



READ ALL ABOUT IT! HOW MOBILE PHONE WEB ACCESS ELEVATES ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION

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Abstract: News reading has shifted away from printed newspapers towards the online environment. Some of the most appreciated hardware for reading online news nowadays are the mobile devices, especially smartphones. The purpose of this research is to test the coherence and the trustability of the relation between mobile phone empowered web access and the custom of reading news(papers) online. The results of a bivariate linear regression analysis ($\alpha = 0.05$) based on Eurostat data for 30 countries spanning over an interval between 2013 and 2018 (180 observations) point out to a positive relationship, yet only of moderate effect (Multiple R = 0.63; $R^2 = 0.40$). The Discussions section investigates possible causes of this effect and, based on the findings, provides pieces of advice that newsroom managers could employ in the editorial strategy in order to better engage with their audiences.

Keywords: mobile phones; newspapers; online news; digitalization; editorial content

Introduction

The diffusion of innovation has permitted the incorporation of features into mobile phones other than the traditional dialling and texting options (Ling et al., 2006), changing the cell phone from a device meant at reproducing sounds at distance into a multimedia instrument that combines several communication means such as sound, image and text for reflecting ideas (Westlund, 2008).

Rettie (2008) believes that mobile phones meanwhile provide the means of interacting (reading news included herein) at times and spaces previously unthought of. Reading news online has become such an ordinary aspect of human lives, that some people check their mobile phones several times a day for new information (Molyneux, 2018). Nelson and Lei (2018) even believe that mobile platforms are “*the*” medium “*du jour*” of reading news. This has got consequential effects on the paperbound editions of newspapers. Although newsrooms have begun their digitization operations as early as the rise of the global internet during the 1990’s (Harris, 1991; Moeller, 1995), the speed

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at which the handheld-connected digital economy escalated in recent years has made even PC's or laptops seem obsolete in comparison to mobile phones or tablets when it comes to reading news. Under such circumstances, circulations of paperback copies of newspapers have nearly dropped out of sight in the presence of higher convenience and accessibility for readers of searching for news by browsing the internet from a mobile phone, a substitute for print media (Jang, Park, 2016; Schmitz Weiss, 2018; Thurman, Fletcher, 2018), especially since free-of-charge editorial content is automatically included into the fixed costs of internet subscription, and one does not have to pay extra, as in the case of buying a printed gazette.

This research paper is classified into five parts. The Literature Review presents how news reading behaviour has shifted away from paperback newspapers towards the online environment and characterizes the latter. Out of the whole amount of the web-sphere, particular attention is directed towards regarding mobile phones (i.e. smartphones) as a media to access and read news. In this endeavor, several pros but also cons of reading news from the cellphone are being discussed, which then lead the way to the Methodology of the research, that prompts out to the target of the paper: to identify how significant the custom of reading news via mobile web is. This chapter also highlights the arrangement of the research, by offering facts concerning data sampling, variable choice, the selection of the Hypotheses and of the Research Question etc. The Results part exhibits the outcomes of the analysis, while the Findings and Discussions chapter attempts to offer a critical interpretation of the results based on a conjunction with the highlights within the Literature Review. In the end, the Conclusions try to encapsulate the main findings of the paper and to stipulate possible directions for upcoming research.

Literature review

For Berry and Hamilton (2009), mobility is strongly changing the way people behave. Mobile phones have recasted the ways in which readers receive news by enabling rapid access and around the clock coverage (Wolf, Schnauber, 2015). While several decades ago, readers would have had to wait for the printing of the edition to buy their copy of the newspaper, nowadays news can be read as soon as published, during night or early in the morning, or *'on the go'* at any other time (Sandner et al., 2007). Location and time dimensions have dramatically changed since the ascent of the mobile phone as a media device (Goggin et al., 2015), making the piece of news an issue of here and now, irrespective of the where's and when's of its production, not to mention that the radius of editorial content has shifted by allowing readers the opportunity to access news produced all over the world (Oppegaard, Rabby, 2016). Likewise, the news supply is appreciably higher on a mobile device that can be endlessly updated throughout the entire day (d'Haenens et al., 2004), compared to a print edition that is limited in space and by an end of edition specified time for the forthcoming issue.

