disseminator, adversarial and populist mobilizer.[6] Most recently they identified the same four role types but found, while the interpretive role was considered the strongest, there was a steep decline in the disseminator role and a marked increase in the populist mobilizer role.[7] Cassidy examined professional role types of print and online newspaper journalists and discovered that print newspaper journalists per-

Chung is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky.

ceived the interpretive / investigative role as significantly more important than online journalists. There was no significant difference between conceptions of the adversarial and populist mobilizer roles, while both groups regarded the disseminator role as important.[8]

Research Questions

Recognizing the need to understand better what the news audience deems to be critical roles of the media, Heider, McCombs and Poindexter examined audiences' perceptions of the news media's roles in a metropolitan area.[9] They found that the audience does not endorse traditional media roles, such as watchdog and rapid reporting; instead, the audience was more likely to say that civic journalism was extremely important. In addition to exploring the news audience's perspectives of media roles, this study examines smaller, community newspapers, which have increased opportunities for community journalism and their online audiences. These community newspapers and their online audiences have not been examined before.

RQ1:
What are online local community newspaper audiences' perceptions about the role of the news media?

Journalists have made efforts to reconnect with their audiences by using interactivity in their online presentation of the news.[10] As traditional media outlets have operated from a top-down, one-way model that adheres to the gatekeeping function of information

delivery, research shows that readers find the immediate back-and-forth communication online valuable.[11] In this study interactivity is defined as a concept that offers different types and levels of audience activity based on Deuze's three categories of interactivity for the design of news Web sites:

° Navigational interactivity provides increased user control and choices.

° Adaptive interactivity allows the users' experiences to affect the content of the site.

° Functional interactivity provides online news consumers with opportunities to communicate with other individuals.[12]

RQ2:
What are the different types of interactivity offered on an online newspaper, and how frequently do online news audiences make use of those specific types of interactive features?

Additionally, in today's news climate, individuals with traditional views of the media's roles might be less likely to explore newer ways of experiencing the news through interactive technologies that provide increased opportunities for audience engagement. However, those who are more in tune with the interactive approach toward news may likely make more frequent use of such features.

RQ3:
Are there associations between perceptions of the role of the news media and uses of certain interactive features?

Method

Data for this study were obtained from a sample of 113 individuals. A newspaper from a local, rural community—located in a Southeastern state—provided a link to an online survey. The average daily circulation for the participating newspaper was 8,734. An audience survey from 2005 shows that the local community newspaper readership is 51 percent female and 49 percent male. Nine percent of the readers are 18 to 24, 37 percent are 25 to 44, 33 percent are 45 to 64 and 18 percent are 65 or older. Caucasians represent 89 percent of the readership. Thirty percent of the readership earned below $25,000, 21 percent earned between $25,000 to $49,999, 18 percent earned between $50,000 to $74,999 and 11 percent earned $75,000 or more. About 48 percent have completed high school education or less, 27 percent have some college education and 20 percent have completed college or pursued an advanced degree. Participants were recruited through online advertisements and then completed the survey linked from the homepage of the online newspaper. The survey was posted for roughly two months during July and August 2006.[13] There was low but consistent participation during the first three weeks. However, after the first month the participation rate dropped significantly. The decision was then made to close the survey after an additional month of extremely low survey completion rates. The survey consisted of a self-administered questionnaire that asked respondents' basic demographic information and their perceptions regarding the role of the news media, civic journalism and uses of various interactive features that represent the interactivity continuum.

Scale Creation

Weaver et al.'s most recent survey battery of 14 questions was used.[14] The response scale ranged from "not very important (1)" and "extremely important (7)." These 14 items were then factor analyzed, and after assessing reliability of the factors (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .86 to .95), they were summed and then averaged to create scales representing different roles of the media.

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they used 19 interactive features generally offered by online newspapers. The features were selected based on earlier interactivity studies[15] and were further modified with additional features. The response scale ranged from "never (1)" and "very frequently (7)." These items were then factor analyzed, and after assessing reliability of the factors (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .78 to .89), they were summed and then averaged to create scales representing the interactivity continuum.

Four questions assessing audiences' perceptions of civic journalism were also included.[16] The response scale was the same as that of the role conception questions. After assessing reliability of the questions (Cronbach's alpha = .93), the scale was produced by summing the four questions and then averaging them.

