
Patterns of media ownership in UK Households

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Abstract

Investigated individual members of households in Britain and how they access news. This included the ways in which they make use of traditional media, such as print, as well as how new technologies (e.g. the Internet) impact on how they select and use the news.

Keywords

online community, cybersociety, computer mediated communication, virtual environments, internet addiction

Introduction

A study investigating correlations between the media ownership and uses in British and Dutch households (van der Voort, 1998) found that children accessed media from more than one source and often there was multiplication of personally owned media. This suggests that children in the households in this study access media from a location and method of their choice, as opposed to sharing a single source in a communal area. This notion is particularly important when attempting to account for media ownership as it demonstrates that the choice of media is down to the individual consumer and not the household as a whole. Factors such as ethnic background, gender and socio-economic status (SES) can provide clues as to why an individual uses a particular media source.

Some ethnicity indicators (e.g. ethnic origin) are cultural aspects that are not subject to one's volition and remain largely unchanged even after extended contacts with another ethnic group. Some other ethnicity indicators (e.g. media usage), however, refer to cultural behavior that is at least partly determined by a person's own preference and choice and is readily influenced by the extent and duration of contacts with another ethnic group (Michael, 1998).

A considerable amount of research has been done into the links between gender roles and media ownership. Much of this research has concluded that the masculine figure has the control over the choice and use of a particular technology. Morley (1986) found that masculine power is evident in a number of the families as the ultimate determinant on occasions of conflict over viewing choices. He found that it was even more apparent in the case of those families who have an automatic control device. None of the women in any of the families use the automatic control regularly. However, Morley's study was conducted at a time when not every member of the household had access to new technology for accessing news. It was likely that there was only one television per family, and the dominant male decided which channel to watch. This would have had a significant effect on how an individual household member chose to access the news, with female members having no choice in the use of new technology.

In households of a higher socio-economic status, it is likely that there was more than one television, but as both Morley's study in 1986 and Van der Voort's study in 1998 both suggest, this second television set is most likely to be located in the bedroom of the youngest male, limiting the choice of news of female members of a family.

Factors influencing media ownership

A study looking at the ownership of new technology in households (Mackay, 2000) found that there is a clear link between the socio-economic status of a household and the number of media sources available. However, nearly every household in the survey had at least one television and those with children were most likely to have multiple ownership.

The ownership of new media technologies was most common in the professional households. Personal computer ownership was at 7% in economically inactive households and 52% in professional households and mobile phone ownership was mainly in the business market. The statistics used in Mackay's study are at least eight years old, making the penetration levels inaccurate. Although penetration levels do not directly explain why a consumer chooses a particular media source for news, knowing the availability of media sources in household can assist in determining why an individual accesses news using a particular method.

Methodology

The study took the form of a quantitative questionnaire to get background details on the participants, followed by a qualitative interview. Twenty individuals from different backgrounds are asked to conduct the questionnaire, by email or over the phone. Conducting surveys using these methods have proven to be a successful way of getting accurate answers from participants, and are used by a number of consumer research groups and political parties. Three participants were asked to take part in the interviews, ranging from a person with a high socio-economic status to someone with a low SES. The interviews were recorded the reasons why they access news using their primary source were investigated. This is an effective method of collecting data, as the participants' answers are initially unprompted.

Findings

Three female participants were interviewed, all in different age groups and from different socio-economic backgrounds. Choosing only females means gender issues can be looked at based on the generation that female came from. The participants all seemed to have strong opinions about their preferred source of news.

"I feel that it is important to watch a channel that covers issues other than news and current affairs because social issues are as important as what takes place in Parliament. Since, social issues are the glue of society and the state of our health service, or

education system or even class issues are in fact more important for future considerations and awareness than events that have already happen" (Interviewee 2).

The format of the medium was also an important factor to the participants. Interviewee 3 found the actual process of purchasing a newspaper formed part of the satisfaction in using it. Each of the participants felt they were able to get more information from their preferred choice.

"I enjoy reading the newspaper. I find that I can get a lot of information. I enjoy buying it. It gives me pleasure to read it; I like reading the paper and not only that there's a lot of journalists writing for a newspaper – all with different viewpoints" (Interviewee 3).

Presentation and content were also important factors when choosing between different providers of the same news source. Interviewee 3 indicated she chose her newspaper because it contained more fashion and health news, and Interviewee 2 preferred Channel 4 News as the information was presented in the form of debates.

"I prefer the presentation style of Channel 4 News over other channels. Channel 4 provides room for studio debate, which I think enhances quality of the information. I think that these attributes add value to the news and provided the notion that you are receiving an evaluation rather than just factual news" (Interviewee 2).

The participants use of the news varied, but all believed that it was important to be kept informed.

"[I find that the news] informs about things that might be important for the future, like that thing with the MMR when people weren't sure if it was safe for their kids, it's useful for like in ten years or so" (Interviewee 1).

