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# Understanding Online News: Uses and Gratifications of Mainstream News Sites and Social Media

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**Abstract:** In this study the uses and gratifications obtained from Mainstream News sites and Social Media when the users read online news is explored. A comparative work is done between the two in order to examine the differences on the type of needs and requirements that each of these Media satisfies. The trust and interactivity that participants illustrate in reading online news is also examined.

**Keywords:** *uses and gratifications, mainstream news sites, Social Media, trust, intensity.*

## 1. Introduction

The conversations around the Media and their social consequences started around the year of 1920, when the Frankfurt School made its appearance [1] and developed the critical theory (“School of Criticism”). What is really interesting regarding the approach of the Frankfurt School about the Mass Media is that it has developed a philosophy around the dominative nature of the Mass Media that regulates the management and conveyance of the message of the Media to the society basis. Therefore, what it is developed, basically, around this consideration is that this particular school of pensiveness supports the passiveness of the audience, which accepts any information or any stimuli from the Mass Media and hence, the message itself that the Media aim to pass across the audience [2]. The audience is weak to react in any message comes from the Mass Media.

This conception of the passive audience changed over the years due to the various factors that have affected this notion, for example the new and contemporary developments in technology which brought new changes in the media chain. The new technologies led us to the New Media which offered to the

audience the interactivity, feature that was not available through the traditional media. The interface between interactivity and News Media is analysed by Cover [3] who states that although it is difficult to define the interactivity, however this can be analysed through the discussion about the new technologies, which give the user the opportunity to interact in different ways with the content (e.g. commentary or notifications and sharing).

This development was described by Katz [4] as a historical change. Katz [4] attributed the designation “powerful media” opposed to “powerful viewers”, as previously it was only mentioned on the prevalence of media due to the ideas that elucidated from the Frankfurt School. Nowadays, due to the interactivity that appears due to the evolution of technologies the audience acquires a position of strength. This change reverses the approach of the passivity of the audience and replaces it with the approach of the active audience. In other words, the audience uses the medium interactively to meet their needs and requirements based on the Uses and Gratifications, rather than simply remaining a passive recipient [2].

In the present study the Uses and Gratifications obtained from reading news online in News Media namely in Mainstream News Sites and Social Media will be examined and a comparison will be done between the two. Murray and Waller [5] defined Social Media/Social networking websites to be the virtual communities which allow people to connect and interact with each other on a particular subject or to just “hang out” together online. Examples are Facebook and Twitter. Mainstream News site is the most widespread form of News Media production online that offers a selection of editorial content. Examples are CNN, BBC, CNBC, online newspapers. In addition the extent to which the New Technologies/New Media affect the level of participation of the audience in relation to the content of Mass Media is also examined [6].

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Uses and Gratifications: Social Media and Mainstream News sites*

Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) is one of the most important theories of the Mass Media research that focuses on the media use and the choice of media [7]. What distinguishes this theory from other communication theories is that the audience member is characterized as an active one. The focus of the theory is what people do with the media rather than the influence or impact of the media to the individual [8]. The Uses and Gratifications theory supports that the Users use the Media for their own benefit based on their own needs and requirements. Katz and Foulkes [9] characterized the mass media use as an “escape” for the user where actually serves concrete needs and where these needs vary according to the influences.

Much research was conducted on Uses and Gratifications in various areas such as television, radio (e.g. [10], [11], [12], [13]) and other traditional media (e.g. [14], [15]). However, with the adoption in the last few years of New Technologies and New Media, research is required to be done in order to explore the uses and gratifications that these media provide. Comparison between the traditional media and New Media related to Uses and Gratifications was done by various authors [16], [17]. One of the most powerful characteristic of the theory

of Uses and Gratifications in News Media is the interactivity element that establishes the relationship between the users and the media on the base of their needs and their requirements. Armenakis et al. [18] supports that News Media create a sociocultural context where the users fulfill their information and interactive needs. According to Ha and James [19] interactivity in News Media describes the ability of users to provide content in response to a source or communication partner. This is supported by the research of Quan-Haase and Young [20] that they applied the U&G theory on the case of Facebook and Instant Messaging.

