

## ANALYSIS

# “PLAYING” WITH YOUR NEWS: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY ON “NEWS YOUR OWN ADVENTURE”

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## INTRODUCTION

I graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia in the Spring of 2010 with a bachelor’s degree in English. Morehouse is a prestigious historically black college, or HBCU, situated as a beacon of academic excellence within Atlanta’s black community. Following in the footsteps of notable alumni — Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., politician Julian Bond and filmmaker Spike Lee, to name a few — I became a man with a social conscience, knowing my obligation to serve my respective communities. What I failed to obtain was formal training in what was to become a passion: journalism. I was an aspirant without the tools to fully succeed in a profession about which I knew very little.

I came to Columbia, Missouri after, what I consider to be, a life-changing experience in my hometown — Greensboro, North Carolina. In the Spring of 2011, a small, alternative weekly newspaper took a chance on me, a college graduate who had rarely flipped through the pages of an Associated Press Stylebook, and gave me an internship as an editorial assistant. Within nine months, I had written countless feature stories on real people in my community; there was the woman who wrote uplifting poems for terminally ill cancer patients, the unassuming hot dog vendor with a culinary degree and years of history as a curbside counselor to troubled souls, and I would be remiss not

to mention the owner of a Jewish restaurant who sold cultural artifacts while preparing delectable dishes for his loyal clientele. My reporting put their lives and accomplishments into print for tens of thousands to read.

In that time, I also wrote two cover stories while under the tutelage of master journalists. The most rewarding part of my experience was the fact that my work was read by citizens in the Piedmont Triad, an area within and surrounding Greensboro, High Point and Winston-Salem. They knew my name without knowing what I looked like, but responded to my work via e-mails, phone calls, and word-of-mouth, letting me know my articles were invaluable additions to their everyday lives. As a journalism neophyte, I felt like I was making a difference and upholding a tenet of democracy by informing the people around me.

Since beginning my graduate studies as a journalism student, I have reported and co-anchored local television news at KOMU-TV 8 (NBC affiliate). I have turned complex issues and breaking news into digestible stories within a day's time. I have also spent weeks thoroughly preparing longer-form stories to highlight seldom covered community issues that fall outside of the daily news cycle. My experiences at KOMU have helped me lay a firm foundation for video storytelling, news writing, research, news judgment, presentation, objective storytelling and taking the pulse of Mid-Missouri to see what issues matter most to our viewership.

In addition, I've written, anchored and produced video news stories for mobile devices at Newsy, an outlet specializing in multi-source, analytical video news. When a gunman went on a killing spree at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, I responded in real-time by contributing content as the story developed. I have been a part of presenting

new touchscreen, multimedia video news stories to better engage our growing mobile audience; I have worked with Newsy's clients to ensure we deliver a news product unattainable anywhere else in the world; and above all else, I have contributed to the body of online and mobile content that is “multisource video news... the only news source that helps users compare news sources from around the world to see how a story unfolds” (Newsy, 2012). My work at Newsy has helped me hone my news writing skills for national and international stories and my video editing skills for mobile platforms.

Holistically, these experiences have afforded me a wealth of knowledge regarding broadcast-style news writing and video storytelling. As we look ahead to the direction of video news on mobile platforms — somewhat of an overarching goal at Newsy — I seek to understand how people interact with the news they consume, particularly, on mobile devices. Little research has been contributed to the whole of journalistic study regarding this topic. It is a goal of mine to look into the phenomena of mobile video news interaction and self-directed content. I hope to move the conversation forward in a way that will inform and enlighten media producers on how this fits within the future of journalism. To accomplish that goal, I plan to use new video news technology developed by Newsy to give consumers more control over video news content.

“News Your Own Adventure,” affectionately known as NYOA, is Newsy’s foray into self-directed video news content on mobile devices. The application, which will be available on smartphones and tablets with touchscreen surfaces, builds on Newsy’s style of multi-source news analysis and places the user in control. Instead of passively watching a linear news video from start to finish, NYOA allows viewers to dictate their news-watching experience.

A presenter or anchor sets up the introductory information, then tabs, or video boxes appear on screen. Each tab or box links to a section of video on a specific topic. At the end of that video, the user can continue to move through the NYOA story options.

