

# Changing Habits?

## Swedish Readers in Transition

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### **Abstract**

*During the first decade with news on the Internet, the daily newspaper has been declared dead several times. This has happened to almost all “old” media at the time of introduction of a new in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But very little has actually happened. Media use is clearly connected to, and part of, every day practices, which do not change at the same pace as the development on the media market. This study shows on stability in use of the large, traditional news media in Sweden. At the same time, we can see established habits for online news. In a smaller group of persons who have been online for many years, and who have a great interest in daily news, the newspaper reading has declined significantly between the years 1998 and 2004. During the same period of time, these persons have increased their frequent use of online news.*

## Changing habits? Swedish readers in transition

Every time a new medium occurs there is fear for what will happen to the old ones (Gunter 2003:35ff, Burnett & Marshall 2003:152ff). For ten years now, different voices at different times have predicted the death of the daily newspaper in Sweden due to news sites. We know, this far it did not happen. But since we all still have 24 hours a day for all sorts of practices, sooner or later new media has to leave trace. I will show in this paper that there are certain limited groups in which newspaper reading has declined to the benefit of online news.

In the research tradition where this study is carried out, one usually talks about news in the sense of media content which focuses current economical, political and social development in society. This somehow narrow definition of news is to a large extent influenced by political science, and has a clear connection to the content presented in traditional news media. It has been easy to recognize news on radio, television and in newspapers. Online, there are no broadcasting times or dead lines. But it seems, though, that news providers tend to copy characteristics of traditional media in order to resemble those. The daily newspaper seems to be the most used model for Swedish news sites (Ihlström 2004:53ff).

Sweden has a strong newspaper market *and* a strong, fast Internet development. Studies also show that newspapers and the Internet are used in similar ways (Schweiger 2005). This makes it interesting to examine how two strong media with partly similar news content relate to each other in a competitive/complementary perspective, which is the aim of this study. The research questions are: *Does use of online news sites affect newspaper reading? How has the relationship between the two developed over the last years and in different groups?*

The paper starts with a note on newspaper reading in Sweden in a comparative perspective and some notes on news sites. Then follows a theoretical frame on changing media habits. Data collection methods are described and discussed before results on news habits in print and on the screen are presented.

### Newspapers and news sites in Sweden

In order to understand news habits and to analyse change, one needs to know more about newspaper reading in Sweden. Some basic knowledge on the development of Swedish news sites are important as well. Both are outlined in the following section.

The Swedish newspaper market has by tradition been very strong. To measure strength, the number of sold newspapers per 1000 inhabitants is a traditional indicator. The total circulation of dailies in Sweden is about 425 copies per 1000 inhabitants. Together with Norway and Finland, Sweden is among top-three in Europe. The more south you travel Europe, the lower level of newspaper circulation (World Press Trends 2004).

Some factors are differential for northern Europe, and especially the Nordic countries (Hallin & Mancini 2004:89ff; Weibull 2005:19ff). Up north, the newspaper market is more differentiated. Newspapers with different content profiles are distributed in different geographic areas: local, regional and national. All papers, with the exception of four tabloids, are published in the morning, and almost 100 percent are sold via subscription with early morning home delivery, which is highly regarded by the readers. The northern European newspaper companies are, thanks to this, closer to the market than their colleagues southwards. The strong reader market also leads to a strong advertising market. This strengthens the conditions for editorial development and improvements of the service level, which in turn strengthen the reader market even more.

Reading habits follow circulation patterns. In countries with high circulation, reading habits are more widely spread, and differences between different groups in society are smaller than in countries where newspaper reading is not so spread. Almost 90 percent of the Swedish adult population read a newspaper on regular basis. The reader market is strong compared to for instance Portugal or Italy, where a bit less than 40 percent are frequent readers (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

The strength of the newspaper market can be explained on basis of different social, economical and political conditions. Northern Europe has, traditionally, a strong reading culture, while oral culture is stronger southwards. Up north there is a large homogeneity both when it comes to population and language, which is an advantage for the newspaper market. Economically, the daily press has developed and spread faster in countries which are among the first industrialized and urbanized. In countries where newspapers are seen as important for the development in society, the press also has a stronger position.