It is vital to mention that a special attention would be given to the term of “user” since this term is linked with the aforementioned theory. The reference of the term “users” has a great importance as this term actually replaces the traditional term of the auditor, the viewer and the reader.

The traditional term fits more in the concept of the audiences’ passiveness in contrast to, the contemporary term of the word “user”, which fits in the concept of the active audiences, such as the audiences that insert in an interactive procedure with the Medium and the content of this Medium, in general. What really matters regarding the approach of the Uses and Gratifications is the one that has already been mentioned above, that the users use the Media to service their concrete needs and of course, these needs vary and differentiate according to the influences [21].

In News Media is not clear the distinction between consumer and producer. Toffler [22] created the term Prosumer (which is derived from the composition of the words producer and consumer) in order to refer to the new trend that defines the users as partly producers and consumers. This trend is presented for example at the news portals, where for instance the users can upload their own reportage which is a clear example of Interactivity [23]. Bruns [24], [25] in his attempt to state that the production and the use are now, confusing concepts, as their meaning in the new digital and interactive interface is the same; he used the term produsage (<production + usage) and the terms Producer (<producer + user) and Co-Creator to describe the increasing production of the content-of the news and other kinds of content- by the users of New Media.

The users’ active role in the processing, the dissemination and the interpretation of the news content is described by the definitions of networked journalism [26], a term that shows the range of journalistic records and mostly of online journalism and this is attributed to the use of new technologies. Participatory journalism [27] is used to indicate the inclusivity of joint management, production, promotion and sharing the news content by the users, and citizen journalism [24] is used to highlight the involvement of the citizens in the particular procedure of production. These definitions precisely demonstrate the new relationship that is created between the user and the content of the news based on new potentials and options.

In this study, four basic components of the Uses and Gratifications theory are being examined i.e. *Information*: the users of the Mainstream News Site/Social Media want to collect information, *Discussion* which is in fact an interactive parameter as basically within the conversation you interact with the other users as well as with the Medium itself or with the journalists, the parameter of *Entertainment* refers to the users who satisfy their recreative needs

within the use of the online Media, and finally, the parameter of *Surveillance* which refers to the need of users to learn about what's happening in the world [28].

## 2.2. *New technologies and on-line media*

Radical changes have been noticed in the last century; changes that mostly were caused by the evolution of technology. Nowadays, trends require new sources of journalism; therefore Social Media and online news have become very important in everyone's life in order to be updated and be informed from the very first moment when the news do happen. Social media like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have conquered the internet. There are widely known as the fastest source of diffusion of information in the modern world. According to Keen [29] many discussions are made in order to examine whether social media are reliable as sources of news to other ways of disseminating information. They have changed the overall way politicians and famous people approach their audience, later this led the professional journalist to provide the news in a different way rather than in the traditional one. Various critical events like elections, deaths of celebrities or well-known politicians, acts of terrorists, hurricanes, earthquakes and many more were first announced to social networks making them very indispensable for the modern professional journalism.

Although, the majority of people questions the reliability and the quality of the provided information/news their popularity is increasing every single day. A recent research of Nielsen and Schroder [30] who was based on a cross-country online survey, showed that despite the popularity of Social Media the younger generation does not use these tools to produce, comment or share news. However, the time spent using Facebook, YouTube and Twitter is basically for entertainment. These widely disseminated tools offer to the users interaction with every posted information hence they have the opportunity to express their opinion, feelings and participate in conversations giving the news a different dynamic and perspective. Kavoura [31], examining social media communication, supports that social media create the "sense of belonging", and actually community feelings (namely "virtual community"), in which users act and interact. Kavoura et al. [32] also supports that social media help to transcend physical boundaries and through organized online communities, new and interactive ways of communication are created.

An alternative way to read news online is the Mainstream News Sites. Between the Social Media and the News Media there is a great literature on which is considered to be the most accurate and credible source of news [33], [34], [35].

