

Online Editors Rate Web News Quality Criteria

by George Albert Gladney, Ivor Shapiro and Joseph Castaldo

A survey of online news people rated the quality of online news. Top rankings went to content criteria, such as credibility and utility, suggesting that many traditional journalism values remain paramount.

In his review of scholarly attempts to define journalistic quality and identify related attributes or criteria, both subjective and objective, Bogart observed in 2004:

American editors and journalists share a fairly broad consensus on what constitutes excellence in the press. When experienced news people are asked what makes for quality, a number of words and phrases inevitably surface: integrity, fairness, balance, accuracy, comprehensiveness, diligence of discovery, authority, breadth of coverage, variety of content, reflection of the entire home community, vivid writing, attractive makeup, packaging or appearance, and easy navigability.¹

He also added, "clear differentiation of reporting and opinion."²

Most, if not all, of the studies upon which Bogart drew his conclusion came from research related to print journalism. One can assume that many of those standards apply to the burgeoning and maturing online news genre, but because of the unique features of the Web, additional standards of quality may apply to online news sites. This is especially true as more and more newspaper Web sites are no longer content merely to reproduce or "repurpose" content of the print product (i.e., "shovelware"), instead creating original content. Bressers and Bergen observed that from the earliest days of the Web, newspapers were

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criticized "for failing to rid themselves of the 'print' mentality and, thus, failing to use the unique attributes of the new medium."³ More recently, Greer and Mensing found that online newspapers were "becoming stand-alone news products rather than supplements or advertising vehicles for their print partners."⁴ In the early going, broadcast Web sites were similarly criticized for restricting use to program promotion and failing to capitalize on the essence of the Internet medium.⁵

The present study focuses on how the essence or unique features of the new medium affect the journalistic standards by which the quality of online news sites should be measured. It asks what new standards apply and how they compare in importance with traditional print standards. First, the authors abstracted from hundreds of academic studies and trade press articles, as well as criteria and judges' comments from the many online journalism awards competitions, a comprehensive collection of the most frequently mentioned standards of quality of online news sites. The authors then did an online survey to ask news Web site editors, producers and executives how they rate the importance of each criterion. The result is a comprehensive ranking of 38 standards.

Literature Review

An early and ambitious attempt to examine newspaper quality was Merrill's 1968 study of "the great newspapers of the world." His quality indicators included independence and financial stability, integrity, social concern, good writing/editing, strong opinion and interpretive analysis, staff professionalism and intelligence, power to influence opinion leaders, expansion of readers' education and intellect, world consciousness and emphasis on politics, international relations, economics, social welfare, culture, education and science.⁶

As research director of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau in 1977, Bogart conducted a comprehensive study of what constitutes journalistic or editorial quality. The NAB study involved a mail survey in which 746 editors ranked the importance of seven subjective attributes of editorial quality and rated the importance of 23 objective criteria. The top-ranked subjective attributes were accuracy, impartiality in reporting and investigative enterprise. The top-rated objective criteria were:

- High ratio of staff-written copy to wire service and feature service copy
- Total amount of non-advertising content
- High ratio of news interpretation and backgrounders to spot news reports.⁷

Modifying the NAB study's quality attributes, a 1982 study by Burgoon, Burgoon and Atkin found that in judging news stories, journalists' top-ranked criteria were, in order: accuracy, depth, impartiality, investigative enterprise, literary style and sophistication of treatment.⁸ In a 1990 study, Lacy and Fico used seven objective criteria from the NAB study, including the three men-

tioned above, and four others: high ratio of art to text, the number of wire services, length of the average front page news story and high ratio of non-advertising content to advertising. They added an eighth: productivity of reporters (amount of copy divided by the number of bylined reporters).⁹ In a 2005 study, Kim and Meyer found that editors' ranking of criteria produced five broad categories of quality: ease of use, localism, editorial vigor, news quantity and interpretation.¹⁰

Other studies through the years have relied on subjective assessments by experts or hand-picked juries, including judges of contests such as the prestigious Pulitzer and George S. Polk awards, to evaluate the quality of newspapers and identify top papers.¹¹ Now and then publications such as *Time*, *Saturday Review*, *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Advertising Age* have attempted to rank the top papers, but the criteria for judgment were vague and, for the most part, subjective.

