

Economic and Business Dimensions

The Divergent Online News Preferences of Journalists and Readers

Reading between the lines of the thematic gap between the supply and demand of online news.

THE POLITICAL BODY, like the biological one, needs the right combination of nutrients to function adequately. One such key ingredient is news about public affairs that is necessary to inform political deliberation and encourage educated participation among the citizenry. In most liberal democratic societies, this news is largely provided by elite news organizations in print, broadcast, and online media. But, at least on the Web, while these organizations have supplied this kind of news in considerable quantities, the demand for news among online readers has gravitated toward other kinds of content also provided on these sites, such as information about weather, sports, crime, gossip, and entertainment. That frames an interesting dilemma for online news, and also for society as a whole.

Measuring Divergence in Online News

I did not look for the dilemma in online news. Once I found it in one place, however, I went looking for it elsewhere and found it everywhere.

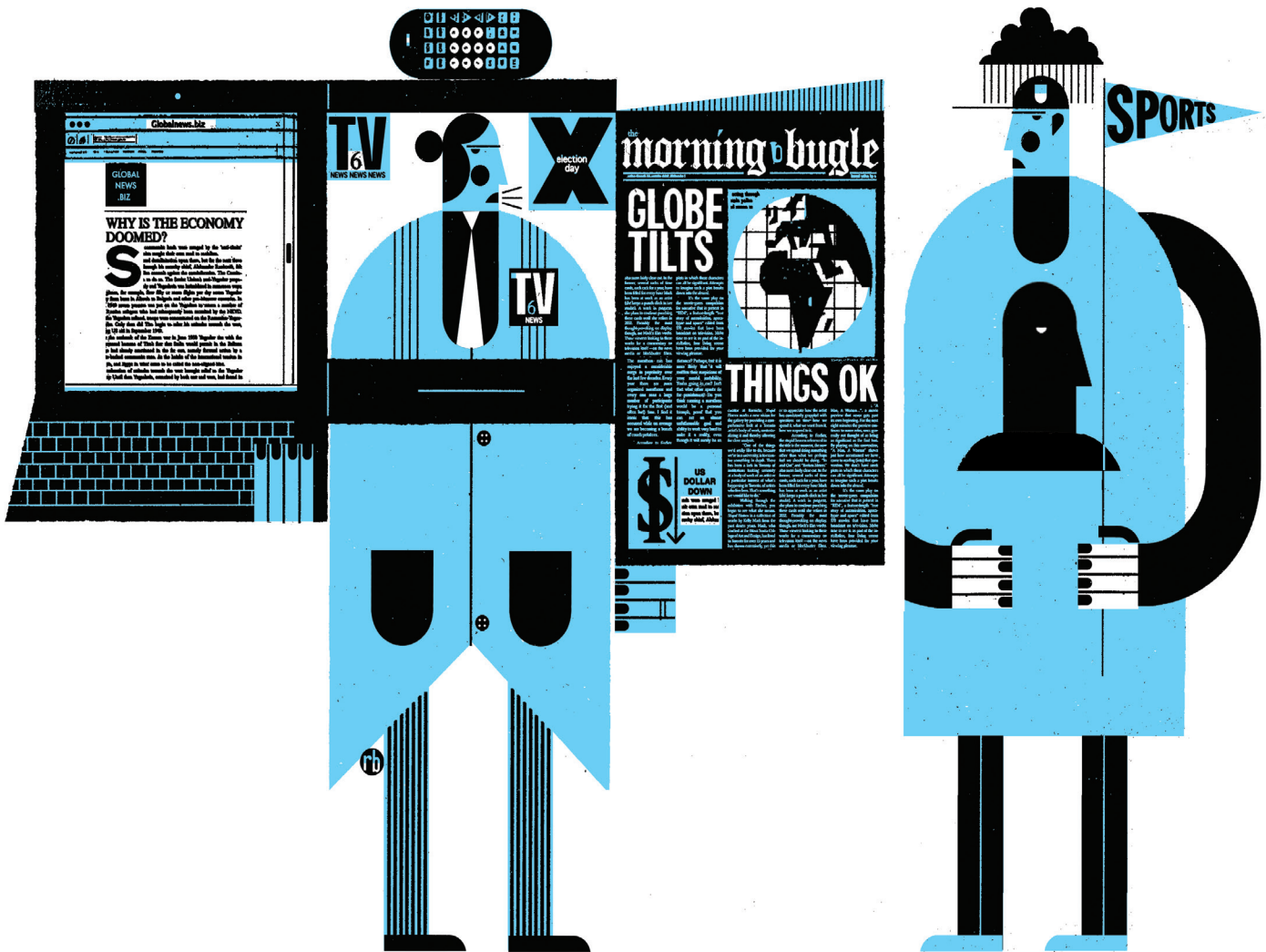
For a book on imitation in online and offline news,¹ I measured the amount of readers' news choices and the thematic composition of their choices. I found a large, double-digit difference between supply (preferences of journalists) and demand (preferences of readers).

More precisely, I calculated the degree of similarity in the events covered in the stories the three leading online news sites in Argentina considered the most important ones in any given news cycle. This meant collecting each homepage's first 10 stories counting from left to right and from the top down in a grid-like manner. The analy-

sis sought to determine whether an event covered in one site was also covered in at least one of the others.

The high level of similarity in news products could not be explained by patterns in the nature of demand. If anything, consumers seemed to want more differentiated news products and also news marked by a different thematic composition than what was offered to them. These sites shared 52% of the events presented on their respective top 10 stories. Furthermore, almost 59% of these stories shared by more than one site dealt with political, business, economic, and international matters.