In these conditions, news production and consumption budges towards online, with not only a majority of consumers using smartphones for accessing news, but also with the lion's share of news websites creating digital apps for phones (Dunaway et al., 2018). While it might seem obviously that digital-natives such as the Gen-Z'ers read

their news directly from the mobile phone (Călin, 2015; Călin, Bîrsănescu, 2017), it should be recorded that customary readers of newspapers have also been attracted towards digital news content (Lin, 2018) thanks to the aforesaid benefits, thus increasing the electronic mobility of journalism and decreasing the offline readership at the expense of the online community.

Yet the patterns of reading news have changed even for the ‘traditional’ newspaper customers. Whilst buying a newspaper was a deliberate decision meant at offering access to information for the buyer, nowadays mobile web has stimulated incidental consumption (Boczkowski et al., 2018). If, prior to mobile web, buying news was a calculated habit that saw the consumer dedicate some specific hours of the day to reading the purchased item, more recently, through mobile devices, news reading is rather occurring as a chance, without any previous calculation of intention to read news. Mobile news is mostly read because it pops up while browsing through the smartphone and it is accessed or ignored as a result of an on-the-spot decision. This has revoked the custom of consecrating some set hours or moments of the day for news reading and replaced it by unplanned usage spread at any given time.

At the same time, the custom of acquiring news (i.e. the active search for news) has been replaced by a passive reception of news (Shah et al., 2017; Wilson, 2000), where the mobile phone user only opens what the operating system recommends. Hence, while mobile phone web use alters the habits of reading news, its effects on the amount of reading are rather moderate because the reader has been induced in a “*mobile-device-assisted-passivity*” when it comes to consuming news. To this passivity accounts also the fact that a preponderance of news nowadays is endorsed and opened through social media systems such as Facebook or Twitter instead of being accessed from news agencies.

Despite of audiences having shifted towards digital operating systems (Lin, 2018; Westlund, 2013), the small screens of smartphones make it rather difficult for users to browse through the news (Motamedi, Choe, 2015). Chyi and Lasorsa (2002) have argued since two decades ago that readers would not be ready to pay for an inferior reading experience, such as the lower screen of mobile phones and the lower font dimensions in browsing apps in comparison to the larger screen of a computer or a PC-tablet. Therefore, online news editors faced the pressure of adapting to the consumer market. Publishers have transformed their way of doing journalism to fit mobile consumption habits (Nel, Westlund, 2012), i.e. by offering shorter content intertwined with more photo or video material (thus providing customer experiences that early day online media was unable of), by offering free-of-charge content, or by enabling ‘*simplified views*’, thus shifting the digitalization of news consumption even further, a process that Ghersetti and Westlund (2018) believe has got fragmentation effects on media. These effects see media content disintegrate according to the wishes of the readers: the readers themselves decide what news they want to read on their mobiles and from what source. Mobile phones have become a beloved source of news consumption particularly because they allow readers to design their own ‘news repertoire’ based on their topics of interest, instead of having to read the ‘given’ of a newspaper edition (Van Damme et al., 2015).

Methodology

In spite of news consumption being relocated towards the online environment and becoming increasingly ‘audience-centered’, there is evidence that not all land is of milk and honey. Whilst some people choose to read their online news on mobile devices, others still prefer computers or tablets. Given this dichotomy, the current research aims to find out just how powerful the habit of reading news via mobile web is and how it influences overall online readership volumes. Hence, the purpose of the research is to verify the validity and the strength of the connection that exists between mobile phone internet access and the habit of reading newspapers online, subsequently readership numbers. The research starts from the assumption that an association exists between the variables, so it wants to test its strength and direction.

Assuming that the connection is declared true, the research wants to find out if the use of mobile phone internet has got an influence on the volumes of reading news(papers) online. The Research Question thus asks: *To what extent does mobile web influence the volume of reading news/newspapers online?*

A bivariate linear regression has been used to explore the relationship between the Predictor Variable x expressing mobile phone web and the Criterion Variable y expressing online news consumption. The regression formula used is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \varepsilon$$

where Y is the criterion variable, β_0 is the intercept value, β_1 is the coefficient of x to be predicted and ε the error component.