Since about 10 years, many Swedish newspapers publish content on the Internet. The development of news sites is associated with the general diffusion and use of the Internet. Sweden is one of the top 10 countries in the world when it comes to both access and use. The Nordic countries, the United States and some northern European countries are in the same phase, while countries in the third world can be considered as laggards to using Rogers terminology (Rogers 1995; [www.nua.com/surveys/how\\_many\\_online](http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online)).

News organizations have had different objectives for establishing Web sites. Initially, in the mid 1990s, there was a great deal of experimentation with content, access tariffs etc. Many media companies wanted to go online because everyone else did (Gunter 2003:42ff, Rasmussen 2002:33ff, van Düsselndorp 1998:11ff). In Sweden, the most used news sites are those provided by newspaper companies, and both form and content resemble the printed daily (Bergström 2005a:135ff).

There are a handful of arguments that point to the fact that parts of the Internet, like the daily news sites, can be compared to traditional news media. But there are also differences. On the Internet, all content is digital. Theoretically, all computer-based media can provide any digitally produced content. Radio news occurs in computers, newspapers in cell phones. It is no longer clear where boundary between media or forms for communication is (Fidler 1997:31ff, Thompson 1995:81ff). The Web emphasizes new form of news (Burnett & Marshall 2003:152ff). Where printed papers are reduced to fit a certain amount of available sides, and television news broadcast for example 30 minutes, the news sites can provide the audience with an endless content.

Along with new technology come increased possibilities for both newsmakers and the audience. The user can interact with the news provider immediately, sending comments on articles etc. But technology and interactivity also means that anyone can be a news provider. An example is the blog Web site, which is a feedback system where individuals publish personal news. Ordinary citizens can become content providers in their own right (Gillmor 2004:236ff; Gunter 2003:167ff). Early research shows that we usually considered ourselves as receivers in the first place though, going online looking for packaged content ready to consume (Roscoe 1999).

The maybe most appreciated facility with news sites is that they publish round the clock. Compared to newspaper reading, a primary activity which takes about 30 minutes a day, news sites on the Internet are checked in short and quick sessions of use all over the day (Bergström 2005a:139ff). This immediacy is maybe what most clearly distinguishes online news from news in traditional print media (Gunter 2003:68ff). Thanks to the digital format and technical solutions for reading digital content, one need not be in a certain place at a certain time to take part of news. Just like the printed paper, but continuously updated. This development makes possible new kinds of media use, and therefore also changes in well-established habits (Castells 1996:337ff; Thompson 1995:18ff).

When it comes to news sites, I would say that the Internet is a mass medium just as the printed newspaper. It has many facilities, which resemble other mass distributed news

media in combination with new possibilities on use and participation. But it is important to keep in mind that the Internet also must be looked upon as a technique for face-to-face communication, for private mail distribution and personal diary writing.

Since the Internet news sites resemble the newspapers more than broadcasting news, these are the two most obvious competitors on the Swedish news market in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With a strong newspaper market and with the largest news sites deriving from well-known newspaper companies, in a country with great potential for Internet use, one should expect two strong competitors in the battle of the audience.

### **Media competition and changing habits**

To be able to understand the impact of new media on news habits, one needs to know some about when and why news media are used and in which aspects they compete. Even though the media system and the amount of available content in different media have increased enormously the last decades, our habits have not changed to the same extent. The average adult Swede spends a little less than six hours a day on media use, and this has only increased slightly within 25 years (Mediebarometern 2005). The use of news media, and a possible change of habits can be looked at from different perspectives. The turn to a new medium or not, is about function (“why”) and about time available in combination with habits and daily practises.