For the first installment — “News Your Own Adventure: The Romney Tapes” — the NYOA format was used to guide viewers through a recording of then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney speaking to wealthy donors at a fundraiser. The candid nature of Romney’s comments sparked a media frenzy, but the speech couldn’t be shown in its entirety — it was more than an hour long and research informs video news producers that very few viewers would want to watch an hour’s worth of video. The NYOA team picked out what might’ve been the four most criticized parts of Romney’s speech and linked those to four video boxes hovering above the anchor. By tapping a box, viewers are taken directly to that portion of the video.

My research topic delves into how news consumers interact with NYOA. The “what’s next?” for video storytelling lies within the hands of mobile device users, literally and figuratively. Upon the completion of this research, I plan to apply for reporting/anchoring jobs at local TV news stations. As eyes shift from newspapers and television sets to mobile devices, traditional print and broadcast outlets will look for ways to better reach readers and viewers, respectively. Hopefully, the results of my research and the knowledge gained throughout the process will help expand my brand as a multimedia journalist and aid my future employers in putting video news right where the consumer wants it

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proliferation of converged news allows news consumers to access and explore stories via several forms of media. For starters, Internet access has become increasingly more commonplace to even the most underdeveloped countries (Orchard & Fullwood, 2010); thus, making online journalism a “universal phenomenon.”

Much like how the Internet has changed the news consumption landscape, mobile devices have reshaped and reformed how people experience news stories. For example, Oscar Westlund (2008), a journalism professor at the University of Gothenberg, wrote, “the mobile phone is no longer only a telephone; it has become a personal mobile device that both integrates communication and multimedia functionality... The mobile device, as a multimedia tool, has four main characteristics: it is portable, constantly connected, personal and has a small screen” (p. 444).

Observers of the media industry believe converged journalism has a significant impact on how news is consumed (American Press Institute, 2006; Nguyen, 2003, 2008). To be a part of the informed electorate — a tenet of journalism is, after all, to inform respective communities — citizens no longer need to subscribe to daily publications or wait for evening newscasts. Mobile news puts the consumer in control by giving them the news they want when they want it, a la carte restaurant-style.

For reference, the practice of convergence journalism involves telling stories by combining text, audio and video in “progressively interactive ways” (Wise et al., 2009). Some researchers argue that the Internet is a highly interactive medium ripe for progressive interactivity and personalization (Chang-Hoan Cho, 1999). For that reason, and countless others, researchers and scholars believe news organizations have joined in

the practice of producing convergence journalism to better engage viewers. The Internet serves as the stage for that interactivity and personalization, unlike print or traditional broadcast, which often has a one-way flow.

Several communications researchers and journalists remarked on how the development of online news resembles the onset and development of online communication in general, which falls in line with mobile news delivery:

This growth in the nature of online journalism mirrors the short history of the development of Web technology, whose chronology is punctuated by dramatic introductions of new modalities into online communication.

While initially the web was text only, it has rapidly advanced to incorporate other modalities such as audio and visuals. (p. 480; Allbritton, 1999; Heller, 1998; Kurtz, 1999)

Part of why we consume news is what William Stephenson described as *subjective play* (1967). In his seminal work produced more than 40 years ago, Stephenson described what he considered a motivating factor for news consumption:

...At its best, mass communication allows people to become absorbed in *subjective play*. People read newspapers, magazines, and paperbacks in vast numbers, and there are ever increasing audiences for movies, radio, records, and television. All of this, it seems obvious, is enjoyable. (p. 1)

Although definitions of “play” vary and, for the sake of this research, spans more than 100 years, Herbert Spencer wrote people participate in play activities “partly for the accompanying satisfaction of certain egotistic feelings which find for the moment no other sphere” (Spencer, 1898). Spencer posits we consume the news because we can become immersed in it as a fun activity.

Exploration into how people interact with convergence journalism is nothing new. The uses and gratifications approach used to examine motivations for using traditional media have also been applied to patterns of Internet usage (LaRose, Mastro, Eastin, 2001). That approach has been used to identify an Internet users needs and how specific media is sought out to fulfill those needs.