Using a different approach in a 1990 study, Gladney abstracted from the literature 18 standards of journalistic excellence, dividing them into nine organizational standards and nine content standards. Then he surveyed newspaper editors, asking them to rank the importance of the 18 standards. The top content category standards were, in order: strong local news coverage, accuracy, good writing, visual appeal, strong editorial page, community focus, news interpretation, lack of sensationalism and comprehensive coverage. The top-ranked organizational standards were: integrity, impartiality, editorial independence, staff enterprise, editorial courage, community leadership, staff professionalism, influence and impartiality. Gladney found that circulation size was a significant factor in the way some editors ranked some criteria.¹² Other studies have examined newspaper quality criteria in relation to circulation size,¹³ competition¹⁴ and ownership.¹⁵

Online Standards

Academic research so far has treated the subject of quality standards for online journalism in a tangential, even haphazard, manner. Although some scholarship has explored ethical standards of online journalism,¹⁶ there has been no systematic attempt to produce a comprehensive list of quality standards. The authors consulted dozens of academic studies in search of criteria of quality that most frequently appeared in the literature. These studies are too numerous to cite here, but several were especially useful. These involved an analysis of award-winning online news sites,¹⁷ a longitudinal content analysis of trends in news presentation and content, multimedia use, interactivity and potential revenue,¹⁸ online newspapers' use of Web technologies,¹⁹ conceptualization and design of news on the Web,²⁰ non-linear storytelling on the Web,²¹ comparison of online news sites across newspapers and radio and television stations,²² interactivity,²³ learning differences between Web and print²⁴ and profit consid-

erations.²⁵ Also useful was a textbook approach to news presentation on the Internet.²⁶

Online journalism awards competitions proved to be a valuable source for the authors. While there are close to a dozen such competitions, seven stood out as most relevant as sources for possible criteria of quality: Digital Edge Awards or "Edgies" (Newspaper Association of America), Online Journalism Awards (Online News Association, which administers the awards for the Annenberg School for Communication [University of Southern California] and its *Online Journalism Review*), "EPpy Awards" (*Editor & Publisher* magazine), Best of New Media Design awards, or "SNDies" (Society for News Design), Sigma Delta Chi online awards (Society of Professional Journalists and *Quill* magazine), NetMedia European Online Journalism awards and the Batten Awards (Institute for Interactive Journalism, J Lab, University of Maryland).²⁷ The authors also consulted the National Press Photographers Association's Web awards competition²⁸ and the defunct *Brill's Content* "Best of the Web" awards.²⁹

The authors also gathered from the trade press many dozens of articles related directly or indirectly to factors that determine quality of online news sites.³⁰ Most useful were the *American Journalism Review* and *Editor & Publisher* (as well as *E&P's Interactive* and *Technical* inserts).

After culling all the sources above to record criteria most often cited, the authors compiled the list of 38 criteria. The authors then developed a questionnaire for an online survey of online news site editors, producers and executives so that the criteria could be ranked in terms of perceived importance based on ratings of each item. While the main objective was to develop a comprehensive list of the most important attributes of quality for online news sites, an additional goal was to determine if some traditional standards are perceived as equally or more important than standards particular to the Web.

Research Questions

RQ1:

How do online news people rate the importance of 38 criteria of online news quality abstracted from the literature?

RQ2:

Do online news people rate any online-specific criteria of quality as being of equal or greater importance than some traditional print standards?

Method

In July 2005, the authors invited 723 editors of online news sites, all associated with newspapers and broadcast news organizations in the United States and Canada, to complete an online survey. The first part of the survey

asked respondents to rate on a seven-point Likert scale the relative importance of each of the 38 criteria (1=not important; 7=very important). These questions were grouped into six categories each with its own definition or theme: Content (a site's body of knowledge), Interactivity (opportunities for active engagement by a site's users), Look and Feel (design elements that produce a satisfying visual experience for the site's users), Navigation (a site's structure/organization of content), Functionality (a site's use of technology) and Community Relevance (a site's engagement with local or target audience needs and wants). For each of the 38 criteria, the authors assigned a one- or two-word label followed by a brief definition. To keep the number of criteria manageable for a survey, some definitions were, by necessity, multi-barreled to include several very closely related and particular characteristics or attributes that together constitute a narrow concept.