The “why-question” of media use has been thoroughly investigated, above all within the Uses & Gratifications research tradition. One distinction has been made between content gratifications or instrumental use on one hand, and process gratifications or ritualized use on the other (Rubin 1984). Instrumental use is intentional and exposure is selective to a specific content. Ritualized use is associated with habit, and related to medium rather than content. Different motives lead to the selection and use of news media and than the choice is evaluated. It might be that online news offer added value in comparison to traditional news media, when looked at from a motives and gratifications point of view.

Generally speaking, old media do not disappear when new media occurs, but motives for use, and functions change with media development (Fidler 1997:31ff, Becker & Schönbach 1989:1ff). Due to Becker & Schönbach this could be seen already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when newspaper circulation increased. The newspapers changed functions for oral story telling and letter writing. When radio entered our homes some centuries later, the topicality function of the press changed. When radio took the role of updating 24 hours a day, newspapers turned more to feature and reports.

When broadcasting television started in Sweden 1956, it had some effects on radio listening quite immediately. People changed from evening listening to daytime use. This also affected the way in which one listened. Radio more and more turned out to be a medium for background use (Höijer 1998:221f). Not only because of the day time listening, but also thanks to increased mobility for radio sets due to the transistor technique (Moore 1993:75ff). By the time of a second television channel in the late 1960s, audience patterns changed once more. People tended to avoid different kind of information content to a higher degree, to the benefit of for example film and entertainment (Kjellmor et al 1969).

There is research showing more specifically how different media are interchangeable depending on different motives and needs. The best substitute for radio appeared to be television and newspapers. Newspapers could best be exchanged with radio and books, and books with newspapers. These in some way contradictory results might depend on that media functions differ due to some criterion: printed or electronic, receiver conditions – watching, listening or reading, and content – for example information or pleasure (Katz et al. 1973). To keep the audience, different media has developed specific qualities over the years (Becker & Schönbach 1989; Fidler 1997).

We know that media use is strongly connected to the time available for the individual. At different stages in life, we have certain amounts of time during the day when it is possible to use news media. The stable patterns mentioned above, show us that media use is well integrated into daily practices. And common practices like working, caring for family, sleeping and eating do not change at the same pace as the media system development.

Changes occur within each medium though. An expanding range of content leads to fragmentation of the audiences. The amount of attention paid to different media is roughly the same, but is becoming more widely spread over media sources (Mediebarometern 2005). In combination with fragmentation, we also see that media use is becoming more and more individualized. The multiplication of channels undermines the unity, which is the stage in which most developed countries are today (McQuail 2005:336ff). In the online environment, the news are fragmented. Internet can provide far greater amount of information than is normally available via traditional news media.

Needs and motives also affects the time for use. Since media use is well established in daily practices, there is really not much space for changes. But if a new medium can satisfy needs, which the old ones cannot, there might be some changes. When studying media use, one can either measure reach or reading habits – recency of frequency (Langschmidt 1982; Tennstädt & Hansen 1982). For newspaper reading, there is a strong correlation between read-

ing habits and the actual reading on a certain day. These different measures appear to be more problematic for online news sites, where the differences between digitally measured site traffic and visiting frequency is greater. The amount of unique visitors on a site is usually larger than audience levels in frequency measurements, which might in some cases point to greater changes in old and new media than existing ones (Bergström 2005a:57ff).

Needs and motives for using new media techniques differ some when comparing different groups of the population, as is shown in for example the diffusion theory (Rogers 1995). Some groups in a society are always more anxious than others on getting in touch with new techniques. These so called *innovators* actively seek the new, which is often associated with fashion and trend setting, and the innovators are therefore mostly young (Rogers 1995:263ff). The technological novelty is of great importance among the first users, something which became very clear already by the time of the introduction of radio (Moore 1993:77). The next group is, due to this categorizing, the *early adopters*. Since techniques often are relatively expensive, and also demand a certain amount of knowledge, the early adopters usually are well educated and well situated. Therefore, one should expect some groups to be more anxious on using the Internet and its content.