Statistical data has been gathered from Eurostat for 30 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom, Iceland, Norway). The datasets expanded over a timespan of six years, between 2013 and 2018 included, whereas extrapolation taking into account the latest four years has been used for obtaining data for 2018, unavailable from Eurostat. At the same time, missing pieces of data within the defined timespan have been obtained through intrapolation, amounting for a grand total of 180 observations that have been inserted into the regression model. The de facto sets of data retrieved from Eurostat were originally depicted as “*People using mobile phones to access internet (%)*” (x) and “*Using internet for reading online news/newspapers (% of individuals)*” (y), the meanings of which have been translated through “*mobile phone web [access]*” (Predictor Variable) and “*online news consumption*” (Criterion Variable) in order to serve the thematic of this research.

The Null Hypothesis (H_0) assumes that no relationship exists between mobile phone web access (x) and the habit of reading news or newspapers online (y). An ANOVA Single Factor Analysis has been carried out to test the hypothesis. If H_0 proves false, then the Alternative Hypothesis (H_a) claims that the use of mobile phone web has got an impact upon the habit of reading news online. This assertion is grounded on previous literature findings made, amongst others, by Boczkowski et al. (2018),

Dunaway et al. (2018) or Wolf and Schnauber (2015), all highlighting the disrupting changes that mobile web had on news reading.

Research results

The validity of the Null Hypothesis has been assessed with an ANOVA Single Factor Analysis ($\alpha = 0.05$), the outcomes of which (Table 1) provide sufficient evidence ($F_{\text{value}} > F_{\text{critical}} = 20.65 > 3.86$) to dismiss H_0 and to acknowledge H_a as true, basically that using mobile phone internet has got an influence on the habit of reading news(papers) online.

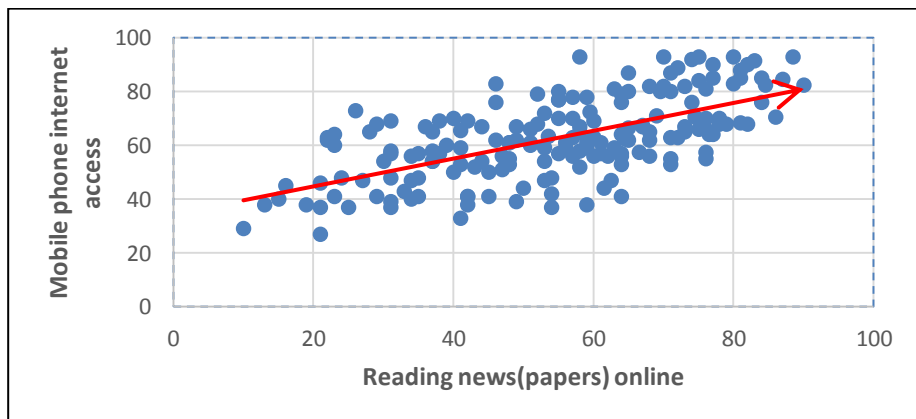
Table 1. ANOVA Single Factor Analysis results

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	5945.46944	1	5945.46944	20.6579301	7.52076E-06	3.8675648
Within Groups	103034.431	358	287.805672			
Total	108979.9	359				

Source: own computations based on statistical data inputs collected from Eurostat.

The Significance F value of the bivariate regression ($5.19E-22$) is below the limit value of fit ($\alpha = 0.05$), hence demonstrating the statistical reliability of the research results. A certain connection can be established between mobile phone internet access and reading online news(papers). The Multiple R value indicates a moderate and positive relationship between the variables (63%), a fact that can also be graphically demonstrated by the scatterplot display in Figure 1, where the trendline has got an ascending path. The dots on the graph show a movement towards the right, highlighting that an increase in the usage of mobile phones to access the internet leads to a raise in the habit of reading news(papers) online. The trendline indicates the existence of a positive relationships between the variables.

Figure 1: Scatterplot display for the correlation analysis



Source: own computations based on statistical data inputs collected from Eurostat.

The R Square value (0.40) highlights that up to 40% of the variation in online newspaper reading behavior can be explained by mobile phone internet access (Table 2).

Table 2. Regression results

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.638614
R Square	0.407827
Adjusted R Square	0.404501
Standard Error	11.65851
Observations	180

Source: own computations based on statistical data inputs collected from Eurostat.

