

Cybernetic Answer to Who, What, Where, When and How: Comparative Analysis of Online and Print Newspapers in Serbia, Great Britain and the United States

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Abstract. In the last 8 years, the number of the Internet users worldwide increased by 305%, and the number of online newspapers has increased more than 50% since 2003. In the light of these developments, this study questions if online newspapers can be seen as a news genre distinct from its print parent. Built on the premises of genre theory, the study tests the applicability of Shepherd and Waters' (1998) classification of news cybergenres. Data collected with content analysis of 223 front pages of the selected online newspapers from Serbia (17), Great Britain (108) and the United States (98), revealed current trends in online publishing and difference in the state of the online newspapers in these countries. Serbian online newspapers most closely resemble their print parent, while online dailies in the USA and GB are exhibiting features of a new news cybergenre.

1. Introduction

Since 2000, the number of the Internet users worldwide increased by 305%. Today it is approaching 1.5 billion [1]. The number of online newspapers increased more than 50% since 2003 [2]. These numbers exemplify changes in the newspaper business and profession. Although online and print newspapers have numerous characteristics in common, a few, such as globalization of the readership, content change and its 24/7 updating cycle, and interactivity tools, imply that online press could be defined as a new news genre.

This study analyzes some of these issues and it uses genre theory for its theoretical framework. Shepherd and Waters [3] proposed a cybergenre evolutionary model in which they argue that as the traditional news genres such as newspapers or magazines are moving to the Internet, a new class of news genre, which the authors named cybergenre, is emerging. According to the authors, online newspapers are developing from replicated subgenre (copying the content and format of the print newspapers), and variant (exploiting the capabilities of the new medium) extant cybergenres to emergent (exploiting the functionality of the new

medium) and spontaneous (no counterpart in other media) novel cybergenres.

The scope of this research is narrowed to the forms of the online newspapers in Serbia, Great Britain and the United States. Considering different contexts in which these three online newspaper industries have emerged (socioeconomic status, newspaper histories, and overall cultures) it is safe to suggest that they are currently in different states of genre development.

RQ1: What are the cybergenre evolutionary stages of the online newspapers in Serbia, Great Britain, and the United States?

2. Results, Discussion, and Significance

The study uses content analysis as a method to examine 223 online newspaper front pages in three countries. The sample from Serbia includes all existing online newspapers: 17. The samples from GB (108) and the USA (98) are selected based on the 2008 Editor & Publisher Yearbook: complete list of GB newspapers and the top 100 highest circulated USA newspapers in 2007. The codebook is adapted from Van der Wurff and Lauf [4].

Table 1: Categories of cybergenre development ^a

	<i>R</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>S</i>
<i>Content</i>	0	2	3.5	5
Audio/visual	Some	Often	Often	Always
Visual	Some	Often	Often	Always
Video/sound	No	No	Some	Often
Timestamp story	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Timestamp all	No	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Form</i>	0	0	2.5	4
Edition	2	2	< 2	< 2
Extra language	No	No	1	< 2
Technical change	No	No	Yes	Yes
Content change	No	No	No	Yes

Functionality	0	5	8	9
Contact	Paper	Offices	Persons	Persons
Internal updates	0	1-2	3 & up	3 & up
External update	No	No	No	Yes
Debate provider initiated	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Debate user initiated	No	No	Yes	Yes
Polls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Search engine	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hyperlinks	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Archive	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

^a R=replicated, V=variant, E=emergent, S=spontaneous

Descriptive values from Table 1 are decoded into progressively increasing numerical values based on the element's presence and level of utilization: 0=absent, 1/2=partially present, 1=fully present. Subcybergenre categories are defined with particular scores for content, form and functionality, as indicated on the top line of each section. The values in between represent a transition phase in which one subcybergenre transforms into a more developed one.

Table 2: Evolution of the cybergenres in three countries

	<i>USA</i>	<i>GB</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
Content	V (2.05)	V (1.99)	V/E (2.15)
Form	R/V (.80)	R/V (0.81)	R/V (.91)
Functionality	V/E (6.15)	V/E (5.48)	R/V (4.06)

Table 2 shows that newspapers in these countries can't be classified as spontaneous cybergenre. Dailies in USA and GB have similar evolutionary patterns, as they exhibit elements of novel cybergenres. Characteristics of emergent cybergenre, in all three cases, are also present only in the functionality elements. However, these categorizations are possibly oversimplified because in-depth analysis of the particular elements of the content, form, and functionality, reveal the patterns in online publishing, as well as, that Serbian online newspapers most closely resemble their print parent

The existence of the news/web site timestamp (news stream) is one of the main differences between print and online newspapers. The results show that online newspapers most often put timestamp with the top news stories. The USA newspapers dominate this category as 31.63% of web sites and 72.45% of news stories have a timestamp (10.19% and 54.63% of British, and 17.65% and 35.29% of Serbian dailies, respectively, do the same). Interactivity is another element scholars often cite as the point of distinction between print and online

newspapers. Majority of the dailies in GB and Serbia don't provide user initiated debates (readers have an opportunity to discuss any topic of their choice). The number of newspapers in the USA (55.10%) that do have this option, indicate that there may be a trend toward offering this service to the readers, which in turn can affect the gate-keeping role of the traditional press.

Shepherd & Watters [3] note that emergent and spontaneous cybergenres allow users to personalize the web page by changing its content and look. The study shows that only 8 newspapers allow readers to choose what stories will be displayed. On contrary, the technical personalization (font size, for example) is more common as 53.70% newspapers in GB, 35.71% in USA and 41.18% in Serbia have this as an option.

Finally, this analysis revealed that only three newspapers from all three countries can be classified as a pure replicated cybergenre. Every other title had at least hyperlinks and a search tool, which are both the elements of the variant cybergenre: they represent functionality enabled with the online medium.

3. Conclusion

Genre theory and cybergenre taxonomy are appropriate tools in analyzing online newspapers, as they emphasize essential differences between traditional news genres (print editions) and cybergenres (online editions). This analysis showed that online dailies in Serbia, United States and Great Britain are on different levels of the cybergenre evolution, with Serbia being on the lowest. The data also indicates that numerous trends (news stream, user initiated debates, personalization tools) that are characteristics of novel cybergenres, are present in numerous newspapers, therefore implying formation of a new news cybergenre.

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[1] Internet world statistic. (n.d.). Retrieved November 12, 2008 from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>
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