By contrast, the most popular stories among the readers of these sites were quite dissimilar: only 36% of the hard news in the top 10 most viewed stories on one site were also among the top 10 most viewed stories in at least



one of the other two sites, and only 32% of these stories popular in more than one site dealt with politics, business, economic, and international matters. This amounted to a 16 percentage point gap between the levels of similarity of the top news choices of journalists and consumers, and a 27 percentage point gap between the thematic composition of these similar choices.

That initial study begged a follow-up question: do similar patterns arise elsewhere? A second study showed that the mismatch also applies to the leading, elite media in the U.S. My collaborator Limor Peer of Yale University and I conducted a study that compared the concurrent news choices of journalists and consumers of four leading, U.S.-based sites: CNN, Yahoo News, *Chicago Tribune*, and the now-defunct *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.³ We chose these sites to represent broadcast, on-

line-only, and newspaper parent companies, and also different geographic orientations. The first two sites were national-global, while the second two were local.

In all cases journalists selected more news about politics, economics, business, and international matters than readers, who, in turn, were more interested in topics such as sports, weather, entertainment, and crime. On each data collection day, research assistants gathered information on the top 10 stories selected by journalists and by consumers, respectively, as operationalized in the previous study. A comparison of the thematic composition of journalists' and consumers' top story preferences per site revealed 13 percentage point gaps on *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and Yahoo, 14 percentage point gaps on CNN, and 17 percentage point gaps on *Chicago Tribune*.

We worried that supply and demand are interdependent: journalists might prioritize certain stories because they perceive that consumers could find them appealing, and consumers might click more often on stories that receive major treatment by journalists. To try to get past these interdependencies, we conducted a second analysis on each site that excluded the stories that were selected by both journalists and consumers. Focusing on the stories that journalists chose irrespective of their level of popularity among consumers, and those that consumers chose even though they were not prominently displayed on the homepage, would give us a stronger measure of each group's independent preference.

The results suggest that independent from the influence of each other, the choices of journalists and consumers would follow strikingly diver-

gent trajectories. The gaps between the thematic composition of the top stories selected by journalists and consumers increased by an average of 19 percentage points.

Does the divergence between supply and demand depend on geography or ideology? Results from a third study, undertaken in collaboration with Northwestern University graduate students Eugenia Mitchelstein and Martin Walter, show that the mismatch is a widespread phenomenon that cuts across media from countries and regions with disparate histories, cultural makeup, and ideological positions.²

This study deployed the design of the second study to examine 11 sites in Western Europe and Latin America: *The Guardian* and *The Times* in the United Kingdom; *El País* and *El Mundo* in Spain; *Die Welt* and *Der Tagesspiegel* in Germany; *La Reforma* and *El Universal* in Mexico; *Clarín* and *La Nación* in Argentina; and *Folha de São Paulo* in Brazil (there was only one Brazilian site because data from a second comparable site was not publicly available). All the sites were the online presence of leading generalist, mainstream, and elite newspapers with national reach in their respective countries. Moreover, in the five countries from which two news sites were sampled, the pairs had somewhat divergent ideological outlooks—either conservative and centrist or conservative and liberal.

Once again, there was a sizable thematic gap between the supply and demand of online news, with the journalists leaning more toward stories about politics, business, economics, and international matters than readers. The differences between the top news choices of journalists and consumers ranged from 30 percentage points in *The Guardian* to 9 percentage points in *Clarín*, with an average of 19 percentage points. In addition, there were no major patterns of variance in this gap by geographical region or ideological preference. First, journalists choose news about politics, economics, business, and international matters 20 percentage points more often than readers in Western Europe and 19 percentage points more often in Latin America. Second, while on conservative sites the thematic difference between journalists' and consumers'

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choices was 21 percentage points, on centrist/liberal sites this difference was 19 percentage points.

The Future of Media and Democracy

It is unlikely that the mismatch between supply and demand of news in the elite media began with the Web. As the noted sociologist and former journalist Robert Park wrote many decades ago, "The things which most of us would like to publish are not the things that most of us want to read. We may be eager to get into print what is, or seems to be, edifying, but we want to read what is interesting." But the strong market position of these elite media meant that because advertisers had to go through them to reach potential consumers, journalists could get away with fulfilling their sense of civic duty by disseminating "edifying" news despite their limited appeal among the general public.


But in the highly competitive contemporary media environment, few news organizations enjoy the kind of natural monopoly or oligopoly position that newspapers and television networks had in the past. Perhaps, none do. Of all media markets, the Web is the most competitive one because of low geographic and distribution barriers and the very high number of players.

In addition, the Web enables organizations to automatically track the number of clicks garnered by each story. This has meant that personnel at elite online news sites are deeply aware of the extent to which supply and demand don't meet. They must confront the dilemma introduced at the beginning of this column on a daily basis.

What should they do? If they stay

the course and the nature of consumer preferences does not change (and there is no reason to suspect it might), the mismatch between supply and demand will further erode their economic sustainability. If they change course and give consumers more of what they want, they will likely pay the price of becoming a different kind of news organization and having to compete in an already crowded space of "populist media." Either way, the future does not bode well for them.

The potential implications of these trends for democracy are not encouraging either. As noted earlier, the leading, elite news organizations are major contributors of the kind of information about political, economic, and international matters that is essential for well-informed democratic deliberation and participation. This information is much more difficult to find in other sources such as tabloid media and even blogs (which largely amplify the information that originates in elite news organizations).

Society's appetite for information might get satiated by news about weather, sports, crime, gossip, and entertainment. But the contributions of these symbolic nutrients for the healthy functioning of the body politic will surely be lacking. If, in part, we are what we eat, we should be aware that we also are the news that we consume. And when the supply and demand of online news does not meet, it is not just elite media organizations that might suffer, but also all of us. 

References

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