In assessing relationships between role conceptions and uses of interactive features, correlation analyses were used.

Findings

Sample

About 71 percent of the sample was female and 29 percent male. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (96 percent). About 20 percent of the participants earned an annual income of less than $15,000. However, 20 percent responded that they earn between $50,000 and $74,999, and another 20 percent responded that they earn $75,000 or more. About 16 percent of the participants had completed high school, 36 percent had some college education and 25 percent had graduated from college.[17] The mean age of the respondents was 41 years old. It is important to note the discrepancy between the sampled population and data from the community newspaper readership survey. The sample is biased as there is an overrepresentation of female participants, and the participants also have higher levels of educational attainment and higher annual earnings. The small sample size is also problematic in generalizing the findings. While the data collected offers some insight into the online news audience in this community, the following results and

Table 1
Dimensions of Audience Perceptions of Journalists' Roles

Question Items	*Factor Loadings*		
Factor 1: Interpretive Disseminator	1	2	3
Develop intellectual and cultural interest of public	.82	.21	.13
Discuss national policy while still being developed	.79	.28	
Get info to the public quickly	.79	.26	-.11
Investigate claims by government	.79	.20	.25
Concentrate on widest audience	.77	.17	.23
Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified	.63	-.15	.23
Factor 2: Populist Mobilizer			
Motivate ordinary people to get involved in public discussions	.15	.94	
Give ordinary people chance to express views	.22	.83	
Point people toward possible solutions to society's problems	.15	.76	.23
Factor 3: Adversary			
Adversary of public officials	.17		.95
Adversary of businesses	.18	.15	.90
Eigenvalues	3.68	2.46	1.97
Variance Explained	33.41	22.37	17.87
Reliability (Cronbach alpha)	.89	.86	.95
Mean (S.D.)	4.80	5.03	4.11
	(1.34)	(1.41)	(1.75)

Subjects were asked how they felt about the importance of the role of the news media based on the above statements with 1=not very important and 7=extremely important.

the interpretation of the results should be considered carefully.

RQ1: Dimensions of Audience Perceptions of Journalists' Roles

A factor analysis yielded three factors, which accounted for 74 percent of the variance after rotation.[18] As shown in Table 1, three scales were created and labeled interpretive disseminator, populist mobilizer and adversary.

The analysis also revealed that most participants found the populist mobilizer role to be the most important (mean = 5.03; SD = 1.41) followed by the interpretive disseminator role (mean = 4.80; SD = 1.34) and then the adversary role (mean = 4.11; SD = 1.75). These factors are similar but not identical to those found in Weaver et al.'s study.[19] The perceptions of what are considered important role conceptions are also different from those of news professionals.

In a separate analysis, results also indicate that most participants found civic journalism to be an important part of the function of the news media (mean = 4.84; SD = 1.57) with means higher than the interpretive disseminator and the adversary roles. Table 2 shows results for the civic journalism questions.

RQ2: Categories of Interactive Features and Levels of Use

A factor analysis yielded four factors, which accounted for 71 percent of the variance.[20] As shown in Table 3, four interactivity scales were created and labeled medium, medium/human, human/medium and human interactivity.[21] The four extracted categories of interactive features are also in agreement with an interactivity continuum.

The analysis also revealed that most participants use medium/human interactive features most frequently (mean = 4.55; SD = 1.50) followed by medium (mean = 2.88; SD = 1.86), human (mean = 2.33; SD = 1.40), and finally human/medium interactive features (mean = 2.06; SD = 1.26).

Table 2
Audience Perceptions of the Civic Journalism Role

Civic Journalism Items	Means (SD)
Conduct polls to learn citizens' priorities on issues	4.85 (1.88)
Convene meetings of citizens and leaders to discuss public issues	4.52 (1.72)
Make special efforts to motivate citizens to participate in decision making on public issues	4.99 (1.63)
Make special efforts to include ordinary citizens as sources in public affairs stories	4.99 (1.63)
Civic journalism scale	4.84 (1.57)

Subjects were asked how they felt about the importance of the role of the news media based on the above statements with 1=not very important and 7=extremely important.

