E-newspapers: Revolution or Evolution?
Deniz Bokesoy, FIS2309, Design of Electronic Text

Abstract
This paper reviews the ongoing discussion regarding the impact of e-newspapers in modern life. New technologies allow e-newspapers to offer interactive elements to their readers that were not possible in the print medium. For some people, these innovations are revolutionary, transforming the news industry. However, during their short history, the role and the design of e-newspapers have followed closely the traditions built over the centuries by print newspapers. The paper concludes that e-newspapers have yet to define their identity, which will possibly be an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary process.

Introduction
During the last two decades e-newspapers have been cautious about drawing a clear mission regarding their role and design. In spite of their increasing use of digital technology, they have followed the traditions of print newspapers for defining their boundaries in design, purpose and use. This paper examines the progress of e-newspapers focusing on their impact on the news industry and determines if the development is a revolutionary or evolutionary process. First, their origins and growth are summarized. Then, their current position is examined with special focus on design, interactive elements and content. Finally, an overall assessment of their identity is offered to answer the question above.

A Short History of E-Newspapers
Although newspapers in electronic format first appeared in 1970s, online delivery of news emerged in the 1990s (Greer & Mensing, 2006). In these early versions, the content was text-based, and was delivered from online services such as America Online (Li, 2006). In 1994, less than 10 newspapers were available to the public through the World Wide Web. However, online newspapers demonstrated rapid growth by the end of 1990s and by mid 2001, more than 3,400 newspapers were online (Li, 2006).

The reason for this accelerated emergence of online newspapers was not only the potential offered by Internet. The profit of the newspaper industry was in decline since the end of 1980s, and the publishers were looking for new ways for their business (Bockowski, 2004). Ironically, online versions did not bring the quick profit publishers were looking for. Rather, the revenues showed a stable, but slow increase (Greer & Mensing, 2006). Nevertheless, the negative impact on the circulation of print newspapers has also been less than expected (Cao & Li, 2006).

During the first decade of online newspapers, they were seen mostly as complimentary to the print medium, often as an advertisement introducing the print newspaper as the main merchandise (Krumsvik, 2006). Gradually, as more and more newspapers appeared online, publishers felt pressured to have a web presence among their rivals (Cao & Li, 2006; Krumsvik, 2006). Today it is hard to find a newspaper in North America that does not have an online version. Additionally, an increasing number of newspapers are created online and have no print version available. Furthermore, a small number of newspapers have shifted from having both print
and online versions to online-only (Li, 2006).

As a result, the status of online newspapers is much advanced than their early days. Online versions offer faster access and more updates compared to their print counterparts (Li, 2006). They make use of various technologies such as audio, animation, graphics and video, and increasingly offer interactive elements. For example, several newspapers covered the Eurocup in June 2008 with a minute-by-minute account of the games, enriched by photographs, animation, audio and videos and offered the readers the chance to add their comments during and after the games.

The Position of E-newspapers today

Redefining the design
The history of e-newspapers has not only been short, but has been influenced by accelerated technological development. As a result, today’s e-newspapers make use of many modern technologies which give them an advantage over the print medium. Nevertheless, their design mimics print medium (Lowrey, 1999; Bockowski, 2004; Krumsvik, 2006). However, the elements behind the traditional design of print newspapers do not always make sense in the virtual world.

Lowrey (1999) summarizes the main factors of print design as headline size, dominant imagery, story placement and story length. Using these elements, the designer tells the reader how to read the paper, as these factors give clues to the reader about the importance of the news, as well as where to start and where to end reading (Lowrey, 1999). Online newspapers have been following this linear style, although it is being replaced gradually by a more interactive style, where not only the editor and the designer, but also the reader defines the relevance, importance and even the length of the news (Lowrey, 1999). One example of this shift of control to the reader is the case of hyperstories, where the length, the borders and the focus of the news story is determined by the reader through hyperlinks.

Lowrey (1999) summarizes this tendency of control shift from editors to readers as the changing role of newspaper editors from a “gatekeeper” to “pathfinder”, where the design suggests how the news could be read, rather than how it should be read.

For the publishers, there are two advantages to this approach. First, the audience of online newspapers is spread over a larger spectrum compared to the print medium, as geographic limitations do not apply in the Internet (Salaverria, 2005). That makes it more difficult for the editors and designers to decide what kind of presentation would be the best for all. Second, research shows that most traffic to the e-newspaper’s web site comes from searches rather than by the “front door” (Annual report on American Journalism, 2008). This means that for readers who are visiting the e-newspaper via links, the suggestions made by the design of the main page have less significance.

Although at a first glance this tendency of design appears to give a lot of power to the reader, the reality might be different. Even if more control might be desirable for the reader, some kind of guidance in a crowded web page might be equally necessary (Li, 2006). One way to achieve this balance between freedom and guidance is to focus on the user-friendliness of the design: it should be as simple, clear and easy to use as possible, with simple language and easy to understand icons or graphics for labelling (U.S., 2006).

While flashy elements might be an advantage to attract users to the page, they might slow the downloading time and create difficulty in the reading experience (U.S., 2006). Since reading the news is about getting useful information on time, the ability to reach the news quickly might be considered more important than the presentation.

Photos and illustrations are entry points to stories both in print and online newspapers (Lowrey, 1999). In the case of online newspapers,
the technology provides various multimedia elements such as video, animation, photos, maps as well as audio. This abundance of choices sometimes results in redundancy of content (Lowrey, 1999).