The survey's second part consisted of 17 ancillary questions related to respondents' age, gender, job title, size of editorial staff, circulation or market size of the larger (partner) organization, etc. After pre-testing by six experienced online news people, the survey was revised to reduce confusion and redundancy. Respondents were required to use unique login and password combinations provided by the authors. Four reminders—three by e-mail and a final one by traditional mail—were sent before the survey was closed in December 2005.

The sample of online editors was compiled using *Editor & Publisher International Year Book*, 2005, to identify U.S. and Canadian newspapers with circulations of 30,000 and above. Where the *Year Book* listed people responsible for online news, those people were included in the sample. Where the person's name, title and email address were not listed, this information was secured online or by telephone. A similar process using *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook*, 2005, was used to identify a sample for broadcast news sites. Finally, the authors used the Web or the phone to secure online editors' names for national TV networks. Although the number of Canadian sites was relatively small, producing only eight respondents, they were included because of the authors' mutual interest, the authors' belief that media scholars need to broaden international focus and collaboration where possible and lack of any relevant theoretical distinction between online news sites in the two countries.

The yearbook sources produced an impressive variety of titles, indicating that online news sites are still experimenting with job description nomenclature. For example, titles including the words "producer," "director" and "coordinator" were almost as frequent as the word "editor." As a result, the authors worried that invitations would reach many people who were not responsible for online news, and others who performed a broader range of duties, including business and marketing. To minimize that possibility, the authors urged addressees to forward the invitation to the appropriate person. Personnel at Web sites of smaller newspapers (30,000-49,999 circulation) and broadcast organizations not in the top 100 markets were included in the invitation list despite the authors' concern that some of these sites tend to offer little original news content. Some people may have declined to participate because they were not, in fact,

running news sites in any real sense of the term. That, along with the growing use of email filters and the sheer length of the survey instrument—55 questions—may have depressed the return rate. With that in mind, the authors were pleased to have 143 respondents complete the questionnaire, despite a disappointing return rate of 19.8 percent.

As expected, only 11.5 percent of the 121 people who worked at Web sites of newspapers with circulations less than 50,000 participated. On the other hand, at least one completed survey was received from 24.6 percent of news organizations sampled, and for larger news organizations, the response rate was even higher: 35.3 percent of U.S. newspapers with circulations of 140,000 and above, 31.5 percent of U.S. newspapers with circulations of 50,000 and above, 26.5 percent of U.S. broadcast stations with Top 25 Nielsen ratings and 80 percent of TV network sites (U.S. and Canada). The eight respondents from Canada produced a response rate of 30.8 percent and represented only 5.6 percent of total respondents.

Results

The questionnaire's demographic section showed a gender mix of 100 males and 43 females. Almost one out of three respondents was 30-39 years old (30.8 percent) and nearly another one third were 40-49 (30.1 percent); 22.3 percent were in their 50s, 14 percent in their 20s and 2.8 percent 60 or older. More than half the respondents (55.9 percent) worked primarily for the news organization rather than its Web site, while 85 (59.4 percent) were the top person in charge of the Web site's editorial operation.

Respondents' titles emphasize the distinct ways in which online news is produced. As one would expect with newsroom personnel, the most frequent noun in titles of the online respondents was "editor" (71 instances), but other nouns in titles included: "manager" (28), "producer" (26), "director" (13), "Webmaster" (8), "coordinator" (2) and miscellaneous (6). As for adjectives in titles (excluding those indicating rank, such as "senior," "assistant," "deputy" and "managing"), the most frequent examples were "online" (41), "Web/Web site" (23), "news" (15), "content" (15), "Internet" (8), "new media" (5), "multi-media" (4), "interactive" (4) and miscellaneous (4).

Credibility, followed by Utility, were top-ranked both in the content category and overall, indicating that trustworthiness and accuracy, along with the provision of "informative, useful" content, are the two highest values for online news people.