Researchers have argued that “redundancy” is a measurement by which the effectiveness of converged journalism or multimedia presentations can be gauged (Hsia, 1971). The thinking is that information delivered via multiple modalities has a better chance of getting through to receivers than single modality messages, e.g. video news. Broadcast news research supports the claim that the combination of moving pictures and audio enhance memory for news content (Reese, 1984). In terms of the most effective modality, video — over text, audio, images or any combination of the three — is believed to be relatively easy to etch into one's working memory (Lang, Potter, & Bolls, 1999).

There are, however, some who are unsure of the effectiveness of multimedia presentations of convergence journalism, citing an overload of stimuli through the combined modalities of text, audio and visuals. Sundar elaborates on that uncertainty saying, “...It is not clear if multimedia helps or hinders cognitive processing of news and

information on websites. Nor is it known if, and to what extent [...] users appreciate the addition of multimedia functionality” (p. 481). Still, it is the thinking of Wise et al. that helps propel the need for study within this area of journalism; research in this field “can advance theory related to information processing of online news content” (Wise et al., 2009).

I seek to better understand how people interact with and consume video news from mobile devices. In order to fully address this, I propose to investigate the effects of self-directed news content on the processing of mobile video news delivery.

This research will review the available literature pertaining to the topic of mobile video news consumption and interactivity and help explore an essential question: Do mobile device users want more control over their news? I will explore the application of the play theory (which describes the desire to consume news for entertainment as well as information) and propose a set of research questions. I will then describe the methods and results of a research study conducted using willing participants who will interact with a mobile news application before responding to questions about their experience in a focus group setting. Finally, I will report my findings and point out their implications for theory as well as practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### On Stephenson's Play Theory and Applications for News Consumers

When William Stephenson published *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* 40 years ago, research in mass communication was scant because it was a relatively new field of study — Stephenson says mass communication theory did not begin until “1924 or so” (p. 1) — and it failed to dig deeper into how mass media affected beliefs of consumers. Citing behavioral scientists and mass communication researcher Bernard Berelson in his introduction, Stephenson wrote: “For a time it seemed that research in mass communication would 'wither away,' to quote one of its earliest advocates.”

In describing *subjective play*, a term he coined to explain a reason for media consumption, Stephenson wrote that playing itself is an encompassing activity that absorbs the player; it is “pretending, stepping outside the world of duty and responsibility” (Stephenson, p. 46). He said it can be seen as an “interlude in the day” and something that is, on a basic level, fun.

Stephenson's thoughts on play derived from work done by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. Before Huizinga, scholars saw no value in play itself. Huizinga, however, linked play with cultural identity in that “it teaches loyalty, competitiveness, and patience (the Chinese *wan*): “To the degree that he is influenced by play, man can check the monotony, determinism, and brutality of nature. He learns to construct order, conceive economy, and establish equity” (Caillois, 1961).

French sociologist Roger Caillois distinguished between four classes of play: *anon* (play involving two opposing sides), *alea* (games of chance), *mimicry* (acting or pretending), and *ilinx* (a form of dizzying play that one might liken to swinging on a

swing or going on a merry-go-round). From there, Caillois expressed that play usually consists of a combination of the aforementioned categories (Stephenson, 1967).

Caillois went even further to describe ways of playing: *Paideia* (primitive, uncontrolled play), *ludus* (a more formal style of playing with set rules that require much more discipline) and *wan* (a “sensual Chinese way of playing”) — described in Stephenson’s book as when jade is polished by caressing it (p. 47). Caillois’ *wan* is similar to Huizinga’s in that it is an activity that teaches patience.

In explaining the origin of the play theory and how it relates to news consumption, Stephenson brings attention to Wilbur Schramm’s “The Nature of News” (1949), a journal article detailing Schramm’s explanation as to why people choose some news stories over others. His theory of news reading sought to explain the enjoyment of mass communication and the selection process. It was Schramm’s thinking that pleasure in news reading derived from one of two principles (and he called on Austrian neurologist and researcher Sigmund Freud for assistance): “One is related to what Freud calls the Pleasure Principle, the other to what he calls the Reality Principle. For want of better names, we shall call these two classes *immediate reward* and *delayed reward*” (p. 260).