**Interactive elements and customization**

The ability to present multiple interactive elements is one of the most salient features of e-newspapers (Spyridou & Veglis, 2008). Interactivity can be broadly defined as the reader’s use of tools to control his experience with the web page, as well as send feedback. This allows many-to-many communication in a medium that has been traditionally one-to-many (Chung, 2008). Some of the most commonly used interactive elements in e-newspapers are navigation tools, forum, comments section, and chat room.

Among these elements, a distinction could be made between those that involve the reader and the interface as opposed to those that involve more than one reader. Bucy (2004) defines these two distinct kinds of interactivity as user-to-system interactivity and user-to-user interactivity. Similarly, Chung (2008) divides interactivity into human interactivity and medium interactivity. Forums and chat rooms are examples of human / user-to-user interactivity, whereas using the navigation tools is an example of medium / user-to-system interactivity. Bucy (2004) includes customization to user-to-system interactivity. Chung (2008) points to the fact that these different types of interactivity attract different types of audiences; therefore having multiple interactive elements is a good approach for newspapers.

For e-newspapers, interactive elements provide a competitive advantage by inviting readers to the page, keeping them there for a longer period of time, and making them return at a later time (Bucy, 2004). Readers, on the other hand, enjoy interactivity because of the freedom to filter the news according to their own interests and the opportunity to evaluate and give feedback on the stories, which creates a feeling of empowerment (Spyridou & Veglis, 2008). In contrast, journalists might have a different standing. According to Domingo (2008), the very basic of interactive elements which give power to the audience to voice their opinion does not fit in the basics of journalism, where the expertise is the source of reliability. Domingo’s study (2008) shows that journalists and news creators generally see participation as a problem rather than one part of the news creation.

The ability of interactive elements to give voice to ordinary people and to connect them to one another is clearly an empowering factor. However, customization, which is cherished as another empowering novelty brings some questions. Unlike user-to-user (or human) interactivity, customization as user-to-system interactivity might serve in isolating individuals rather than connecting them. Schoenbach (2007) points to the fact that the ability to select and filter the news in the way that one wishes does not necessarily empower the individual or the society. Rather, it enlarges the gap between those who are actively participating and interested in the policies and events surrounding them and those who are not.

**What about content?**

Another concern about the focus on interactivity in e-newspapers is that it is overshadowing the content. In the beginning, e-newspaper content was text-based and was a replica of the print version. Gradually, with the interactive elements coming into play, e-newspapers started to build a unique identity to gain more importance in the industry. In that sense, interactivity became a symbol of identity for e-newspapers. However, too much focus on interactive elements or technological abilities, at the expense of content quality, might lower editing standards and credibility, as emphasized by Salaverria (2005). Bocowski (2004) also discusses the emphasis of e-newspapers on technological design and the lack of focus on content.

E-newspapers have yet to find the balance between content and design. The need for more
research on how the readers use the interactive elements (Chung, 2008) also creates a barrier in finding the formula for a unique, but healthy combination.

Revolution or Evolution?
E-newspapers have often been seen as having the power to transform the news industry radically (Spyridou & Veglis, 2008). However, as summarized above, they have been hesitant for developing their unique boundaries in terms of design, technology, editing policies, and level of interaction.

What might be the reason for this cautious approach? One reason can be their starting point. According to Spyridou & Veglis (2008), newspapers were not able to articulate their mission when they first transitioned to an online format. Most e-newspapers went online as a defensive act, rather than an active approach to adapt to rapidly developing technological advances. Eventually, as web presence became a necessity to be up-to-date, many newspapers went online as there was no other option (Krumsvik, 2006).

Newspaper publishers have seen that online advertisements did not bring the revenues they had hoped for (Greer & Mensing, 2006). In the U.S., not only there is a slowdown in online ads, but there is an ongoing discussion about the effectiveness of these ads (Annual, 2008). This might be making publishers reluctant to invest more in e-newspapers.

Looking at the history and the present situation of e-newspapers, it is hard to agree with the enthusiasts who believe in the revolutionary power of e-newspapers. The changes brought by e-newspapers have not been sudden, uniform, or synchronic (Spyridou & Veglis, 2008). Salaverria (2005) draws a similarity between a human and a medium’s life, stating that just like humans, no medium starts life as an adult, and needs to mature over time. Viewing the discussion from a larger perspective by including all digital world, Grazian (2005) states that most technologies have been applauded as revolutionary in history, although their shaping and impact have always been evolutionary. Bockowski (2004) finds current position of e-newspapers similar to the beginning of book printing, where most rules were based on the traditions of oral storytelling and the technology of hand-copied manuscripts.

Conclusion
An overview of the history and current state of e-newspapers in regards to design, interactivity and content reveals that they are at the beginning of their life as a medium. In regards to their design, e-newspapers have not yet found a balance between the freedom and guidance they offer to their readers, as well as their attractiveness and ease-to-use as an online product. A similar balance is needed between the levels of interactivity and editorial quality. The ability to provide fast and easy access to news is one of their largest advantages over print medium, but it also has to be in balance with credibility and editorial quality. Only then, can e-newspapers mature and offer a unique identity of their own.

Although their use is rapidly growing, considering the multidimensional maturing process, it is reasonable to expect that their impact in the news industry will be an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary one.

Works Cited