A research was conducted in the ISLA, University of Amsterdam [36] in order to understand the relationship between the Social Media and the online news. This research examines the impact on news events by the Social Media utterances (implicitly or explicitly) and the fact that one needs to cross reference the reliability of the information posted from these distributed tools going through the edited content to the unedited. Also, the number of news posted in the social media in contrast to the online newspapers that specialize in providing the news was also examined. Overall, both sources of news were the result of the new technological era. Social media provide the freedom to people to use these

internet tools to actively engage on sharing and producing news. Then again online news offer the unedited information to the readers allowing them to share it on the social media, edit it and interact with other users. All the above lead to the linked relationship between these two news sources.

### 3. Methodology and Analysis

#### 3.1. Measures

A questionnaire was distributed in order to examine the Uses and Gratifications obtained from reading news online in Mainstream News Sites and Social Media. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part included demographics, the frequency and intensity of users in reading news online. It also included 21 items that correspond to the four variables related to the uses and gratifications of reading online news in Mainstream News Sites i.e. Information, Discussion, Entertainment and Surveillance. It also included the same 21 items referring to the uses and gratifications of reading online news in Social Media. Participants responded on a 5 point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagreement) to 5 (strongly agreement). Some items out of these 21 were taken from the research of Quan – Haase and Young [20] and Froget et al. [37]. For the purposes of this research items for each variable as aforementioned were summed up. The second part of the questionnaire included questions related to the trust that participants demonstrate in online Mainstream News sites along with the participants' interactivity. Items were assessed using a five point likert scale where 1 corresponds to no trust and 5 corresponds to a very high degree of trust.

The questionnaire was translated in Greek and then back translated in English by professional linguistics. A pilot study was conducted with a sample of 7 questionnaires. The questionnaires were given to university students in order to check the validity of the questionnaire. Small modifications were done as necessary.

#### 3.2. Sample

The study used a cross sectional survey with a representative sample from university students. The survey was conducted anonymously. In total 192 questionnaires were administered (81% of the questionnaires were valid). The sample is constructed by 156 university students, 90 females and 66 males, where 74.4% are less than 25 years, 21.8% are between 26-44 years old and 3.8% are above 45. Seventy nine percent of the sample is undergraduate students while the rest are postgraduate ones. The vast majority of the sample is expert on using the internet as 60% uses the internet for more than 7 years and actually 93% of the sample read news online. The majority of the students read online news of social content. Table 1 represents their preferences.

Table 1. Preferences of the participants in reading online news

Percentage (%)
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Social Content	50.3%
Athletics	21.3%
Politics	16.1%
Other	12.3%

Principal component analysis with Varimax (orthogonal) rotation was performed on the 21 items of the Mainstream News Sites part but also for the Social Media part. The factor analysis referring to the Mainstream News Sites was supported by Bartlett's test of sphericity,  $\chi^2 (210) = 1256.59, p < .05$  and Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of .87 above the recommended value of .6. Factors with an eigenvalue more than 1 were retained. A four-factor solution was obtained. The first factor included 8 statements on Information which accounted on the 35% of the variance, the second factor included 6 statements on Entertainment accounted for the 11% of the variance, the third factor included 4 statements on Discussion accounted for the 8% of the variance and the fourth factor included 1 statement on Surveillance which is accounted for the 5% of the variance. The 21 statements of the Mainstream News Sites explain 59% of the variation (see Table 2). Principal Components analysis with the Varimax rotation for the Social Media part revealed a four factor solution with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 37%. 12%, 6% and 6% of the variance respectively. Bartlett's test of sphericity,  $\chi^2 (210) = 1414.98, p < .05$  and Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of .88. The first factor included 8 statements on Information, the second factor included 6 statements on Entertainment, the third factor on Discussion included 4 factors and the fourth factor included 3 statements on Surveillance. The four factor identified explain the 61% of the total variance (see Table 3). Not all questions loaded on the appropriate factor as a more representative sample should be obtained. However, in the analysis the appropriate loadings were considered.

Table 2 and 3 show the internal consistency within the current sample, the means and standard deviation referring to the Uses and Gratifications of the online news by Mainstream News Sites and the Social Media.

