

Review of: "The Internet and Local News and Information," by Mark Cooper

Reviewer: Steve Wildman, Michigan State University

In remanding portions of the 2003 Report and Order on Media Ownership to the Commission for reconsideration, the *Prometheus* Court criticized the Order's analysis supporting the proposed diversity index for including the internet in the index without determining whether the websites internet users turned to for news were independent of offline media sources of news. The Court cited evidence that online services most relied on by internet users for the most part were online extensions of traditional media enterprises operating in local markets. As such, they should not be considered independent voices.

Two surveys of media use designed by the Consumer Federation of America and Consumers Union (CFACU) that were administered in 2004 and 2006 by Opinion Research Corporation included questions intended provided information on the extent to which citizens rely on internet sources for news and information about both national and local affairs and whether internet sources accessed for this purpose were independent of traditional offline media news sources. In this paper, Dr. Mark Cooper reports and discusses the results from this portion of the survey. He also discusses findings from surveys conducted by other organizations that also asked questions about use of online sources of news.

The findings of the two CFACU surveys strongly support the Court's argument that the online news sources accessed by internet users are overwhelmingly online extensions of the offline operations of traditional media enterprises. Relatively small fractions of survey respondents reported internet sources as their first or second most used sources for national news and information and less than five percent of respondents reported reliance on internet sources for local news and information. (This was calculated as a percentage of answers to a most used news source question. If most used and second most uses are totaled, the internet's percentage increases to 10 percent.) In addition, survey respondents who reported frequent use of the internet for either type of news were found to overwhelmingly utilize the web services provided by providers of traditional offline media services, and of these, websites maintained by newspapers and television services were clearly dominant. These findings are shown to be similar to findings from a survey with similar questions conducted by Pew. The survey methodology is also similar to that employed by Pew in its surveys for a number of years. Were it not for the discussion of the impact of the order in which questions were asked on the nature of the responses to key questions beginning on page 145, I would find little to criticize in this paper devoted to presentation and discussion of the internet-specific findings of the CFACU surveys. This is the type of information the Commission should be seeking to determine the extent to which the availability of internet sources should be reflected in the design of local ownership policies. However, the problems with the material in question do raise questions about the rest.

In a section of the paper titled "A Note on Wording and Sequencing of the Source and Internet Questions," Dr. Cooper notes that the results reported were from a survey in which participants were asked what sources they relied on for national and international

news and information before they were asked what sources they utilized for local news and information. To test for the possibility that asking about national and international news sources first might influence the responses to the local news and information sources questions, CFACU also “asked the questions in a different way one [sic] a different date of another national random sample survey.” (p. 146) As the quoted passage might indicate, this section appears to have been composed in some haste and edited lightly, which may account for apparent inconsistencies in textual claims and evidence presented in Exhibits 10 and 11. The ways in which the second set of survey questions differed from the first are described as follows. “We did not ask the national/international questions first, we asked only those who said they went online for news (as opposed to everyone who has the Internet) and we included the aggregators in the list of web sites that were visited.” The findings presented in the table that is Exhibit 10 are then described. “The respondents move in the direction that would be expected (see Exhibit 10). Without being asked about national and international news and information first, more respondents say they go to national sites for local news.” (p. 146)

The implication of “sites” in the last sentence quoted is that the summary of survey responses reported in Exhibit 10 relates to websites respondents visited to get local news. The title of the table, however, begins “Major Sources of News” and the list of sources has the internet as its own category, along with local TV, national TV, national daily, local daily, local weekly and radio. Clearly what is being reported is a comparison of responses to two sets of questions relating to all sources for local news, not just those that are internet-based. By itself, this undoubtedly inadvertent discrepancy between the content of Exhibit 10 and its textual description should not be a matter of much concern. However, questions raised by the findings reported in Exhibit 11 and their in-text description raises the possibility that the interpretation presented of differences in the responses to the two surveys may be a less than complete explanation of the effects of differences in survey approach on the results reported.

