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# Print and digital affordances in news: Overlaps and divergence

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# The transition to digital news

Digital technology has broadly disrupted journalism and the prior industrial model

- Shift to the attention economy
- Collaboration and competition from big tech platforms
- Demolition of previous advertising/audience subsidy

News media have shifted from a pursuit of an advertising-only approach  
Subscriptions and membership strategies are now ascendant

- Local media has struggled to find sustainability in subscriptions
- In the U.S., The New York Times and Washington Post capture 50%
- Engagement with (and perceived value in) most news sites remains low

Initial Questions:

- The value of news is in learning / understanding.
- That may be complicated in digital.
- What inherent or designed factors of the user experience might be relevant?

# Goals of the study

We used Gibson's conceptualization of affordances to examine print and digital news experiences

- How do readers perceive medium attributes?
- How do readers utilize affordances in their consumption of news?
- How do affordances differ between print and digital?

Further applied Dervin's work on sense-making to consider information processing

- Are affordances implicated in 'understanding' the news?
- Which affordances are most salient?
- Can 'understanding' be improved with more intentional design?

# Affordances in news

Two completed studies - print and digital news readers  
Three categories of affordances: physical, perceived and relational. (Gibson)

## **Print affordances**

Physical: wayfinding, materiality, retrievability  
Perceived: importance, aesthetics and completeness  
Relational: genre, trustability, browsability and serendipity

## **Digital affordances**

Physical: hypertextuality and retrievability  
Perceived: importance, immediacy and trustability  
Relational: convenience, genre, control and interactivity

# Alignment and divergence

Comparing the use and effect between mediums is challenging  
Print and digital affordances may and often do:

- Have the same use and form
- Have the same use but different form
- Have a different form but analogous use
- Be present but more difficult to conceptualize

The inventory is still incomplete and under-explicated in our study

# Genre

The collection of coverage on a given topic into categories to assist discovery

## **In print**

Well-established standards (News, Opinion, Business, Sports, Comics)

Typically separated by page or section

Prominent labeling and design treatments for differentiation

## **In digital**

Same categories - but no 'physical' structure

Labeling is less prominent

Stories are discovered via off-site referrals (social, search)

Design treatments are often uniform across categories

As a result, reader confusion is heightened in digital.

Many examples of 'Opinion' columns being mistaken for 'News' online.

# Retrievability

The label and need/use are the same across platforms.

## **But in print**

- Requires access to physical edition
- The search set is relatively constrained
- Mental model for recall more accessible

## **In digital**

- Requires sometimes significant cognitive effort
- Bookmarking, keyword searching...
- Finding the link at original discovery point (social)
- Finding the article still promoted on the news site

# Serendipity

The label and need/use are the same across platforms.

## **But in print**

- Edition is specifically curated for relevance
- Again, the search set is relatively constrained

## **In digital**

- Possibilities for discovery/relevance are unlimited
- But, news relevance is by definition limited and idiosyncratic
- News discovery channels online are tuned for distraction not news relevance

# Conclusion

- The evolution of news production in print provided systemic cognitive support for understanding
- The transition to digital distribution overlooked these intrinsic features
- Affordances are a useful theoretical tool to explore the attenuation of cognitive support from print to digital
- We are creating an inventory of the most relevant affordances and identifying print/digital gaps
- This can be used to inform industry practice and develop digital sites/apps that better support reader needs