Although all the participants cited the topical content as a reason for selecting a particular news source, their political persuasion also played an important role. They seemed more likely to choose a particular provider if it agreed with their point of view, as Interviewee 3 explains.

"I changed from the Mail for various reasons; I think they were biased on various issues. [At the time of the death of] Princess Diana; they had a bad viewpoint of her, and a few other things that I didn't particularly agree with. So I decided to change my paper" (Interviewee 3).

This consumerist reason for changing media source suggests that news providers have to ensure brand loyalty through holding a particular political line. However although Interviewee 3 was sure of her beliefs, how she arrived at these viewpoints may have been influenced by the

amount of choice she had in accessing news media when she was younger. Interviewee 2 indicated that she had always been liberal minded and even though she used to watch ITV, this was because that was the channel her father watched.

"We liked the news and we used to watch it with my dad, it was just that other programs he used to watch that we didn't like. He would say that some newspapers were fiction and he only liked BBC news. He hated us watching "John Craven's News Round" and preferred if we watched the 'real' news" (Interviewee 2).

Interviewee 2 indicated that she has access to the Internet and television in her bedroom, but she did not always access her news from a private space. She indicated that in the communal area of the household, the remote-device was in her control most often, but mentioned that this was not always the case. In contrast, when she was younger and her father lived with her, she felt that she was limited to the news she accessed as he made decisions over the use of the television.

"I prefer to watch the news in company, I normally suggest a program and see if everyone is in agreement, if there is company, but most times I am alone so I just take over" (Interviewee 2).

Even though the male in the household usually controlled the television, the availability of more than one TV in the household has had an impact on the choice of news source. Interviewee 1 grew up in a generation where there was more than one television in the household.

"If I wanted to watch a different channel I would just find another TV" (Interviewee 1).

The interviewees owned or were able to access a wide range of news sources, with all of them having a television and radio in a private space. They were all able to gain access to the Internet, but none used it as their primary news source. They would use the Internet only to follow up a news item they accessed using their primary news source.

"[I use the Internet] for more info on things that I've seen on the news. When there's something I'm interested in and that's not on the news I look it up on the Internet" (Interviewee 1).

The interviewees felt they were unlikely to change to the Internet as their primary news source, viewing it as a complementary form of media.

"I think I'm of the age where I wouldn't change [to using the Internet]. I'm not saying that I wouldn't find things of interest on there though. I'm not really that up-to-date on the Internet. But, maybe, perhaps when I've got more time, I'd like to learn. I would

prefer it if someone found it for me and then I could read it, I don't think I'd go on there myself and find it" (Interviewee 3).

The participants viewed new media as something that required effort and all indicated that they found their preferred news source easy to access.

Discussion

In all the households investigated in this study there were strong opinions on the choice of news source. The younger members of a household preferred new media sources such as the TV or Internet to access news, with the older members preferring print media. This was particularly true of the female members, who were less likely to watch television than the male members of the household.

These findings correlate with those of Van der voort (1998) who found that children in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands were less likely to read newspapers, although this may be for more cultural reason as opposed to practical ones. Newspapers, especially in the Netherlands, were increasingly chosen for learning among older age groups. This contrasts with the age trend for books, which are less often chosen for learning by older children.

The study also showed that the older members of the household are less likely to change to new media, such as the Internet. This contrasts with research from Nielsen/Net Ratings (2001), which found that six million British women using the Internet from home every month.

The majority of the females that took part in the study saw the Internet as a complementary source of news, with the older members reluctant to access news this way because they felt it to be difficult to use.

An issue that came out of the study was the remaining dominance of the male in the communal area of the household. The findings were consistent with the study by Morley (1986) that showed that it was usually the oldest male figure that controlled the remote device to the television. The older female that was interviewed suggested that she might prefer the newspaper to other news sources because her partner always had the remote device. However, the increase in ownership of new media has change the way news is accessed by younger generations, as they indicated that they would often leave the communal area and access news from a private space.

Even though the dominance of the older male appears to still exist, household members are less limited in their alternative choice of news, which

suggest they are more likely to develop alternative opinions. No matter how someone accesses a media source, they are presented with a choice of news provider. For example, a TV viewer can choose between BBC News and ITN. The study showed that people were more likely to choose a particular provider if it shared the same political ideology as themselves and would be more likely to change to another provider if this failed to remain the case.

Limitations and implications for future research

This study investigated households where there were many sources of news available, which does not reveal how individuals access news where they have less choice. It is possible that they would develop the same opinion as that of the member of the household that controls the television.

The Internet provides increased opportunity for personalised news services, whereby an individual can decide what news they receive. This practice could lead to individuals being less restricted and more able to be themselves without any outside influences, or could lead to a time

where people have fixed views and become less informed about issues important to them.

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