Exhibit 11 presents statistics describing responses of participants in the two surveys to questions about what internet sources they used either most frequently or most or second most frequently (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> most frequently combined). The title for the table is “Different Approaches to Questions Result in Small Differences in Responses.” Below I question whether the differences reported really are small. Here I note that variation in at least three survey factors may have contributed the differences in the reported responses to the two surveys. (1) The second survey did not ask the question about national/international news before asking about sources of local news. (2) The second survey asked only those respondents indicating they sought news on the internet about what online sources they used most frequently and second most frequently, while the first survey asked this question of all respondents who had access to the internet in their homes. (3) The second survey identified internet news aggregators while the first survey did not. Without other controls, it is impossible to state with any confidence how much variation in any of these three factors contributed to the observed differences in responses. Nevertheless, the finding that “local sites have the largest increase” is attributed to “the fact that the national news question was not asked first.” (p. 147)

It is also hard to justify the claim in the table title that “different approaches to questions result in small differences in responses” when the comparison shows that respondents to

the survey with the national/international question asked first listed local TV websites first 13 percent of the time and first or second 22 percent of the time while the corresponding figures for responses to the second survey were two percent and four percent. There were also sizable differences in percentages listing local daily newspapers. In relative, though not absolute terms, some of the other changes are also quite large. For example, others/portals increases (first to second survey) from 7 to 13 percent for most plus second most used percentage, which is nearly a doubling, and doublings are reported for list serves and blogs on this measure, although the initial values are only one percent. In any case, I don't think the results reported support the claim that different approaches result in small differences in responses. If any thing, the results suggest that the order in which questions are asked can substantially influence the survey results reported. If this is the case, then the impact of the order in which other questions in the CFACU survey were asked on reported results might also be questioned—in particular the questions asking survey respondents what media they used most frequently or found most important as sources of national news and local news.

If different survey approaches, and especially differences in the order in which questions are asked, do influence the magnitudes of response totals, we have to ask whether asking the national/international question first generates the most reliable measures of sources used for local news. If the primary interest of the inquiry were concentration in sources for national and international news, would this dictate asking questions about local news sources first? Perhaps a better approach would be to ask subsamples of the survey population the two sets of questions in opposite order and use their responses to identify a range in which a true value might lie. Of course, this issue could be better addressed by an expert in survey methodology, which I am not, and the question about the effect of the order in which questions are asked on the responses elicited applies to the Nielsen survey conducted for the FCC prior to the 2003 Report and Order as well as to this survey by CFACU.

Dr. Cooper argues that because the percentage of respondents listing the internet as a source is so small, the effect of survey approach on distribution of responses matters little when it comes to assessing the importance of internet sources should be given in the crafting of local ownership policy. This may be true, but I would feel more comfortable accepting this conclusion if I had more confidence in my understanding of the survey instruments employed. Plus, what constitutes small is not clear. 10 percent of respondents to the first survey (with the prior question about national/international news) listed the internet as their most or second most used source. For participants in the survey without the prior national/international news question, eight percent listed the internet as most used and 21 percent listed it as either most or second most used.

Totaling most used and most plus second most used responses across the media listed in Exhibit 11 for the two surveys also raises questions about the bases against which the percentages were calculated. Respondents to the internet use questions in the second survey were restricted to individuals who said they used internet news sources. The first survey tabulated responses for all people who said they had the internet at home, whether they use it to find news or not. One would expect that the percentage of the second survey sample listing internet sources for news would be larger than the percentage of respondents to the first survey listing internet sources because the first survey

respondents include individuals who have the internet at home but don't use it for news. That is, those who use the internet for news would be expected to list internet sources more frequently than those who have the internet available, but may or may not use it for news. However, the total of most used percentages over all media websites for the first survey is 47 percent, while the corresponding total for the second survey was 26 percent. Sums of percentages across all media websites for most plus second most used sources tell a similar story: 80 percent for the first survey and 48 percent for the second survey. There may be a simple and straightforward explanation for these apparently anomalous results, but with the information provided it is not possible to determine what it might be.

The last few pages of this paper report results from a Pew study of blogging and offers other evidence suggesting that bloggers operate and view themselves very differently than traditional media and do not play the same roles attributed to traditional media in policy debates over the First Amendment and diversity. While I was not able to decipher the supporting Exhibit 12, the evidence and arguments offered support the basic thrust of this section that the emergence of blogs, and perhaps other new internet sources of news and information, does little to allay long standing concerns with the effects of concentration in ownership of traditional media.