A hypothesis is that news on the Internet, because of its independence of time and space, creates needs on updating. This might in turn lead to changed news habits in groups that are more keen on using the Internet. Since the printed newspaper is the news media that resembles news on the Internet the most, we should expect the greatest change in newspaper reading. Historic data shows only slight changes in media habits even in periods of expanding media markets. Therefore one should not expect reading habits to change quickly.

### **Methodological discussion and data collection**

The analysis is based on a survey questionnaire. The survey was conducted within the framework of a national mail survey – the national SOM<sup>1</sup> – between the years 1986 and 2004, and the years 1998-2004 are mostly used in this analysis. Each year 6000 persons aged 15-85 years living in Sweden received the survey. The answering frequency is on average 65%, divided almost in the same way as the Swedish population on age, gender, social class, education etc. This gives us a statistically significant material and possibilities to see patterns and change in the whole population as well as in smaller groups over a period of 25 years.

This study is focused on the use of different news channels, mainly morning (broadsheet) and evening (tabloid) newspapers, but also broadcasting news like the Ekot national radio news report, local radio news on channel P4, national as well as regional news television

programs on public service channel SVT and the commercial television channel TV4. News online is defined as certain news sites on the Internet. The names of these sites have varied somewhat over time, but most of them are the Web versions of the large daily newspapers as well as individual radio and television channels.

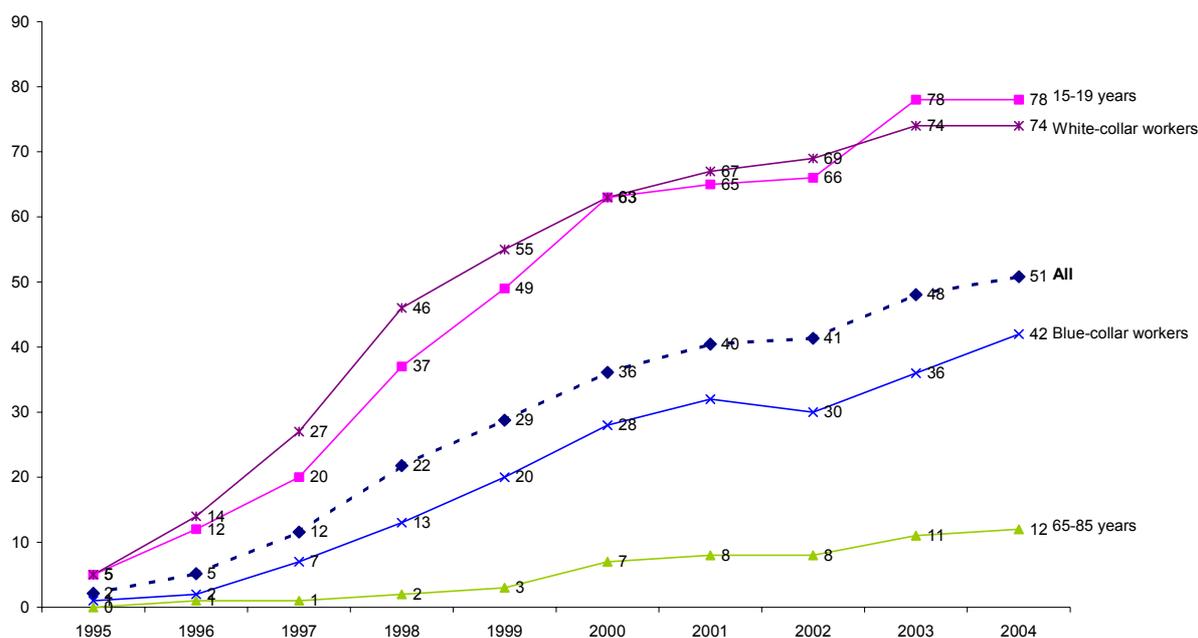
Respondents in the survey are asked about their newspaper readership, their viewing/listening of television and radio news and their use of individual news sites. In addition, certain survey years have included questions about when one uses the Internet, if they believe that their news consumption has increased or decreased as a result of Internet, how long they have been using the Internet and their views about the Internet as a news provider.