Immediate rewards include stories crime, disasters, accidents, sporting events, etc. Delayed rewards include stories about public affairs, education, economics, etc.

Schramm devised a hypothesis to test his theory of news reading, with the assumption that more educated or socialized individuals would be more likely to opt for delayed rewards, whereas less educated individuals would be more attracted to immediately rewarding news. Out of 746 participants, he not only found that there was an increase in delayed reward reading with education, but there was also a decrease in

immediate reward reading with higher levels of education.

Schramm performed other experiments he deemed “primitive,” but concluded that self-identification with news and subjective satisfaction played a large role in one news story being selected over another.

But according to Stephenson, Schramm’s theory — much like many others — did not include the play aspect of news reading: “The communication situation is not one in which information is passed from a communication source to a receiver; it is one in which the individual plays with communication” (Stephenson, p. 151).

Stephenson’s thinking differed from Schramm’s; he thought that news reading could be undertaken without any expectation of a reward: “Thus we come a long way from Schramm’s early formation to this: *newsreading is a communication-pleasure, sans reward*” (p. 58-59).

For reference, “communication-pleasure” is a term introduced by Thomas Szasz (1957). Stephenson describes communication-pleasure as something similar to a conversation between two people. The two meet, they converse, and afterward they say how much they enjoyed it. The conversation serves no real purpose. They were not trying to please each other and they did not expect anything from each other. But the activity is fulfilling in a subjective way to each individual.

To add credibility to the play theory and its application to news consumption, Stephenson used his very own Q-methodology to develop a Q-factor model for the theory. A full understanding of Q-methodology is not essential to my research, but I feel it is important to at least note the very basics of this approach to further exemplify the work accomplished by Stephenson with regard to the play theory.

To test the theory from a subjective standpoint, Stephenson collected “self-referent” or subjective statements on news reading from other researchers in this field. Those statements include “Newspapers have fine appreciation, good judgment,” “Newspapers are enjoyable to read,” and “It’s a bit of a chore to read a newspaper” (p. 152). These statements are “central concepts held by authorities who have studied or written about journalism” (p. 153). Stephenson collected 38 of those statements and compiled them in what is called a Q-sample.

He then uses a population sample of college students to perform a Q-sort with those statements. Q-sorting is a way for participants to place values on the statements using a range of numbers. Participants place those statements on a range of numbers to identify which ones are most like and least like their thinking on a topic, which in this case is news reading.

The self is centric to this approach. Stephenson concludes that communication-pleasure is essential to the value of news reading or news consumption.

According to David Myers, author of *An Argument for the Study of Play* (1988), Stephenson’s book received mixed reviews. Myers inserts a criticism from Melvin DeFleur’s *A Review of The Play Theory of Mass Communication* (1968) in which DeFleur says: “In short, play theory, taking a purely subjective and individualistic approach to the study of media, would ignore... socially significant issues and concentrate on what is essentially a trivial matter, the 'self-enhancement' of the communication receiver” (p. 483).

DeFleur goes on to say that Stephenson's book was "irritable, ...pompous, ...irresponsible, ...poorly organized, ...and superficial" (p. 482).

But an argument can be made now, just as it was in 1967, about the revival of interest in the play theory; then, Stephenson wrote this was partly "because of the urgent communication problems facing the newly developing nations of the world" (Stephenson, p. 1). In overlaying Stephenson's statement onto the current status of mass communication, I interpret this to mean that the play theory can be used to explain new media technology and news consumption phenomena. After all, Stephenson believed people consume various forms of media because it is fun to do so.

The satisfaction of consuming the day's news has been likened to playing games as researchers have expounded on the play theory. Marshall McLuhan, a philosopher of communication theory wrote in his book *Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man* (1967):

"Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are the extensions of the animal organism [...] As extensions of the popular response to the workday stress, games become faithful models of our culture. They incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image" (p. 235).

In a sense, the constant consumption of news is an ongoing game which citizens play daily, not only for necessity, but also for enjoyment. Theodore Glasser (2000) wrote, "Stephenson attempted to explain news consumption habits in terms of a combination of

usefulness and pleasurableness.” Just as Stephenson believed, Glasser wrote that play described the ability for individuals to engage a very public world in a very private and personally satisfying way (p. 24).