Almost all respondents were connected with the editorial side of the Web site, 76 (53.1 percent) exclusively and 64 (44.8 percent) partially. Fifty-six respondents (39.2 percent) worked partially on the business side; only one worked exclusively on the business side. About half of the respondents (49.7 percent) worked partially on the design side, but only eight (5.6 percent) worked exclusively on the design side.

Results indicated that most Web site editorial staffs are small. Almost half of the respondents (69, or 48.2 percent) said they worked on Web sites with three or fewer people on the editorial staff; while 38 or 26.6 percent said 4-10 people were on the staff and 36, or 25.2 percent, said the staff exceeded 10 people.

Regarding RQ1, Table 1 summarizes the definitions of the 38 criteria and shows how the respondents ranked their relative importance. The top 12 criteria were, in order: Credibility, Utility, Immediacy, Content Relevance, Ease of Use, Fact-Opinion Separation, Clear Paths, Simplicity, Exclusivity, Hyperlocal, Good Writing and Content Paramount. The bottom 12, starting from the bottom, were: Editorial Vigor, Outside Commentary, Cutting Edge, Quick Read, Civic/Public Discourse, Community Dialogue, Interactive Reading, User Choice/Control, Customization, Bandwidth, Digestibility

Table 1
Overall Ranking of Importance of 38 Criteria

Rank	Mean*	Criteria
1	6.62	Credibility
2	6.57	Utility
3	6.55	Immediacy
4	6.50	Relevance
5	6.46	Ease of Use
6	6.18	Fact-Opinion Separation
7	6.12	Clear Paths
8	6.03	Simplicity
9	5.94	Exclusivity
10	5.93	Hyperlocal
11	5.92	Good Writing
12	5.88	Content Paramount
13	5.80	Speed and Efficiency
14	5.78	Appropriate Design
15	5.74	Search Power
16	5.70	Good Illustration
17	5.59	Access to Editorial Staff
18	5.50	Depth
19	5.48	Marketplace of Ideas
20	5.46	User Requirements
21	5.45	Technology Relevance
22	5.43	Community Building/Service
23	5.29	Multimedia Richness
24	5.19	Familiarity
25	5.06	Citizen Participation
26	5.06	Breadth
27	5.02	Reach
28	5.01	Digestibility
29	4.94	Bandwidth
30	4.91	Customization
31	4.81	User Choice/Control
32	4.79	Interactive Reading
33	4.78	Community Dialogue
34	4.76	Civic/Public Discourse
35	4.71	Quick Read
36	4.48	Cutting Edge
37	4.45	Outside Commentary
38	3.59	Editorial Vigor

*Means are calculated from respondents' ratings of each item using seven-point Likert scale: 1=not important; 7=very important.
Note: N=143; mean of means=5.46 (sd = 0.58)

and Reach. The overall mean was 5.46 on a seven-point scale (1-7), meaning that there was a central tendency bias on the high side. That was not surprising since it is reasonable to expect that respondents would rate any valid criteria of quality as important. Note that only the very lowest of all 38 means (at 3.59) was lower than the mean of the Likert scale, 4.00, while the highest was 6.62, close to the maximum of 7.00.

The authors identified a number of criteria that, judging from the literature review, were clearly traditional standards of quality (i.e., standards found in the literature of newspaper quality and likely familiar to journalists in any medium). Likewise, the authors identified criteria that were unique to, or much more applicable to, online news sites. Some criteria did not fall unambiguously into either category.

To answer RQ2—do online news people rate any online-specific criteria of quality as being of equal or greater importance than some traditional print standards?—the researchers scrutinized the criteria ranked at the extremes of the overall ranking (the top and bottom 12). Among the 12 top-ranked criteria, the two criteria at the top of the ranking (Credibility and Utility) were clearly traditional, as were three of the other 10: Content Relevancy, Fact-Opinion Separation and Good Writing. Descriptions of the remaining seven criteria contained varying degrees of Web-specific language, but none was completely unique to the Web: Immediacy, Ease of Use, Clear Paths, Simplicity, Exclusivity, Hyperlocal and Content Paramount. Immediacy is worth separate mention since it was ranked number 3. The questionnaire defined it as relating to a site “updat[ing] breaking news frequently,” which is clearly easiest for a Web site, but every news organization is committed to disseminating the news as fast as possible, and broadcast journalists may update a big story as frequently as do online sites.