The coefficient value of web mobile access (0.51) shows that each internet access via mobile phone bares a 51% chance of accessing news(paper) websites to read online (Table 3). Hence, there are considerable chances that once a user has accessed the internet on his or her mobile phone the destination will be some news agency or newspaper. At a coefficient of 51%, one in two hits of the internet on the mobile phone would possibly end up on a news site ore app.

Table 3. Regression coefficients

	Coeffi cients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	34.41644	2.692342	12.78308	5.75E-27	29.10341884	39.72945	29.10342	39.72945
Mobile Phone Web Access (x)	0.517664	0.046755	11.07195	5.19E-22	0.425399388	0.609928	0.425399	0.609928

Source: own computations based on statistical data inputs collected from Eurostat.

The positive value of the intercept ($\beta_0 = 34.41$) shows that even if consumers did not use internet on their mobile phones, they would still read newspapers online, primarily from other handheld or desktop devices, such as tablets, laptops or personal computers. The regression indicates that, what the access of mobile phone internet does, is to increase the readership for the online news websites. According to the regression formula $[Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X + \epsilon]$, the chances of reading newspapers online (Y) would increase from $\beta_0 = 34.41$ if no mobile phone web is used to $Y = 34.4+0.51+11.6 = 46.51$ when the latter is used. This accounts for 35% higher chances of reading online news when the internet is also used on the mobile phones, and not limited to other devices.

Findings and discussions

The results of the regression analysis answer the research question by indicating that a positive and moderate relationship exists between mobile web and reading news(papers) online. Reading news on mobile phones via mobile internet access has become a custom nowadays, yet this habit often occurs by chance, simply because the item of news pops up as a recommendation, while browsing through the web of the phone. Research results have indicated that each internet mobile access supports a 51% chance (coefficient value of the x variable = 0.51) of reading news online, which, in turn, could lead to a 35% increase of the customer base of a given online news portal. News editors or newsroom managers should be aware that they have one in two chances to make their item of online news read if they prompt the news on the user's mobile phone screen, which would respond to the desiderate of increasing managerial efficiency (Crişan-Mitra, Borza, 2014; Manole et al., 2011; Verboncu, Zamfir, 2017; Voinea et al., 2015). Mobile marketing and advertising campaigns should not be ignored under such circumstances. A proper editorial strategy has one in two chances of increasing the readership of online news portals. It also has to be considered that many smartphone users nowadays do not actively search for news, but passively receive the recommendations of browsers/operating systems. Therefore, one of the most fruitful solutions for news editors to increase their readership is Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which can aid items of news, this would be better and more often recommended to the users, based on the latter's web search interests. In the end effect, this can also lead to increased levels of online trust (Colesca, 2007) in news providers.

The passivity in receiving news could also explain one of the most interesting findings of the research: the moderate effect that exists between the variables. While it might be expected that digital technology enhances online news consumption, the effect is rather ordinary (R Square value = 0.40). One of the reasons of the moderate effect might be found in the '*mobile-device-assisted-passivity*' (MDAP). The mobile web news reader does not make a purpose from searching for news; he or she is not necessarily interested in finding some specific item of news, but only reads what the browser or operating system recommends based on previous search interests. While on the desktop web the user would have mostly still had to search for a specific online newspaper to read a particular news, and thus would have entered into a perceptual rapport with the newspaper brand, the latter emotional partnership and, subsequently, the levels of involvement, have been reduced through MDAP. Such sequels tend to become contemporaneously customary, when people usually act after having observed others' behaviour (Drămnescu, Enăchescu, 2018) and account for the moderate effects of the hereby researched relationship, as mobile devices are not primarily intended to serve as news-reading facilitators, but mostly as entertainment tools. The mobile web structure has enabled leisure and entertainment behaviors – e.g. multi-player gaming (Călin, Cernat, 2016; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2018; Männikkö et al., 2018), web-surfing (Shen et al., 2018), social-networking (Jeong et al., 2016; Wolniewicz et al., 2018), photo sharing (Grieve, 2017; Leaver, Highfield, 2018; Thelwall, Vis, 2017), gambling and betting (Gainsbury, 2017; James et al., 2017) – that have altered the morphology of reading news, if not even substituted it. The changing landscape of the user vs. world

wide web relation has transformed web use from information seeking intended, to entertainment intended, which has had negative effects of searching for news online.