As media technology develops, the reasons for news consumption have gone relatively unchanged, with exception to the fact that people have new and interactive ways to “play” with their news.

### **Mobile Devices And Interactive News Opportunities**

The changing news landscape is one that can be marked by the use of buzzwords like “convergence” and “new media technology.” Newsrooms now use multiple platforms to reach their audiences as the emergence of new technology allows news consumers to take their information “to-go” instead of looking for the nearest newspaper stand or parking in front of a television.

Research from various sources report online and digital news consumption continues to increase as the venerable contractors of “brick-and-mortar” traditional print and TV news scramble to make sense of the changes to — as Wayne Gretzky famously said and Steve Jobs famously repurposed — “skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it's been.” With more information showing a shift in news consumption to online and digital platforms, *where* is the metaphorical puck going to be?

In a 2010 article, CNET News writer Dong Ngo stated, “If you are like the overwhelming majority of Americans, you are likely to read or hear about this story again on TV, the radio, newspapers, and other Internet sites.” The way consumers access news from a multitude of devices today is something that William Stephenson and other

ambassadors of mass communication could not have foreseen; however, the research and theoretical positions taken by scholars of yesteryear are as applicable as ever when pondering the various “why’s?” of continual news consumption.

On journalism and new media technology, Theodore Glasser writes:

What is paramount for purposes of play is not, therefore, the content of news but its form — and the fact that it appears in that form, again and again, each and every day... And one of the most dramatic and usually celebrated changes in news and its form, particularly but probably not entirely an artifact of mainstream American journalism, bears directly on the aesthetics of news and thus the prosperity of news for play and pleasure. (p. 27)

New forms of storytelling have brought consumers and producers into a digital realm. Now, news organizations worldwide practice what has been deemed convergence journalism in an effort to engage potential audience members. Convergence does not supplant traditional forms of delivering news, but complements it by “combining text, audio, and video in progressively interactive ways to tell stories” (Wise et al., 2009).

The combination of modalities that constitutes convergence journalism also takes the name multimedia, which Hans Marmolin (1991) describes as “the use of multiple senses in processing stimuli or multiple modalities used in sending a message.”

Similar to Marmolin’s thoughts, Martijn Hoogeveen (1997) describes multimedia as a part of a larger system or object where “multiple perpetual perceptual representation

media, such as speech, music, text, graphic, still, animation and video, are used in an integrated manner.”

The Internet makes converged media possible as a platform ripe for interactivity and personalization, unlike traditional broadcast media. Chang-Hoan Cho (1999) argues that the Internet is a highly interactive medium, which brings into focus a new way to “play” with news consumption.

Much like how the Internet changed news consumption landscape, mobile devices have further transformed how people explore news stories. Mobile phones and tablets allow us to search the web and experience news in the same manner one would with a desktop or laptop computer — only now, news consumption can happen anywhere.

Mobile video storytelling has emerged as one of the newest forms of media technology and more news outlets have taken to mobile devices so consumers can read or watch the news wherever is most convenient. The impetus for such technology could arguably be the thought of giving mobile device users more control over their news consumption, but little research has been conducted to examine how people interact with mobile news applications that have interactive capabilities.

Mobiles Republic, a mobile apps publisher, found in a survey that 42 percent of Americans now use the Internet to find national and international news. Another survey of more than 3,000 U.S. adults by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism found that more than three-quarters of U.S. adults now own laptop or desktop computers, a percentage that has been stable for some years. Internet access seemingly opened the metaphorical floodgates for device capability. Forty-four percent of adults own a smartphone, and a little less than half of that number own tablet computers (18%).

Tablet ownership grew 50% from the summer of 2011 when it was at 11% to January of 2012 when this survey was taken.

The evidence increasingly hints that the level of news consumption on mobile devices is especially heavy. For instance, the 56% of tablet owners who say they get news on those devices is on par with the percentage who in Pew's 2011 survey said they get news on their tablet every day (53%).

Inger Lindstedt et al. (2009) puts it succinctly but poses a very pertinent question: "Through interactivity, people should be able to use available material in more meaningful ways, question top-down models of news production and take part in the news production process on a more equal basis... But does it work?"