Table 3
Categories of Interactive Feature Use

Question Items	Factor Loadings			
Factor 1: Human/Medium	1	2	3	4
"Submit photos" function	.92			
"Submit stories" function	.91	.11	.11	
Reporter/editor e-mail links	.75	.26	.30	
Letters-to-editor	.65	.41	.31	
Factor 2: Medium/Human				
Customized weather		.80	.11	.12
Updates	.24	.70	.13	
Search	.20	.68	.13	.18
Alerts	.20	.67		.18
Polls	.12	.58	.49	-.18
Factor 3: Human				
Chat		.15	.80	.25
Q&A	.21		.80	.16
Forums	.21	.22	.77	
Factor 4: Medium				
Video	.19	.16	.14	.92
Audio	.20	.18	.21	.89
Eigenvalues	2.91	2.77	2.44	1.86
Variance Explained	20.76	19.78	17.41	13.30
Reliability (Cronbach alpha)	.85	.79	.78	.89
Mean	2.06	4.55	2.33	2.88
SD	1.26	1.50	1.40	1.86

Subjects were asked how frequently they made use of the above features on news Web sites with 1=never and 7=very frequently.

RQ3:

Associations between Roles and Uses of Features

While no associations were found between perceptions of journalists' roles and age, gender and education, there were positive correlations between perceptions of the interpretive disseminator role and use of medium interactive features ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) and use of medium/human ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) interactive features; the populist mobilizer role and use of medium/human ($r = .37$, $p < .01$) interactive features; the adversary role and use of medium/human ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) and human ($r = .28$, $p < .05$) interactive features; and perceptions of civic journalism and use of medium/human ($r = .35$, $p < .01$) and human/medium ($r = .22$, $p < .05$) interactive features.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings indicate that this online news audience's assessment of prominent journalist roles was slightly different from previous studies on the perceived roles of professional journalists. While Weaver et al. found the interpretive role to be the strongest,[22] this study found online news audiences perceive the populist mobilizer role to be most prominent. This audience also perceived the civic journalism function to be highly important—only second to the populist mobilizer role. Weaver and his colleagues found mixed results on the civic journalism questions,[23] but it appears that this news audience endorses civic engagement. The populist mobilizer function has been linked to attitudes with civic journalism, thus, it makes intuitive sense that these two roles are both considered to be prominent and had the highest means among the four assessed role types. These findings are important, in that while the populist mobilizer role is gaining ground as a significant function among professional journalists, it is considered the most important journalistic function among this online news audience. These findings suggest that news audiences find it important to be included in the process of news delivery and presentation. The interpretive role was also considered important but converged with the disseminator role. While research shows a steep decline in perceptions of the disseminator role by journalists, this audience still seems to want news quickly that is relevant to a general mass audience. The adversary role, while not completely absent, is considered least critical among this news audience.

The results also indicate that interactivity can be promoted through different types of features that serve unique purposes and with two distinct levels of adaptive interactivity. Medium interactive features allow readers more control or choice options in experiencing news stories. Medium/human interactive features allow users to personalize news to their liking, while human/medium interactive features allow users to express customized opinions. Finally, human interactive features facilitate interpersonal communication online.[24] Consequently, there appear to be four distinct types of interactive features that promote interactivity. These findings further expand and build upon the three types of interactivity suggested by Deuze.[25] However, the use of interactive features was moderate with medium/human interactive features used most frequently and human/medium interactive features used least frequently.

There is also a relationship between the perceptions of journalists' roles and use of different types of interactive features that facilitate different types of news consumption behaviors, allowing for various levels of audience participation and engagement. For example, individuals who find media serve an adversarial role are likely users of human interactive features that allow the audience to communicate and build a conversation with others through forums and Q and A functions. Audiences who endorse civic journalism are likely users of the human/medium

interactive features that allow users to submit customized content, such as news tips or news stories to express their views. Individuals who find the interpretive/disseminator role as a critical function of journalists are likely to use medium interactive features for added sensory rich interpretations of timely news stories. In addition, all three media roles and civic journalism were positively and significantly correlated with the use of medium/human interactive features, which allow for tailoring of information. However, the correlations should be interpreted with caution as the statistical power of the associations is weak with a large part of the variance left unexplained.

Familiarity with technology or comfort with using the Internet may also be factors associated with the use of interactive features. Future studies should attempt to answer these questions and also improve the generalizability of the sample. The current study is limited in its small sample size and the self-selection method of an online survey with the potential of introducing bias in interpreting the findings.