Since the SOM-survey is carried out each year since 1986, it allows us to analyse news habits before and after the Internet was introduced to a larger audience. The collected data offers unique possibilities to study news media habits in a period of time when the Swedish media system changed in above all the radio and television broadcasting, and in the digital news area.

### **Using news on the Internet**

Using news sites on the Web presupposes that you have access to the Internet, and that you use it. Around 75 percent of the adult population has access at home (Swedish Trends 2005:30). Half of the Swedish population uses the Internet several times a week (fig. 1). There are great differences in Internet use due to above all age. Only about 10 percent of the oldest part of the Swedish population are Internet users, compared to about 80 percent among the youngest in the survey. There is also big discrepancy due to social class. The Internet users are almost twice as many among white-collar workers as among blue collar workers. We have had these differences since the mid 1990s and they are hardly decreasing in the period of time for this study.

**Fig. 1** Internet use several times a week 1995-2004 (percent of the population)

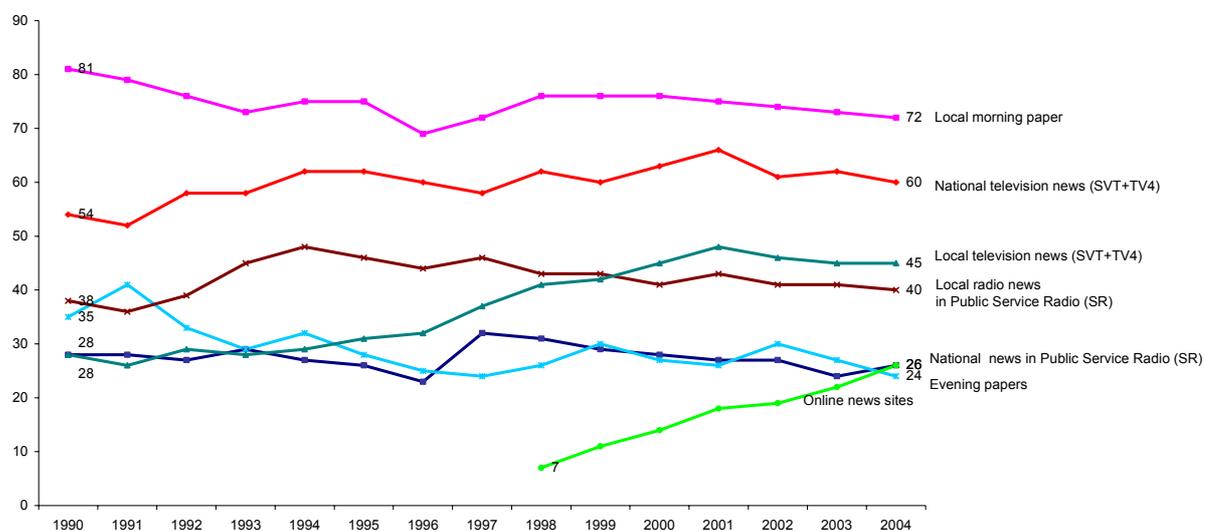


Source: The national SOM-survey 1995-2004.

Internet use takes place for different purposes. The most common reasons to go online are to handle e-mail and to do general information seeking (Bergström 2005a:77ff; Findahl 2004; Internetbarometern 2004). About one third of the adult population say that one of their main purposes for Internet use is visiting different news sites. This means there is quite a large potential for an online news audience.

Altogether, around 25 percent of the Swedish adult population visits news sites frequently (i.e. three days a week or more). This share has increased every year over the last eight years, and online news is well established among Swedes. Compared to other news media, online news is quite small though (fig. 2). Most widely spread among the large news media in Sweden is the local morning paper, which reaches almost 75 percent of the adult population. National television news has a somewhat smaller audience, but still reaches almost two thirds of the adult population several days a week. Local radio and television news are less spread, but still gather almost 50 percent of the population on a regularly basis.