Among the 12 lowest ranked criteria, the two at the bottom—Editorial Vigor (ranked 38) and Outside Commentary (37)—are clearly traditional criteria. Of the other 10, only two criteria (Digestibility and Quick Read) were criteria that might apply to both traditional and online quality. The remaining eight were unique to Web capabilities: Reach, Bandwidth, Customization, User Choice/Control, Interactive Reading, Community Dialogue, Civic/Public Discourse and Cutting Edge.

To get a different look at results, the authors organized the 38 criteria into six broad, aggregate categories. [See Table 2] The largest category, Content, contains the largest number and proportion of traditional standards. The other five aggregate categories—Interactivity, Navigation, Look and Feel, Community Relevance and Functionality—contain mostly criteria that are Web specific. Organizing the criteria in this way allowed comparison of the aggregate mean of the Content category with the aggregate mean of each of the other five categories to see if the mostly traditional Content category was rated significantly more important than any of the five Web-focused categories.

Table 3 shows that when the aggregate means of all six categories are ranked in importance, Content is at the top, followed by Navigation, Look and Feel,

Table 2
Rankings of Importance by Aggregate Criteria

AGGREGATE WITHIN

	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>CONTENT</i>				
Credibility	1	6.62	0.63	0.05
Utility	2	6.57	0.62	0.05
Immediacy	3	6.55	0.71	0.06
Relevancy	4	6.50	0.72	0.06
Fact-Opinion Separation	5	6.18	1.16	0.10
Exclusivity	6	5.94	1.25	0.10
Good Writing	7	5.92	0.99	0.08
Good Illustration	8	5.70	1.06	0.09
Depth	9	5.50	1.21	0.10
Breadth	10	5.06	1.46	0.12
Outside Commentary	11	4.45	1.83	0.15
Editorial Vigor	12	3.59	1.69	0.14
<i>NAVIGATION</i>				
Ease of Use	1	6.46	0.83	0.07
Clear Paths	2	6.12	0.92	0.08
Speed and Efficiency	3	5.80	0.94	0.08
Familiarity	4	5.19	1.66	0.14
User Choice/Control	5	4.81	1.39	0.12
Quick Read	6	4.71	1.35	0.11
<i>LOOK AND FEEL</i>				
Simplicity	1	6.03	1.00	0.08
Content Paramount	2	5.88	1.12	0.09
Appropriate Design	3	5.78	1.12	0.09
Digestibility	4	5.01	1.39	0.12
Cutting Edge	5	4.48	1.50	0.13
<i>FUNCTIONALITY</i>				
Search Power	1	5.74	1.31	0.11
User Requirements	2	5.46	1.17	0.10
Technology Relevance	3	5.45	1.19	0.10
Reach	4	5.02	1.36	0.12
Bandwidth	5	4.94	1.46	0.12
<i>COMMUNITY RELEVANCE</i>				
Hyperlocal	1	5.93	1.31	0.12
Community Building/Service	2	5.43	1.37	0.11
Citizen Participation	3	5.06	1.48	0.12
Civic/Public Discourse	4	4.76	1.60	0.13
<i>INTERACTIVITY</i>				
Access to Editorial Staff	1	5.59	1.23	0.10
Marketplace of Ideas	2	5.48	1.28	0.11
Multimedia Richness	3	5.29	1.47	0.12
Customization	4	4.91	1.42	0.12
Interactive Reading	5	4.81	1.49	0.13
Community Dialogue	6	4.78	1.70	0.14

N=143

Note: Means obtained from range of 1=not important to 7=very important

Functionality, Community Relevance and Interactivity, in that order. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found that the overall set of differences comparing all categories against each other was significant at $p < .001$. The ANOVA, however, does not reveal which combinations are significant, so a multiple comparisons test was conducted to determine which individual pairs of means were significantly different from each other. That test found that the Content category was significantly different from the four lowest ranked categories—number 3 (Look and Feel) with $p < .05$ and numbers 4, 5 and 6 (Functionality, Community Relevance and Interactivity) with $p < .001$. The difference between the Content category and second-ranked category (Navigation) was not significant. Table 3 notes a few other pairs with differences that were statistically significant but not related to RQ2.