Notes

1. Michael B. Salwen, "Online News Trends," in *Online News and the Public*, eds. Michael B. Salwen, Bruce Garrison and Paul D. Driscoll (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2005), 47-79.

2. Merrill Morris and Christine Ogan, "The Internet as Mass Medium," *Journal of Communication* 46, no. 1 (winter 1996): 39-50.

3. John Soloski, "News Reporting and Professionalism: Some Constraints on the Reporting of the News," *Media, Culture & Society* 11, no. 2 (April 1989): 207-228.

4. John W.C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, *The News People: A*

Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

5. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

6. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996).

7. David H. Weaver, Randal A. Beam, Bonnie J. Brownlee, Paul S. Voakes, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: U.S. News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

8. William P. Cassidy, "Variations on a Theme: The Professional Role Conceptions of Print and Online Newspaper Journalists," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (summer 2005): 264-280.

9. Don Heider, Maxwell McCombs and Paula M. Poindexter, "What the Public Expects of Local News: Views on Public and Traditional Journalism," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (winter 2005): 952-967.

10. Merrill Brown, "Bringing People Closer to the News," *Brandweek*, 2 October 2000, p. 26.

11. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Trends 2005 'The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary,'" 1999, <http://peoplepress.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=72> (28 June 2004).

12. Mark Deuze, "The Web and Its Journalisms: Considering the Consequences of Different Types of Newsmedia Online," *New Media & Society* 5, no. 2 (June 2003): 203-230.

13. In order to avoid multiple submissions, information on IP addresses and e-mail addresses were collected.

14. Weaver, et al., *The American Journalist in the 21st Century*.

15. Brian L. Massey and Mark R. Levy, "Interactivity, Online Journalism, and English-Language Web Newspapers in Asia" *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (spring 1999): 135-151; T. Schultz, "Interactive Options in Online Journalism: A Content Analysis of 100 U.S. Newspapers," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 5, no. 1 (September 1999), <http://

jcmc.indiana.edu / vol5 / issue1 / schultz.html> (27 August 2006); S. Chan-Olmsted and J. Park, "From On-Air to Online World: Examining the Content and Structures of Broadcast TV Stations' Web Sites," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (summer 2000): 321-339; K. Kenney, A. Gorelik and S. Mwangi, "Interactive Features of Online Newspapers," *First Monday* 5, no. 1 (January 2000), <http:// www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue5_1/kenney/> (6 July 2006).

16. Weaver, et al., *The American Journalist in the 21ˢᵗ Century.*

17. Twelve percent had earned an advanced degree.

18. Items (role questions) that cross-loaded on two or more factors (provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems) and those with factor loadings lower than .50 were eliminated. The first factor analysis yielded five factors, in which all factors had values of at least one, but two factors had only one item loaded (provide entertainment and relaxation, set the political agenda). Thus, a subsequent rotation was employed yielding 11 items that loaded on three factors (italicized items represent dropped roles).

19. Weaver, et al., *The American Journalist in the 21ˢᵗ Century.*

20. Items (interactive features) that cross-loaded on two or more factors ("submit news tip" feature) and those with factor loadings lower than .50 (customized headlines/topics) were eliminated. The analysis yielded five factors, but one of the factors did not fit conceptually. Thus, this factor, which included interactive ads, photo galleries and the "send article to friend" feature, was dropped. A subsequent rotation was conducted in which 14 items loaded on four factors (italicized items represent dropped features).

21. Deborah S. Chung, "Interactive Features of Online Newspapers: Identifying Patterns and Predicting Use of Engaged Readers," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 3 (April 2008): 658-679, <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/119414160/HTMLSTART><http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/119414160/HTMLSTART> (Jan. 27, 2009). 22. Weaver, et al., *The American Journalist in the 21ˢᵗ Century.*

22. Weaver, et al., *The American Journalist in the 21ˢᵗ Century.*

23. Weaver, et al., *The American Journalist in the 21ˢᵗ Century.*

24. Deborah S. Chung, "Interactive Features of Online Newspapers: Identifying Patterns and Predicting Use of Engaged Readers."

25. Deuze, "The Web and Its Journalisms."