Incidental Exposure to Online News

Synthesis Lectures on Information Concepts, Retrieval, and Services

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Incidental Exposure to Online News

Borchuluun Yadamsuren
Columbia College, Columbia, Missouri
Sanda Erdelez
School of Information Science and Learning Technologies
University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri

SYNTHESIS LECTURES ON INFORMATION CONCEPTS, RETRIEVAL, AND SERVICES #54

ABSTRACT

Rapid technological changes and availability of news anywhere and at any moment have changed how people seek out news. Increasingly, consumers no longer take deliberate actions to read the news, instead stumbling upon news online. While the emergence of serendipitous news discovery online has been recognized in the literature, there is a limited understanding about how people experience this behavior. Based on the mixed method study that investigated online news reading behavior of residents in a Midwestern U.S. town, we explore how people accidentally discover news when engaged in various online activities. Employing the grounded theory approach, we define Incidental Exposure to Online News (IEON) as individual's memorable experiences of chance encounters with interesting, useful, or surprising news while using the Internet for news browsing or for non-news-related online activities, such as checking email or visiting social networking sites. The book presents a conceptual framework of IEON that advances research and an understanding of serendipitous news discovery from people's holistic experiences of news consumption in their everyday lives. The proposed IEON Process Model identifies key steps in an IEON experience that could help news reporters and developers of online news platforms create innovative storytelling and design strategies to catch consumers' attention during their online activities. Finally, this book raises important methodological questions for further investigation: how should serendipitous news discovery be studied, measured, and observed, and what are the essential elements that differentiate this behavior from other types of online news consumption and information behaviors?

KEYWORDS

incidental exposure to news, serendipitous news discovery, information encountering, news encountering, serendipity, online news, news consumption, news reading behavior

Dedicated to our parents and families

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Preface

The function of news is to orient man and society in an actual world (Park, 1940).

The impetus for this book started when Dr. Borchuluun Yadamsuren (the first author) became fascinated with the concept of *information encountering* (IE) while taking a seminar by Dr. Sanda Erdelez (the co-author) entitled Human Information Behavior, at the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies at the University of Missouri. Later, Dr. Yadamsuren came across an article on incidental exposure to news in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*. This experience sparked the idea to conduct her dissertation research on the interesting and emerging topic of serendipity and online news consumption, applying IE, as a conceptual framework.

This book presents outcomes of an ongoing, multiyear research program, the scope of which reaches far beyond a dissertation study alone. Numerous discussions about incidental exposure to news with scholars in information science and mass communication as well as everyday people, online news consumers, have helped us rethink and rediscover different dimensions of the collected data. Two quantifications of the process of re-analysis included returning to over 300 pages of interview transcripts and multiple replays of close to 25 hours of recorded sessions.

This process has continually reinforced the complexity of the research topic. Chief among the many challenges associated with this complexity has been the pursuit of understanding on two phenomena that are fast developing and (almost) impossible to catch up with: news and technology. As Park (1940) wrote, news itself is a "very perishable commodity."

> *News remains news only when it has reached the persons for whom it has "news interest." Once published and its significance recognized, what was news becomes history. This transient and ephemeral quality is of the very essence of news and is intimately connected with every other character that it exhibits. Different types of news have a different time span. In its most elementary form a news report is a mere "flash," announcing that an event has happened. If the event proves of real importance, interest in it will lead to further inquiry and to a more complete acquaintance with the attendant circumstances. An event ceases to be news, however, as soon as the tension it aroused has ceased and public attention has been directed to some other*

> *aspect of the habitat or to some other incident sufficiently novel, exciting, or important to hold its attention* (p. 670).

In this sense, we grappled with the "transient and ephemeral" nature of news in our investigation of serendipitous news discovery. Many news stories reported by our respondents as a part of their incidental exposure to online news (IEON) experience are already historical references, flash announcements of certain important events during the time of data collection and interview sessions. Still, we believe that those news stories, historical as they inherently and inevitably become, could enrich our understanding of the principles of IEON behavior when we direct our attention to the nature of a news story, the event covered in it, and the attention-grabbing elements that led readers to incidental exposure.

The second challenge in our investigation of IEON was the ever-changing technologies for both news delivery and news consumption. The study presented here reflects IEON and online news consumption behavior involving the technologies available during the data collection period, which was prior to the recent explosion in the use of tablets and other smart devices. However, we argue that the general patterns of behaviors identified in the IEON process model, as presented in this book, are independent of the types of mobile digital devices. While specific strategies and tools to capture, share, and save the encountered news stories could be different based on the specific device in use, the main focus is on identifying the IEON and its process steps to inform the development of innovative tools that enable news consumers to benefit from serendipitous news discovery.

Finally, this book is an attempt to present a conceptual framework that identifies and investigates IEON based on study data that captured only a slice of everyday online news consumption and the IEON experiences of residents in an American Midwestern college town. Such slices will undoubtedly differ by community, culture, and country, depending on numerous factors, such as lifestyle, media system, technology penetration, and so on. We leave the exploration of this territory for future research.

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Sanda Erdelez is grateful to the University of Missouri Mizzou Advantage strategic initiative for awarding two grants to her research group on Opportunistic Discovery of Information. These grants provided funding for her ongoing research on IE and also supported the research activities presented in this book. She is thankful to her daughter Eva Petakovic for providing editorial help and also grateful to her numerous students and colleagues from all around the world for promoting interest in the role of serendipity in human information behavior.