

## **Audience of Local Online Newspapers in Sweden, Slovakia and Spain - a comparative study**

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### **Abstract**

Since a new online audience for local newspapers has emerged during the last years, in response to the growth of the Internet, we need to know who they are, what their reading habits are, and what their view on emerging technologies are, to be able to design good online newspapers. We have conducted a study using online questionnaires at three local online newspapers in three different countries: Sweden, Slovakia and Spain. The objective of this paper is to describe the differences and similarities between the three countries regarding audience profiles, scenarios of use, opinions of current and future issues and to discuss design implications.

### **1 Introduction**

Online newspapers can currently be characterized as a variant genre, not yet a fully developed genre of its own. Computer mediation is seen by Shepherd and Watters (1998) as a force towards change, where a genre moving from one medium to another first becomes replicated trying preserve content, structure and purpose, then changes to a variant, utilizing the medium more. Then it may change dramatically into an emergent genre, where its roots as a replicated genre are not obvious. Today, most online newspapers consist of a set of genre elements. Eriksson and Ihlström (2000) identify the news stream that presents recent stories ordered by publishing time and the headlines that are used to present stories of highest general interest together with the archives. Other elements included in a repertoire of genre elements together with the above are navigation elements, landmarks and advertisements (Ihlström and Lundberg, 2003).

As newspapers launched their online editions, a first effect was the formation of an online audience. Apparently, to get a sizeable audience is important, since the competition has grown with the expansion of the Internet (Aikat, 1998). This audience has for example been found to have different habits depending on whether or not they subscribe to the printed edition in a Swedish study of online audiences (Ihlström & Lundberg, 2002). The different habits can be described as scenarios of use (e.g. derived from the opinions of the users). The detected scenarios

of use can later be used as input in a design process (Carroll, 2002). Since these scenarios differ between audience groups, these differences can't be detected by server logs alone. Therefore, in our study, which is a part of the Electronic Newspaper Initiative (ELIN-IST-2000-30188), we have used an online questionnaire approach to get data about audience groups in three different countries.

Cyber Dialogue reported that although 49% of online U.S. adults visited a local newspaper site on a monthly basis, only 7 percent did so on a daily basis (Runett, 2000). Bellman, Lohse and Johnson (1999) reported that out of their survey with 10.180 respondents, 19,1% used the Internet at home to read news. Readers of online editions of local papers tend to be readers of that paper, but online editions of national papers reach people who don't read the print edition (Chyi & Lasorsa, 1999). In this paper we present a comparative European study between Sweden, Slovakia and Spain, using online questionnaires at the Östgöta Correspondenten ([www.corren.se](http://www.corren.se)), Korzar ([www.korzar.sk](http://www.korzar.sk)), and Diari Segre ([www.diarisegre.com](http://www.diarisegre.com)) online newspapers, respectively. All three newspapers have a printed edition of the newspaper as well.

The objective of this paper is to describe the differences and similarities between the three countries regarding audience profiles, scenarios of use, opinions of current and future issues and to discuss design implications.

## 2 Method

The study was conducted in December/January 2001/2002. At three newspapers, the survey was presented for approximately one week. The questionnaire contained 19 questions, no open question included. Having corrected for item non-respondents for the demographic questions (1-5), a total of 2.864 answers were collected. Of these, 2.311 were from Östgöta Correspondenten, 159 were from Diari Segre and 358 were from Korzar. The Diari Segre and Korzar audiences are smaller than the audience of Östgöta Correspondenten.

The survey was been presented as a pop-up questionnaire. A one-page design was used, which is faster for the respondent than a multi-page design, although the item non-response is higher. There was no use of advanced graphics, which gives less partial non-response from modem users (Manfreda, Batagelj & Vehovar, 2002). Only respondents who pushed the submit button were included in these surveys. In all surveys, there were some multiple-choice questions.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Audience profiles

*The Swedish Audience* has the largest proportion of senior readers (11.4% over 55 years), and also the largest proportion of subscribers to the printed edition, almost 50%. 53.1% are in the ages between 16 and 35. They are fairly well educated with 48.4% university educated and 41.2% with comprehensive school. They are mostly full time workers (61%), students (16.4%) or part time workers (6.6%). The audience consist of approximately 2/3 male, and only 1/3 female readers, in all three countries.

*The Spanish Audience* has the largest proportion of young readers (29.3% less than 25 years) but the smallest amount of senior readers (2.6% more than 55 years old). They have the highest percentage of university educated readers with 62.6% and 23% have comprehensive school. Only

1/5 of the readers are subscribers to the printed edition. They also have the highest amount of students (18.5%) but the lowest amount of full time workers (57.4%).

*The Slovak Audience* does not subscribe to the printed edition (only 3.6%). Almost 57% of the readers are between 26 and 45 years old. They are the most educated readers with either university educated (57.8%) or comprehensive school (40.2%). They have the highest amount of full time workers (74.4%) but the lowest amount of students (10.6%).

### **3.2 Scenarios of use**

*Main scenario:* More than a third of the respondents of the three countries read the online editions once daily or several times a week at a minimum. The information in the online newspaper that the audience read is similar, primarily the most recent news (average 67.1%) and the local news (average 52.8%) of the three papers. In all three countries, men also read sports news to a much greater extent than the women.

*The Swedish Scenario:* The audience reads the online newspapers mostly on a daily basis (27% once a day and 14.4% several times a day), 29.1% reads sometimes each week while 18.5% reads several times a week. They read it at work (45%) and at home (38.7%). More than 40% reads the online edition before lunch and 23.3% reads it during the evening. They primarily read the most recent news (70.8%) and local news (56.2%). The Swedish audience is the most interested in sports (35.2%) but they do not read much culture news (11%).