**Fig. 2** Frequent use of different news media in Sweden, 1990-2004 (percent of the population 15-85 years)



**Comment:** Frequent means at least 5 days a week except for evening paper and online news where at least 3 days a week is intended. In 1994 the new commercial TV-channel TV4 started their news programs. The increase for local television news in 1997 is due to changed broadcasting time. The increase for national radio news the same year depends on a change in questionnaire construction.

**Source:** The national SOM-survey 1990-2004.

As for all media and news use, there are differences when comparing different groups of the population. For all traditional news channels in this study, use increases with age. This is most striking when it comes to local broadcasting news, but also significant for national news in radio and television. There are age differences for daily newspapers as well, but these are smaller. One can also find some differences in use due to social class and education level, especially for newspapers and national radio news, where higher educated are more likely to consume news content. The opposite pattern is found for local broadcasting news, while no significant differences are found for national television news (Bergström 2005b).

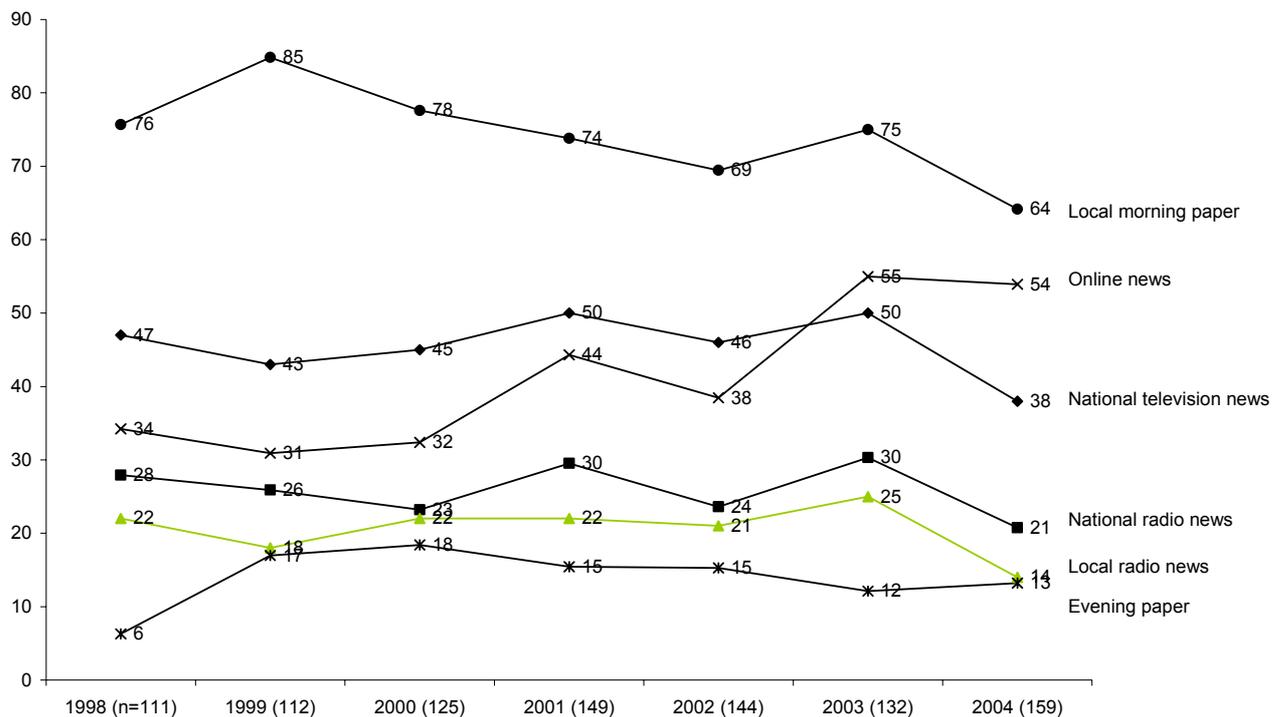
Online news shows somewhat different consuming patterns. Young and highly educated persons are the most frequent users of online news. The results are opposite to those of reading printed newspapers. The online news visitor very much resembles the general Internet user, and Internet use also turns out to be the most important single factor explaining use of online news (Bergström 2005a:193ff).