The authors also employed a factor analysis to better understand the data. Initially, analysis of the correlation matrix indicated no relationships too strong or too weak to pursue an exploratory factor analysis. Such an analysis, using varimax rotation, yielded one latent variable driving all six aggregate criteria. That variable had an Eigenvalue of 3.39; no other latent variable merited attention (Eigenvalue exceeding 1). Factor loadings (analogous to correlation coefficients) were substantial for all six aggregate criteria and were tightly clustered from a high of .793 for the Content category to a low of .692 for the Community Relevance category. The fact that the highest factor loading was on the Content category supports results of the ANOVA presented earlier.

The large latent variable explained 56.4 percent of the variance in the way online news people rated the importance of the 38 criteria of quality of online news sites. Unfortunately, because all six aggregate criteria loaded on the latent variable with roughly the same strength, it remains a mystery how to define or describe the one latent variable. About all that can be said is that the results seem

Table 3
Rankings of Importance by Aggregate Criteria

AGGREGATE ACROSS CATEGORY	Rank	Mean	SD	SE
1. Content	1	5.72	0.54	0.05
2. Navigation	2	5.66	0.75	0.06
3. Look and Feel	3	5.44	0.78	0.07
4. Functionality	4	5.30	0.81	0.07
5. Community Relevance	5	5.22	1.05	0.09
6. Interactivity	6	5.15	0.93	0.08
OVERALL		5.41	0.85	0.03

Note: 1-way analysis of variance found overall differences across categories significant at $p < .001$ (F value=11.46). Tukey HSD post-tests found statistical differences between categories 1 and 3 ($p > .05$) and 4, 5 and 6 ($p < .001$).

The only other significant differences were found comparing categories 2 against 4 ($p < .01$) and 5 and 6 ($p < .001$), and categories 3 against 6 ($p < .05$).

to suggest that online news people tended to rate all of the criteria as important so that distinctions among the various criteria were finely drawn. Another possibility: The latent variable has no conceptual or theoretical significance and is merely a statistical artifact.

Finally, the researchers wanted to see if any of the demographic factors appeared to influence the way respondents rated the importance of the various criteria. Independent t-tests showed that three groups of respondents—those working primarily with the larger news organizations, those whose Web site was partnered with a television station and those whose Web site was partnered with a radio station—gave a significantly higher rating of importance to criteria in the Look and Feel category. Assuming equality of variances and using the 95 percent confidence level, the first comparison was $p < .05$ and the second and third comparisons were $p < .01$. No other demographic or organizational factors mentioned earlier were found to be significant in explaining differences in how respondents rated the importance of any of the six aggregate criteria.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that by giving top ranking to the Content category, the online editors, producers and executives signaled that many traditional journalistic criteria of quality of content remain of paramount importance. Credibility, followed by Utility, were top-ranked both in the Content category and overall, indicating that trustworthiness and accuracy, along with the provision of “informative, useful” content, are the two highest values for online news people. This may mean their Web site’s credibility is a supreme concern at a time when so much content on the Web, broadly considered, is regarded as untrustworthy and inaccurate.³¹ And it may mean they believe a top-quality site should have lots of original material and provide “news you can use.” These are highly traditional viewpoints for journalists, as are other top-12 criteria in the Content category: Content Relevancy, Fact-Opinion Separation, Good Writing and Content Paramount.

Among the other top-12 criteria, many emphasize attributes that are largely Web-specific in form, but that largely reflect principles that were established in journalism well before the advent of the Internet. Similarly, the items ranked 5 through 7—Ease of Use (relating to navigation tools and how the site is organized), Clear Paths (“colors, formats do not impede content and navigation information”) and Simplicity (related to site’s interface design elements)—echo familiar concepts of newspapers’ architecture and design. Exclusivity (avoidance of merely reproducing parent content), number 9, is clearly a Web-specific idea; whereas, Hyperlocal (24/7 updating of news and information of interest to target audience), number 10, expresses traditional ideas of story selection and prominence in a way that’s achievable only on the Web.