Table 2. Principal Component Analysis for uses and gratifications related to Mainstream News Sites

Item	FACTOR			
	I	II	III	IV
<b>I. Information</b>				
To get with current issues (14)	<b>,793</b>	,090	,005	-,015
Its easy to get information (18)	<b>,787</b>	,183	,085	,041
To get information I need (20)	<b>,781</b>	,026	,144	,075
To search for information that I need (15)	<b>,740</b>	,022	,239	,188
To search for information (2)	<b>,728</b>	,143	,061	,088
To get information for free (4)	<b>,715</b>	,174	,038	,065
Online news is a source of current information(11)	<b>,697</b>	,186	,036	,134
To get answers to specific questions (12)	<b>,692</b>	,095	,285	-,104
To find out things I need to know (8)	<b>,656</b>	,264	,189	-,218
Online news is a source of trustworthy information	<b>,523</b>	,312	,068	,012
To occupy my free time (1)	<b>,445</b>	,398	-,016	,376
<b>II. Entertainment</b>				
Because it passes time away particularly when I'm	,160	<b>,860</b>	,137	,086
When I have nothing better to do (21)	,109	<b>,838</b>	-,012	,070
To pass time when I am bored (6)	,215	<b>,746</b>	,187	-,074
Because is a habit just something to do (17)	,323	<b>,601</b>	,045	,186
To entertain myself (10)	,001	<b>,546</b>	,438	-,041
<b>III. Discussion</b>				

To give my opinion on a topic of discussion (13)	,188	,036	<b>,757</b>	-,032
To participate to group discussions related with news	-,077	,066	<b>,748</b>	-,032
To discuss topics/news I care about (16)	,353	,202	<b>,574</b>	,109
To respond to others discussion on topics of interest	,328	,180	<b>,554</b>	,282
<b>IV. Surveillance</b>				
Reading online news is a way to learn about people	,022	,077	,065	<b>,868</b>
<b>Coefficient alpha</b>	<b>,89</b>	<b>.8</b>	<b>.68</b>	<b>.24</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>29.86</b>	<b>18.06</b>	<b>12.48</b>	<b>11.34</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>6.60</b>	<b>4.92</b>	<b>3.51</b>	<b>4.13</b>

Note: Factor loadings in bold in the same column load on the same factor.

Table 3. Principal Component Analysis for uses and gratifications related to Social Media

Item	FACTOR			
	I	II	III	IV
<b>I. Information</b>				
To get information I need (20)	<b>,776</b>	,119	,365	,015
To search for information that I need (15)	<b>,773</b>	,016	,250	,160
Its easy to get information (18)	<b>,704</b>	,148	,360	,091
To get answers to specific questions (12)	<b>,689</b>	,134	,323	,308
To discuss topics/news I care about (16)	<b>,674</b>	,183	,035	,390
To search for information (2)	<b>,627</b>	,043	,353	,101
To respond to others discussion on topics of interest	<b>,552</b>	,237	-,014	,318
To give my opinion on a topic of discussion (13)	<b>,473</b>	,377	-,192	,395
<b>II. Entertainment</b>				
Because it passes time away particularly when I'm	,103	<b>,870</b>	,095	,048
To pass time when I am bored (6)	,105	<b>,820</b>	,114	-,082
To entertain myself (10)	,212	<b>,730</b>	-,082	,014
Because is a habit just something to do (17)	,180	<b>,698</b>	,234	,177
To occupy my free time (1)	-,092	<b>,664</b>	,371	,283
When I have nothing better to do (21)	,039	<b>,371</b>	-,010	,110
<b>III. Discussion</b>				
Online news is a source of current information (11)	,369	,188	<b>,690</b>	,217
To get information for free (4)	,251	,165	<b>,667</b>	,068
Reading online news is a way to learn about people	,238	-,013	<b>,618</b>	,198
Online news is a source of trustworthy information	,124	,074	<b>,335</b>	,757
<b>IV. Surveillance</b>				
To participate to group discussions related with news	,397	,177	,005	<b>,689</b>
To find out things I need to know (8)	,225	,104	,430	<b>,621</b>
To get with current issues (14)	,393	,085	,349	<b>,444</b>
<b>Coefficient alpha</b>	<b>.88</b>	<b>.65</b>	<b>.76</b>	<b>.69</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>28.66</b>	<b>20.71</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>10.34</b>
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>6.64</b>	<b>6.62</b>	<b>3.61</b>	<b>2.58</b>

Note: Factor loadings in bold in the same column load on the same factor.