### **Changing habits?**

It is likely that changes in news habits take place within certain groups. To see if there is any change, one has to analyse the development in groups of people who has been online for a while, who has more interest for news on the Web. Groups which are likely to be most eager and interested in the new news provider, and therefore more likely to establish online news habits.

In this study, such a group consists of white-collar persons aged 20 to 39 years, using the Internet several times a week. A group which resembles what Rogers call innovators (Rogers 1995). As shown in fig. 3, audience sizes decreases for all analysed traditional news media in this particular group. National television and radio broadcast news not until the last two years though, and evening paper not significantly. But one change is statistically significant in these figures: the decrease in morning paper reading. Morning paper is still the most spread news medium among younger, white collar Internet users, but the percentage difference between morning paper and online news has decreased from 42 percentage points to 10 over seven years.

**Fig. 3 Regularly use of different news media among white collar persons aged 20-39 years, who uses the Internet several times a week (percent)**



**Comment:** Regularly means at least 5 days a week except for evening paper and online news where at least 3 days a week is intended.

**Source:** The national SOM-survey 1998-2004.

When an innovation is accepted like the online news, and when diffusion started, it is likely that the majority will follow the innovators and the early majority (Rogers 1995). Since we know that diffusion among older people is a very slow process, it is not likely that the online news will take over newspaper reading in the average population in a short time perspective. It is also important to keep in mind that technology might shift again and that we probably will see other carriers of news becoming large from an audience perspective. Even though the news service in the cell phones are not yet demanded to a great extent, we will probably see an increased use with development of techniques and content along with an increased audience interest for the necessary receiving technique. We might, once more in history, make the wrong prediction, but considering this, there is no reason to believe that we will abandon mobile, wireless news transmission, maybe just find other techniques for it.

## Conclusion

After one decade with the Internet in Swedish households, the audience has above all transferred the reading competence from the daily newspaper, when establishing use of online news. They are used in similar ways. The front page in the hard-copy paper and the home pages on the news site are menus from which one can choose content on the basis of interest. This is even clearer on the Internet news sites. The development of the news audience continuously checking what's up, will probably be reinforced when Internet becomes even more mobile and when improved transmission and receiving technique opens up for new possibilities like pictures and news film.

In one way the competition between online news and hard-copy papers is limited when it comes to function and use. Different functions like background-reading vs. checking, leads to different time and space in use, which also affects the amount of time spent on each medium. The competition is rather that of updating, where the news sites online uninterruptedly can provide the user with new information, compared to the hard-copy paper, which updates once every 24 hours.

It is hard to say if and when the online news actually replaces the printed daily. When measuring reach, you see hardly any changes at all. But when measuring habits – frequency – newspaper reading decline and use of online news increases. In certain groups, there are probably factors like changing daily practices, increasing costs and a high pace of living that makes online news an interesting alternative, to the expense of the printed daily.

Due to convergence in format and content, it is getting harder to separate the news distributors from each other. In the Swedish case, it has been rather easy to separate news channels from each other thanks to distribution technique, content and form. In new media forms all the formats appear in the same technical transmission. The audience can consume content through computers like cell phones, lap tops etc. regardless of the senders intention. This might affect the use of traditional distribution forms and traditional media, but probably not the need for, and the use of daily news content. But it might not be possible to talk about newspapers, television and radio news or news sites online, but about news from certain providers, like the CNN, New York Times or Der Spiegel which are consumed in a variety of old and new digital distribution techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> The SOM Institute at Göteborg University, founded in 1986, conducts interdisciplinary research and organizes seminars on the topics of Society, Opinion and Media. The Institute is jointly managed by the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, the Department of Political Science and the School of Public Administration at Göteborg University (see [www.som.gu.se](http://www.som.gu.se)).