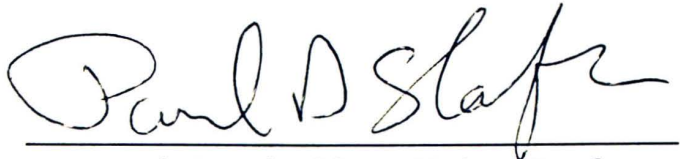# MSNBC:
A COMPARISON OF TELEVISION NEWS AND INTERNET NEWS

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I am submitting herewith a research paper written by Henry Michael Dunn entitled "MSNBC: A Comparison of Television News and Internet News." I have examined the final copy of this research paper for form and content and recomend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Art, with a major in Corporate Communications.

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MSNBC:

A COMPARISON OF TELEVISION NEWS AND INTERNET NEWS

A research project

presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Henry Michael Dunn

December 1998

Dedication

This research project is dedicated to the memory of my father, William Dunn. He taught me to work hard and never give up. While he was not physically with me during the pursuit of my degree, the memory of his love and the legacy of his wisdom guided me through the writing of this study.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my mother, Sally Dunn for her caring, understanding, and love. My brothers, Billy and Joey provided support and humor that will never be forgotten. I would also like to thank my sister-in-law Ann for her concern and interest in all of my pursuits. The support and guidance of my aunts, Dew Drop Begley and Dee Dee Dunn, will forever be greatly appreciated. I would like to express my gratitude to my uncle, Henry Bell and his family, Glenda, Scooter, and Dottie for their care and concern during this process. I would like to thank my grandmother, Elizabeth Dunn for her love and care during this time. I would like to thank Dr. Paul Shaffer for his time and patience during this project and throughout my time at Austin Peay State University. He has been an inspiration and a wealth of knowledge. I would also like to thank members of the Department of Speech, Communication, and Theater, Dr. Mike Gotcher, Dr. Patrick Jablonski, Dr. Margeret Duffy, Dr. Reece Elliott, Dr. Ellen Kanervo, Dr. David von Palko, Mr. John Mosely, and Ms. Sue Ball for their generosity and guidance. Finally, I want to thank God for giving me the ultimate tools to complete this project.

Abstract

Most cable news channels have created an Internet web site as a companion to their news programing. MSNBC is a collaboration between a leading software company, Microsoft, and a leading broadcast company, NBC. The study took place during a one week period between March 23 - 27, 1998. This study found the news content on both the web site and the cable channel were basically the same. If the story had a source then the attribution was the same for the cable channel's news show as it was for the story on the web site. There was no new or different information. The major difference between the Internet web site and the cable channel news program was the use of archival stories on the web site. There were much more related story links on the web site. This is one of the strengths of the Internet.

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Chapter I

Introduction

This study examined the emerging use of Internet web sites to disseminate news. Cable news channels are utilizing their Internet addresses to present news in a newspaper-like format. Text versions of the day's top stories are accompanied by still photographs similar to those in newspapers. The two research questions that this study answered are the following: First, is there a difference between news content on the MSNBC cable news broadcast than there is on their Internet web site? Second, is the story order the same on both media outlets?

The following definitions and terms are important to this study:

Content Provider Is the term used to define an Internet journalist.

CNN Is a 24 hour Cable News Network.

CNN Interactive Is the web site for the Cable News Network.

Generation X Is the term that applies to persons born between 1961 and 1980.

Internet Is an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world.

MSNBC Microsoft National Broadcasting Company a 24 hour

cable news network, teaming software company Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Company.

<u>World Wide Web</u> Is a part of the Internet designed to allow easier navigation of the network.

<u>User Interactivity</u> Is defined as the interaction between the viewer and the content provider. The World Wide Web allows the user to comment on the content of the site instantaneously. Interactivity may come through instant e-mail or on-line opinion polls.

<u>Down Loading</u> Is the process by which a World Wide Web page is called up on the computer of the user.

<u>Streaming Video</u> Is video that is played over the Internet.

<u>World Wide Web Site</u> Is a page on the Internet that usually combines text and graphics(pictures). The content may also contain streaming video and links to other sites.

<u>Links</u> Are highlighted text that will connect the user to another World Wide Web site or another page within the site itself.

Chapter II will examine some of the current literature available in the area of news on the Internet.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

The speed of the World Wide Web has made the distribution of news faster than it has ever been. Many television news networks are using the Internet to get late breaking news out to the public only moments after the event has occurred. Broadcast stations are turning their attention to web sites in delivering the news, because of the speed and the growing number of Internet users(Martin 1996, Shepard, 1997).

From the beginning of broadcast news there has been a race to get the news out first. Radio traditionally won the battle, because it was able to break in with news instantly. This, however, has changed over the years with radio formats that rely more on popular music than on late breaking news (Bliss, 1997). Television made great strides with its news divisions in an attempt to win the information race. Yet, even with the ever-popular breaking news flashes on television, there were still problems. The death of Great Britain's Princess Diana had the CBS Television network scrambling to find an anchor at eleven p.m. on a Saturday night. Once the anchor was found there were a number of preparations that the producers needed to make in order for a broadcast to occur. Thus,

other stations beat them to the biggest story of the year. The death of Princess Diana had many details and conditions changed instantly. The broadcast news stations were unable to report all of the information as it happened. They used their Internet site to report all of the pertinent facts and some of the background information relevant to the story (Tedesco, 1997).