Using paired t-test, mean-level differences were found for Mainstream News Sites and Social Media related to the factors of Entertainment and Surveillance. The other two factors did not show a statistical significant difference. Thus, the results suggested that readers are more entertained reading news in Social Media rather in Mainstream News Sites. Contrary Mainstream News Sites provide more Surveillance rather than Social Media (see Table 4)

Table 4. Means (SD) and paired t-test results



	Online News in Mainstream News site Mean (SD)	Online News in Social Media Mean (SD)	D
Information	29.86 (6.6)	28.66 (6.64)	.18
Discussion	12.48 (3.51)	12.62 (3.61)	-.04
Entertainment*	18.06 (4.92)	20.71 (6.62)	-.45
Surveillance*	11.40 (4.09)	10.34(2.58)	.30

\*Note:  $p < .05$

Instead of using the frequency, intensity scale of online news is employed [37]. Intensity, measures how reading news online is integrated on the users' daily routine, how engaged is the user reading news online i.e. "Reading online news is a part of my every day activity", "Reading online news has become part of my daily routine", "I feel out of touch if I do not read online news" [37]. Multiple regression was used in order to explore the relationship between the intensity of reading online news and age, gender and the four variables related to the uses and gratifications of Mainstream News Sites (Information, Entertainment, Discussion and Surveillance). The overall model was significant with  $R^2 = .29$ ,  $Adjusted R^2 = .259$ ,  $F(6,149) = 10.04$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 5). The variables Age, Information and Entertainment were statistically significant with Information being the most important variable to explain the intensity of reading news online. In addition, all of the aforementioned variables were positively related with the intensity.

Table 5. Results on Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting the Intensity (Mainstream News Sites)

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Constant	2.77	1.192		2.325
Age*	1.305	.391	.246	3.334
Gender	.163	.4	.029	.0409
Information*	.117	.038	.271	3.083
Discussion	.005	.068	.006	.075
Entertainment*	.117	.048	.202	2.407
Surveillance	-.004	.054	-.006	-.075

Note: \* $p < .05$ .

Multiple regression was also used to explore the relationship between the intensity of reading online news and the uses and gratifications of online news in Social Media. Again the overall model was significant ( $R^2 = .25$ ,  $Adjusted R^2 = .22$ ,  $F(6,148) = 8.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with Age, Entertainment and Surveillance being the statistically significant predictors of the Intensity with Age being the most important one (see Table 6).

Table 6. Results on the Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting the Intensity (Social Media)

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Constant	2.55	1.38		1.84
Age*	1.66	.39	.31	4.27
Gender	.6	.43	.1	1.4
Information	.08	.04	.19	1.83
Discussion	-.10	.08	-.13	-1.3
Entertainment*	.09	.03	.22	2.78
Surveillance*	.16	.1	.14	1.55

Note: \* $p < .05$ .

### 3.3. Trust and Interactivity

Differences on the trust that participants show in reading online news in Mainstream News Sites and Social Media was investigated by using a paired t-test. Analysis suggested that there is a statistical significant difference on the average trust that participants show between the two ( $t(154) = -10.773$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Namely, the average trust for the news presented in Mainstream News Sites ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.07$ ) is higher than the trust for the news in Social Media ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ).

The participants also did not show a high interactivity related with the news. The vast majority of the sample just read the news ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), rather than like, share or comment the news.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we explored the uses and gratifications obtained from a) Mainstream News Sites and b) Social Media. A factor analysis of uses and gratifications from Mainstream News Sites and Social Media revealed four factors i.e. Information, Discussion, Entertainment and Surveillance. Despite the increased interest in Social Media, most studies focus on uses and social implications of the social media [20]. However, there is no research related to online news concerning different types of media.