The question posed by Lindstedt et al. is basic but helps form the basis of my research questions in asking whether or not new media technology is effective in communicating messages or engaging consumers?

On one hand, there are some researchers who feel that overstimulation can cause "interference, distraction... cognitive overload and fatigue" (Sundar, p. 482-83). The novelty of interactive elements within a video news presentation could lead to users developing positive attitudes without offering substantive value (Hoogeveen, 1997; Street and Manning, 1997).

James Coyle and Esther Thorson (2001) sought to examine effects of interactivity in web marketing sites with the assumption that more unique web features would increase positive attitudes about websites. Coyle and Thorson experimented by allowing 68 total participants to explore four originally designed websites. They concluded unique web features (like telepresence, a simulated perception of a direct experience) yielded high

levels of interactivity and positive attitudes toward the websites. While my research deals primarily with mobile video news stories, I believe the concepts and definitions within Coyle and Thorson's research are applicable.

One definition of interactivity referenced describes three primary functions including the speed with which one can manipulate content, the range of ways content can be manipulated, and realness of manipulation. (Coyle & Thorson, 67; Steuer, 1992).

Interactivity has also been defined as a system where organizations and individuals can communicate directly with one another regardless of distance or time (Robert Blattberg and John Deighton, 1991). Louisa Ha and Lincoln James (1998) wrote that there were five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collected and reciprocal communication.

Considering Ha and James' dimensions of interactivity, it can be argued that heightened areas of interactivity can increase positive attitudes about a website (a conclusion found in Coyle and Thorson's research), but how do those findings translate to mobile devices and the functionality of interactive, touchscreen video news stories? My research questions are as follows:

R1: How does visual design and touchscreen capability enhance the audience fascination with media content and its information value or instrumental uses?

R2: When it comes to mobile consumption of video news, (a) how does interactivity and personalization (i.e. a user's ability to manipulate or

navigate through touchscreen news videos on mobile devices) impact how people interact with news? (b) Do news consumers like having more choices in terms of what part of a story they want to see at any given moment when viewing non-linear video news stories?

## METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, I employed the use of qualitative phenomenological research methodology to examine the usage of interactive video news on mobile devices.

As Clifford Christians and James Carey (1984) put it, “qualitative research is an attempt to offer an alternative to a natural science model of the social sciences, communications in particular” (p. 355). Christians and Carey note this type of research does not shy away from arithmetic, but seeks to juxtapose past events with more contemporary phenomena.

Christians and Carey point out, “New events flow from past events, but even though similar themes emerge, they often acquire new meanings” (p. 368), so qualitative research can look at the new “events” in mobile news delivery through the theme of play theory to see if the translation results in new meanings.

When thinking about mobile news consumption and where and when one might “play,” there are limitations regarding how researchers could observe mobile users. Ideally, a researcher could follow a subject around for hours a day noting how the subject experiences a video news story on their phone or tablet device, but in the interest of time, that option was not feasible.

William Stephenson wrote that playing itself is an encompassing activity that absorbs the player; it is “pretending, stepping outside the world of duty and responsibility” (p. 46). He states that it can be seen as an “interlude in the day” and something that is, on a basic level, fun. Judging by this definition, one of the characteristics of *subjective play* is that it can happen anywhere.

Considering the aforementioned limitation, a phenomenological method of qualitative research yielded the best results while collecting data on the experience of mobile device users when accessing interactive video news stories.

German philosopher Edmund Husserl is credited with starting the phenomenology movement in 1913. Phenomenology is defined as “a philosophical perspective that helps researchers to explore and understand everyday experience without pre-supposing knowledge of those experiences” (Converse, 2012). This qualitative methodology emphasizes rigorous observation of the phenomenon to discover its true essence and come to a new understanding (Flood, 2010).

Phenomenology is most useful when “the task at hand is to understand an experience as it is understood by those who are having it” (Cohen, 2000). That entails “researchers stripping away of preconceptions of a phenomenon to experience its pure essence” (Converse, 2012). To accomplish this, I conducted focus groups to find out how the participants experienced the phenomenon — interactive mobile news videos that allow users to choose their own experience.