*The Spanish Scenario:* A large proportion (33.3%) of the Spanish audience reads the online edition several times each day (7.7% once a day). 10.3% reads several times each week while 15.4% reads some times each week. They read it from their home (33.8%) or from work (29.7%). Mostly, they read the online edition in the evening which differs from the other countries. They read the most recent news (64.6%) and the local news (44.1%), while not being very interested in economy (12.3%). The women are more interested in culture news (45.5%) than the men are (19.8%).

*The Slovak Scenario:* In Slovakia the audience mostly reads the online edition once a day (36%) or several times a week (33.8%). Only 8.1% reads several times a day. A clear majority reads from work (62.9%), which is the highest amount of the three countries. Only 22.3% reads from home. More than 37% reads during the early morning and only 16.8% in the evening. They read the most recent news (65.9%) and the local news (58.1%). The Slovak audience reads the economy news (21.8%) more than the audience from the other countries as well as the national news (36.3%). The women are more interested in culture news (20.8%) than the men are (8.8%).

### **3.3 Current and future issues**

In Slovakia, 37.7% of the audience were positive to micro payment for more and faster local news in the future, compared to 8.3% in Spain and 10.5% in Sweden. Regarding attitudes towards advertisements, some differences between the three countries were found. In Slovakia 34.1% were positive to advertisements compared to 21.1% in Sweden and 11.8% in Spain. Most people were neutral (average 42%) in all three countries. Concerning alternative media for receiving news, 37.1% (average) preferred to use their TV, whereas few people wanted news in their handheld computer (average 13.8%) or mobile phone (average 17.1%). No differences between the countries regarding alternative media were found. The preferred alternative forms for news was

radio news in all countries (Spain 37.4%, Sweden 22.9% and Slovakia 31.5%), SMS news was mostly preferred by the Slovak audience (24.6%) and the Swedish audience (21%) preferred video news more than the other audiences. Regarding moving images and sound over broadband connections, as much as 55.8% of the Swedish audience thought it would be more interesting (Slovakia 45.3%, Spain 39.5%). As regards personalisation, a majority in Sweden (56.6%) would not like a fully personalized paper compared to 22.9% in Slovakia and 33.3% in Spain. The most positive were the Slovak audience with 40%.

## 4 Discussion

In our study, we found results which differ from those of Runett (2000), namely that our respondents read the paper more often, with an average of 42.2% in the three countries reading once, or more than once daily, compared to the 7% reported by Runett. Furthermore, in our study, 36.1% read from their home, which is almost twice as many compared to the results of Bellman et al (1999). Compared to the results of Chy and Larosa (1999) this study did show national differences regarding subscribing and non-subscribing readers. Only Sweden was close to their results, with around 50% subscribing readers.

The *main differences* between countries found were; **a)** The high amount of subscribing readers in Sweden (48.1%) compared to Slovakia (3.6%). **b)** More senior readers in Sweden (11.4%) compared to Spain (2.6%). **c)** In Slovakia the audience mostly read the online newspaper from work (62.9%) and only 22.3% reads from home whereas in Sweden 38.7% reads from home and 44.9% from work. **d)** The Slovak audience was almost four times more interested in micropayment for more local updated news than the other countries. **e)** The Swedish audience was the most negative to full personalization (56.6%) compared to the Slovak audience with a positive attitude of 40%. **f)** The attitudes towards advertisements were most positive in Slovakia (34.%) compared to the Spanish audience with only 11.8%. These differences could be due to cultural differences and/or differences in infrastructure. Further research is needed to explain these differences.

The *main similarities* found are used to propose *design implications* that are more general and could be used at most online newspapers. The motivation to read online news is principally to read the most recent news, almost 70% of the audience use the online newspaper for that reason. The news stream element with its timestamps is a good form for presenting a selection of the most recent news items (Ihlström & Lundberg, 2003). In Sweden the high interest in sports news, in Spain the culture news and in Slovakia the national news could be a reason to give that a prominent position on the first page. However, there is a difference between male and female readers regarding sport and culture news, which could for example be resolved through personalization, or by presenting the additional sports/cultural news items in a specialized news stream. Interestingly, the Slovak audience reads the most recent news to about the same degree as the other countries in spite of not having a news stream on the front page of the online newspaper, and they are four times as positive to micropayment for more and faster local news in the future. We believe that micropayment could be a good means for paying to have such a news stream added to a personalized edition, in particular since the Slovak audience was the one most positive towards personalization. The headlines section should primarily present local or domestic daily news, since this is an important use of the online edition. However, since more than half of the audience members visit the newspaper less than once daily, we suggest that the headline section is extended to include a clearly marked part where the most important news from the past days is included. This could be clearly labeled and/or the date could be used as a mark on all articles in the headlines section. Taking together the preference for video and audio, and the desire to use the

television set as a media terminal, future online news sites will have to present content in new ways. This is an issue for future research, such as is being conducted in the ELIN project, where future media production and content forms are explored.

As an instrument for design, these implications are not complete, but could be interpreted as specific for the current audience. A genre analysis together with analyzing server logs, would show the impact on overall audience size and reading habits, of design alterations. Focus groups could be used to gain insights in what design, news and new services that could interest the potential audience and to develop new forms for news presentation and interaction.

## 5 Conclusion

We have found both similarities and differences between the three countries leading to some design implications. The results suggest that it is hard to create one design for all countries, since the preferred contents, alternate terminals, willingness to pay etc differ. The online newspaper genre is currently evolving into a genre of its own. With the use of future media terminals, personalization and more audio and video over broadband connections the genre might evolve to an emergent genre (Shepherd & Watters, 1998). This indicates that the media companies have to rethink the way to present the news in the future.

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