Both Mainstream News Sites and Social Media are seen as important tools in reading news online, but the type of needs that each Media fulfil definitely is not the same. Even though their differences are small, they are central to the way in which users experience the two tools and use them. No differences were obtained between the two types of media related with Information and Discussion. Information may be derived either through the authentic or original news from the Mainstream News Sites, or via notifications in Social Media (secondary data sources). Mean level differences exist for the gratification of Entertainment. Higher values were obtained in Social Media as it was expected [38]. Social Media essentially shape this need and drive the use of it for the purpose of Entertainment. Another mean level difference was obtained on Surveillance with a higher average for Mainstream News Sites.

In this study it was also investigated which individual factor (Age, Gender, Information, Discussion, Entertainment and Surveillance) predicts the intensity of reading news online in Mainstream News Sites and Social Media. Results have shown that Information is the variable that has the highest impact and is positively related on the intensity of reading news in Mainstream News Sites. Contrary for the intensity of reading news online in Social Media, age is the most

important factor to predict the intensity. The fact that the sample is restricted to university students this may regulate to some degree that age is the most important factor. In general, younger people are in favour of using Social Media as opposed to the Mainstream News Sites. While university students are an extremely significant sample to research in regards to the Internet and Social Media as argued by LaRose et al. [39], university students naturally have dissimilar lifestyle than the general population. Future research should focus on a more representative sample of the population. The research data also showed that the intensity of using Social Media for online news, if you overlook the age factor, is for entertainment.

The degree of trust shown by the users a) on the Mainstream News Sites, and b) on the Social Media was also discussed. The survey revealed that users trust Mainstream News Sites (for reading online news) compared to the Social Media. This is actually related to the validity and the name of the source that determines significantly the reliability of the news content. However, a recent research by the Reuters Institute [40] demonstrated that users in UK on a regular basis search the Social Media for news. Despite this fact it is important to mention that only few people trust the Social Media as their primary source for getting information.

It is of particular interest to mention here that various development studies around the theory of uses and gratifications overemphasized the incentives of the users to watch a programme on TV or listen it to the radio. The aforementioned media were the first traditional mediums that the U&G was applied to. For example, the study of Rayburn and Palmgreen [41] demonstrates that the consumption of media content is a process closely linked to the beliefs and perceptions of the users regarding the characteristics of the media. If for example, the users believe that a medium is ideologically adjacent to a political space or specific political views, then the consumption of the media will be done by the individuals that agree with the features of this media. On the other hand, Maniou [42] states that the theory of uses and gratifications is mainly focused on the individual characteristics rather than the wider social structure. In other words - according to the author - the theory does not focus on the social influences, but on the actual behavior of the individual. The question that arises here is whether the person's attitude towards the usage of the media is a process that is actually not affected by the social, cultural context and structure.

Hence, the theory of uses and gratifications creates interesting scientific controversies where this study comes to strengthen and expand that in the area of social networks and online news. One of the key elements that arise through this study is that users "consume" the content of internet media essentially for two main reasons: firstly, to be updated and secondly to spend their free time or for entertainment. But what comes to reinforce the theory of uses and gratifications is the preference of the user as to which media the user will select to be informed and the extent to which the user trusts the media. However, this cannot be viewed unilaterally by only taking in account the behavior of the individual (user) but also the social influences, the characteristics of the medium, such as political views, the accuracy/objectivity of the information source etc.

To conclude, the theory of uses and gratifications either applied in the case of traditional media, or online media, supports that there is a plethora of

parameters that actually affect user's incentives as to the choice of the media, but also the way in which the user chooses to "consume" the media content that has elected. Hence, the user's selection is not a simple linear process but a complex spectrum that is affected by three main factors: a) the general characteristics of the user (behavioral approach), b) the characteristics of the medium, and c) social and cultural influences on both the user and the medium.

Therefore, this research is the kick start for the extension of the Uses and Gratifications theory for online news but also for the interaction of the users with online media.

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