Both the need for editors to invest in marketing campaigns for boosting their news readership, as well as the disposition of the world wide web towards entertainment, have added towards a propensity of social media as news supplier. Some decreasing levels of trust in traditional mass-media corporations have been reported, mainly due to corruption scandals or partisanship, which have made readers step out of the habit of paying money for the printed editions of newspapers and opt, instead, for free content or alternative news sources (Fletcher, Park, 2017), which are mostly shared through social media such as Facebook or Twitter. The fact that the relationship with the newsroom is intermediated by social media platforms explains the moderate effects of the R Square value, because the reader does not have a direct contact with a particular news provider any longer, but opens different pieces of news being shared on social media by distinct providers, including friends or relatives.

Odd enough, the tendency towards using social media for accessing news also accounts for a pullback attitude of readers, motivated by the fear of fake news. Readers nowadays are aware that not all news distributed in social media is verifiable and, thus, tend to offer lower levels of trust for social media prompted news in comparison to those that they would have placed in a traditional news agency or newsroom. Yet, the world wide web entertainment function has increased comfort levels with mobile phone users, reducing their active search of news from a particular source and increasing their passivity of receiving news recommendations. Such a switch from essence to form is typical for postmodern societies (Drămnescu, 2013), in which the mobile phone user is caught in the middle between not searching for verifiable news and waiting to receive news which he then considers to be 'fake' just to step out of it.

Conclusions and future research

This research has indicated that using the mobile phone to access online news can significantly increase the readership volumes of internet-based news editors, supporting the recent findings of Molyneux (2018) or Nelson and Lei (2018), who regarded the mobile phone as being the 'nec plus ultra' of reading news today. Although correlation effects have been demonstrated to be rather temperate, the paper has presented several strategic options that newsroom editors or managers have got in order to better engage with their audiences. Having an internet access is a condition of the present-day news reading, part of a larger mass communications prospect (Bușu, Bușu, 2014; Vlăduțescu, 2014), a fact that explains the positive relationship between mobile web and reading newspapers online.

The moderate effects of the relationship might be traced back to the elaborated landscape of the online news area. This paper has only dwelled into a minor part of this terrain. One of the limitations of the research and which might be worth studying in future attempts is that the paper does not make a difference between accessing news via an internet browser through the provider's website and opening news from a digital app awaiting to be downloaded from an Appstore. Dunaway et al. (2018) have already underlined that news websites also have to create digital apps if they ought to exploit

their competitive advantages at maximum. Based on Lin's (2018) claim that online news readers are increasingly attracted to digital apps, prudent judgment might affirm that web browsers such as Internet Explorer or Google Chrome lose terrain themselves. Hence, it would be interesting to find out to what extent mobile web influences (or, at its part, is influenced) by the two distinct ways of news consumption: via apps and via browsers. Such attempts could well enlarge the apprehension of news digitization for editors and managers, who undoubtedly have to strategically master social and technological changes that impact upon the success of their work. Extended research is still needed in order to create a better picture of a topic that undoubtedly raises strategic challenges for editors: whereby the internet allows higher and faster competition compared to printed newspapers, the battle for an ever-reducing attention span of the readers is far from having ended.

The contributions of this paper to managerial knowledge are based on the main insight drawn from the regression results: the independent variable '*Mobile Phone Web Access*' has got potential to elevate the number of online news readers. Starting from this situation, the paper has suggested several managerial approaches that editors can use to connect to their audiences. Not at least important is the fact that the research has acknowledged the existence of a certain customer passivity when it comes to reading news which are supported by online environments. When making decisions, managers should take this '*mobile-device-assisted-passivity*' into account and be aware that an important deal of the customers will only open news items if they are prompted towards them. Investing in more e-marketing and SEO might prove a good solution not only for attracting readers, but also for reaching the managerial goal of creating a strong and reputable organizational brand identity (Buşu, 2013a, 2013b; Marcu, 2016).

This research contributes to the digital economy, in general, and to the online news market, in particular. In a global context in which communication approaches have changed and people are seen swiping their touchscreens on the buses, in the subways or while walking on the streets, expecting readers to scroll the mouse wheels in search of news will not be sufficient any longer (Dima et al., 2014; Gifu, Teodorescu, 2014). News editors will have to incorporate smartphones and mobile web in their editorial content strategies, if they hope for increased competitiveness.

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