As was the case with the death of Princess Diana there are many archival stories that are pertinent to the main story. Television networks have neither the time nor the ability to show all of those archival stories during their broadcast. World Wide Web sites offer the accessibility of archival footage and stories that enhance the breaking news and serve as trivia for a curious user (Berniker, 1995, Tedesco, 1997).

Clearly the Internet has come a long way since its conception in the mid 1960's. The original design of the internet was not for audio or video data, but for military text-based communications(Noack, 1997). Newspapers were the first news media able to utilize the Internet for the distribution of information. Now many papers and magazines are teaming with local and network news organizations to build on their individual strengths(Brodesser, 1997, Noack, 1997,Notess, 1997). An example of such a partnership is seen

in the teaming of Knight-Ridders Herald News Leader in Lexington, Kentucky and the Market's CBS affiliate, WKYT. This cross-media partnership allows both of the organizations to use their strengths and create a product that is superior to the competitors in that market (Brodesser, 1997, Noack, 1997). Cable News Network and Time Warner Incorporated's various magazines have become complimentary within the last two years. CNN found that its web site was being bombarded with inquiries into the O.J. Simpson trial after the verdict was announced. The hits on the World Wide Web site were so heavy that CNN had to divert some of the traffic to an alternate site using the Time Warner Pathfinder site. They were able to accommodate the browsers who were looking up background information (Berniker, 1995).

The interactivity on the news web sites is a strong selling point. CNN interactive allows the user to do more research on topics by having links to other news sources (Notess, 1996). CNN Interactive also allows users to write responses in to major stories, such as the Dick Morris scandal (Taylor, 1996). This interaction drew responses from delegates on the floor of the Democratic National Convention. A world wide web site allows a station to get nearly instantaneous feedback from the user (Taylor,

1996). This may work very well in determining the course of a follow-up and which stories get more air time on the broadcast station.

CNN is not the only major, 24 hour, all-news broadcast network to make extensive use of their web site; MSNBC is trying to revolutionize the way news is broadcast. The NBC network combined its major news operation with Microsoft's extensive computer knowledge. Combined they created a network that is both a television station and a complete news web site (Shepard, 1997). MSNBC is also creating a new hybrid of journalist who is reporting over the Internet (Shepard, 1997, Rust, 1997, Ianzito, 1996). Some of these journalists are being coined "content providers." Many journalists feel that MSNBC is creating a new form of journalism that will combine the best of print and broadcast (Ianzito, 1996). MSNBC and CNN among some others have had some problems streaming live video over their web sites (Noack, 1997). The Internet has been downloading text for many years and does so very efficiently, but streaming video is very new technology. Many users have to download upgrades to be able to have access to the live video. Some of these downloads can take up tp several hours to complete (Berniker, 1995, Noack, 1997).

One of the benefits that is growing out of the

Internet, is user interactivity. MSNBC is taking advantage of this format and lets their users design their own newscast. This allows the user to choose which story they deem most important (Danitz, 1997). The users are also able to make comments on stories and answer survey questions (Danitz, 1997, Taylor, 1996). User interaction is very important to the networks, as it will help them grow toward their target market.

The average user of the Internet web sites is described as a person from The Generation X (Danitz, 1997). Many of these users are already familiar with the World Wide Web and prefer it over the traditional broadcast news. Other networks are targeting well educated men in their forties because they make up a large percentage of Internet users (Grover, 1997). To play to the interests of the generation X users, MSNBC has employed several young journalists (Martin, 1996).

Chapter III will review in detail the method of the research into the differences and similarities in MSNBC's cable news channel and its World Wide Web site.

Chapter 3

Methodology

There are many cable television stations devoted to all day news coverage. Recently many of these stations began to utilize their Internet web sites as a tool of news distribution. This study looked at the difference in the information that is distributed on both forms of media. For the purpose of this study the flagship news program on MSNBC, The News with Brian Williams, and the network's web site were examined. The study critically scrutinized the difference in the cable channel and the web site. The areas that were studied included: the content of the news, the order of the stories, and the amount of related subject matter. This study took place over a one week period, March 23 through the 27, 1998, excluding Saturday and Sunday.

The content of a story was determined by the amount of information that is distributed via the cable station and the Internet. Each fact and detail that was reported was counted and a comparison was made between the information on the cable channel and the information given on the web site. The study looked to see if the web site went into as much or more detail than the cable network's news. The importance of this was to determine which form of media is being utilized to deliver the most information. Facts were

defined as names, dates, locations, and places. Details were defined as the reason for the story and special circumstances surrounding the event. The time that was spent on a story was also important to the study. The study looked to see if the time spent on a story was equivalent with the amount of information on the web site. It was impossible to measure the story and the amount of time for the cable news story to indicate similarities or differences. That is why the counting of details and facts was vital to the study.