The bottom-12 criteria provide a somewhat different picture. Four of the 12 are traditional print criteria: Editorial Vigor, Outside Commentary, Digestibil-

ity and Quick Read, although the latter is expressed differently on the Web—with the use of indices, abstracts, summaries and digests—than in print. It is interesting that the two lowest-ranked criteria appear on some lists of traditional criteria: Editorial Vigor (site takes a stand, has a voice/point of view, offers commentary / analysis separate from objective reporting), ranked 38, and Outside Commentary (broad variety of comment / opinion from outside sources, including professional pundits and readers alike), ranked 37. The authors speculate that the online news people distanced themselves from these criteria for two complementary reasons. First, they wish to differentiate themselves from blogs, where free comment holds sway over values like accuracy and verification. They view blogs as radical and a bad way to deliver journalism.³² Second, they view editorial opinion and outside commentary as being far removed from online news sites' main mission—to concentrate on content that is informative/useful (Utility, number 2) and to update breaking news frequently (Immediacy, number 3).

The other eight in the bottom 12, either explicitly or by the way they are framed in the context of online news sites, relate to attributes unique to the online world: Reach (connections with other Web sites), Bandwidth, Customization, User Choice / Control, Interactive Reading (high degree of non-linear storytelling), Community Dialogue (interaction among users), Civic / Public Discourse (user engagement through a variety of means) and Cutting Edge (innovative multimedia presentation and tools). While some evidence suggests that a site's bells and whistles figure prominently in awards for online news sites,³³ the present study suggests that the online people value substance as opposed to flash.

Overall, it is interesting that the attention of online editors apparently remains focused primarily on the traditional function of providing news and to a lesser degree on interactive discussion of issues and events. The authors were especially struck by the fact that the two lowest-scoring aggregate categories of criteria—Community Relevance and Interactivity—are precisely those that are—putatively associated with the major strengths and more revolutionary possibilities of Web news—the so-called “citizen journalism” (CitJ) or “participatory journalism”—which aim to empower ordinary citizens to interact with the news media by commenting on the news and sometimes even influencing how it is defined, selected, reported and verified.³⁴ Likewise, many have expected the Web to provide a way for news media to play a stronger, more interactive role in community issues. Not only do the two categories score lowest overall, but only one associated criterion makes the top-12 criteria. It's probably no coincidence that that particular criterion (number 10, Hyperlocal), unlike the others, refers to news being provided to communities, rather than news media listening to or talking with citizens.

All of this suggests that online news people generally are disinclined to give highest marks to criteria unique to the Web. The multiple comparisons test provides further evidence of this, as the respondents' ratings of criteria in the

aggregate Content category were significantly higher than ratings in the lowest four categories. On the other hand, it's important to note that there was no significant difference between the respondents' ratings for Content criteria as compared with Navigation criteria, indicating that—as might be expected—sites' structure and organization is seen as critical to its success in conveying content. Respondents especially valued the Navigation criteria of Ease of Use, Clear Paths and Speed and Efficiency.

The finding that respondents whose Web site was partnered with TV or radio rated the Look and Feel category significantly higher than respondents at sites partnered with newspapers is perhaps not surprising. TV and radio news practitioners know that their media, unlike print, do not easily lend themselves to lengthy, complex stories, and thus they traditionally have placed great value in message simplicity and digestibility—key criteria in the Look and Feel category.

The authors hope that future research will surmount the weaknesses of this exploratory study by obtaining a larger sample to explore further the differences between smaller organizations with underdeveloped Web sites and larger organizations with fully developed Web sites, and by refining and reducing the large number of criteria beyond the six aggregate criteria abstracted in this study. The fact that the authors were dealing with 38 criteria made clear-cut analysis especially difficult; secondary analysis of some of the data may refine an understanding of what is really important to online news people as they evaluate quality of sites.

Notes

1. Leo Bogart, "Reflections on Content Quality in Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal* 25, no. 1 (winter 2004): 40.

2. Bogart, "Reflections on Content Quality in Newspapers."

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