This study looked at the order of the news items on the cable channel. The way that story order was determined for the study of the web site was the way it appeared on the screen. The story that first appeared on the screen was deemed the lead story. The lead story also had the most space devoted to it on what MSNBC calls the front page. Order was then ranked in descending order as it appeared on the page, first, second, third, etc. The contrast of order on the cable channel and the web site was important in determining if the web site was a repeat of the news broadcast on the cable channel, or if it was a news source unto itself.

Related subject matter was defined as stories that had a direct link to the current story. An example of this was

the school shootings in Arkansas. The study looked to see if there were any mentions or archival footage of the similar shootings in Mississippi and Kentucky on the cable channel and archival story links on the web site. This determined which form of media was better able to incorporate related stories into the breaking news. With MSNBC's coverage on the death of Great Britain's Princess Diana many visitors to the web site perused through past stories and pictures of the princess. This study also examined the difference in the amount of additional information on the web site and the cable broadcast.

The shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, occurred on the Tuesday, March 24, 1998, during the course of the study. The coverage of this event will be examined in detail. The cable channel had a reporter on the scene and offered interviews with eyewitnesses. The details of the involvement of two underage boys were revealed on both the cable channel and the Internet. The News with Brian Williams showed video from the recent shootings in Paducah, Kentucky; Stamps, Arkansas; and Pearl, Mississippi. The web site offered links to the complete stories of these other similar shootings. Both forms of media reported basically the same facts. Even the web site carried the text of the Brian Williams live interview with an expert on child

violence. The facts from this story that were considered pertinent included the ages of the boys, the number of victims, the location, and the age and sex of both the victims and the shooters. The aforementioned facts were reported on both the cable channel and the web site. As far as order of stories was concerned this story was the lead story on both The News with Brian Williams and on the web site. The other stories of the day included: further investigation into the presidential scandal, the second execution in Florida in one week, and the winners of the Academy Awards. Both forms of media offered extensive information on the previous related shootings.

In Chapter IV the results of the research will be discussed.

Chapter 4
Results and Recommendations

There were a few small differences from one form of media to the other. Story content remained basically the same. The facts that were broadcast were also written in the web site. The most significant difference was the inclusion of extra information on the web site. Extra information is the relevant news of the recent past. An example of this was seen when comedienne Phil Hartman was fatally shot. There were five links to relevant stories that included: other Saturday Night Live cast members' deaths, Hartman's career, and the fate of his current television show. There were also related topics for most of the major news stories of the day, especially those dealing with important news makers such as President Clinton.

Research Question One: Is there a difference between news content on the MSNBC cable broadcast networks and their web site?

There is a difference between the information. The web site, while offering the same information as The News with Brian Williams, also offers links to related stories.

Research Question Two: Is story order the same on both

media outlets?

There were some differences in the amount of information and number of related stories. There was virtually no difference in the order the stories were presented on the cable broadcast and the web site.

The main problems with the Internet web site and the cable channel are minor and can be improved with some work. The web site and the channel run virtually the same stories. It is as if the site is a written version of the cable broadcast. There is little reason for the viewer of The News with Brian Williams to log onto the web site for any new information. The web site needs to have news that cannot be seen on the cable broadcast. There needs to be a creation of original Internet journalism. With the promise of a new way of covering news MSNBC needs to commit to giving space for its web site to stories that are generated specifically for the Internet site. This is a new media and there can be significant advances in journalism, both broadcast and Internet, with some innovations in reporting. There are some very strong selling points to the web site. The interaction it allows with the audience is a perfect example of the strength of the Internet as a whole. There is instant feedback on stories that allows for both entities to respond to the public's desire for certain news stories.

Another strength are the links to relevant stories. These allow a browser to look at related stories from the past.

The Internet is a very powerful tool that can change the way the media is viewed. News consumers can now be a part of the news process simply by voicing an opinion through the web site. This is perhaps the most powerful advantage the Internet brings both MSNBC and the viewing public.

Future studies could be done on the interactivity of the web site and the intended consumer. Many news web sites are offering opinion polls and chat rooms to discuss important issues in the news. MSNBC airs a show entitled Newschat that encourages viewers to e-mail, call in, vote on the poll in the web site, and enter the chat room. The future of how news directors determine the importance of a story could be affected by this new interactivity.

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Vita

Henry Michael Dunn was born in Detroit, Michigan on March 1, 1970. He attended Hopkinsville Community College, where he received an Associates of Arts degree on May 15, 1994. He then attended Austin Peay State University receiving the degree of Bachelor of Science in Mass Communication in 1996. In August, 1996 he began work on his Masters of Arts degree in Corporate Communications. He received his degree in December, 1998

He is currently employed as an adjunct professor for Austin Peay State University, teaching communications courses on the Fort Campbell Center. Mr. Dunn is also a general assignment reporter for WKAG TV 43 in Hopkinsville, Kentucky.