Agar and MacDonald (1995) put focus groups “somewhere between a meeting and a conversation” (p. 80). An informal level of discourse allowed participants to speak freely and answer questions directed by me, as I was the moderator.

Instead of interviewing each participant in a closed setting, focus groups facilitated synergy through group interaction and loosely-structured dialogue. Kidd and Parshall (2000) explain why informal discussions found within focus groups are effective:

...Focus group participants relate their experiences and reactions among presumed peers with whom they likely share some common frame of reference. Focus group members comment on each other's point of view, often challenging each other's motives or actions in a pointed fashion. (p. 294)

Focus groups are valued more than individual interviews because the interaction between participants offers useful information on the level of consensus and diversity.

The amount of participants in a focus group and the number of focus groups vary depending on research topics and objectives, but four to six groups seem to be the most commonly cited numbers between researchers. Four to six groups are suggested to keep research results from becoming "saturated," which occurs when very little new information emerges and responses from participants can be easily predicted (Zeller, 1993).

The number of participants within a group is usually determined by manageability. Smaller groups make it easier for moderators to conduct or facilitate the kind of active discussions that yield high involvement (Morgan, 1992). Morgan strays away from giving an exact number of participants, but does mention focus groups of four to eight participants being optimal. He does caution though the ideas produced by participants don't necessarily increase with participation; a group of four can be just as effective as a group of eight.

I conducted six focus groups — three groups of six, two groups of five and one group of seven. Beyond 36 participants, I felt I would reach the point of saturation Zeller

mentions. All focus groups were administered a standard set of questions, but were also subject to follow-up questions dependent on responses from participants.

Converse goes on to say that “the goal of phenomenology is not to create results that can be generalized, but to understand the meaning of an experience of a phenomenon” and “writing a record of the interpretation of data” is a strong suit when aiming to do just that (p. 32). She posits that while writing thick descriptions and interpreting what takes place, identifying themes or patterns is key. I performed this task by re-reading and re-interpreting data collected from the subjects.

To help me answer my research questions, I recruited undergraduates at the University of Missouri-Columbia. College students are a key demographic when studying new media audiences. In Howard Vogl’s (2010) research on future high value media audiences, he says “people with above average education levels are heavier consumers of news media than the general population” (p. 3). Vogl mentions that in most cases, “those with above average education have more discretionary income than the population at large.”

Vogl’s statements on what he considers to be high-valued media audiences are congruent with a 2008 Pew Research Center study that found “highly educated and high-income workers are far more likely than those with less education and lower incomes to say that it is important for their job to keep up with the news,” (p. 63). The study also found that “44% of college graduates say they get news online every day, compared with just 11% of those with a high school education or less,” (p. 4). Since there is little research on college graduates and news consumption via mobile devices, i.e. smartphones or tablets, I moved on the assumption that the aforementioned statistics also reflect the

percentage of college graduates that use mobile devices to obtain news compared with those with a high school education or less.

I shall also mention this project took place on a college campus. Research supports the value of college students in a project regarding news consumption, but students were also an abundant and convenient resource at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

I reached out to current students at the University of Missouri-Columbia through a professor at the Missouri School of Journalism and included broad details of the study so not to deter anyone while also piquing the interest of participants. The professor offered students extra credit to participate in the research project.

This study employed the use of NYOA, putting users in control of their news consumption experience. Ironically enough, choices must be made for the participants before the actual focus group study.

The NYOA app was only created in the past few months; thus, there are a limited number of stories available. NYOA has mainly been used to delve deeper into complex or exceptionally broad political topics, including the Vice Presidential debate between Vice President Joe Biden and former Republican Rep. Paul Ryan, Congressional firsts with the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, and, our very first video, a breakdown of former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney's secret fundraising comments.

Because our first NYOA video was a test-run, the Newsy staff decided not to include it in the NYOA app. I scripted and designed an additional political story for NYOA titled to give participants a larger variety of stories to play with during the study. All three are political stories, but differ in content and design.

The study was conducted in a testing room located on the University of Missouri-Columbia campus, with Apple iPad tablets for each participant to use. Participant groups contained no less than five and no more than seven participants. Converse relates her thoughts on group sizes, saying “although the sample size of the phenomenological research may be small and the results not generalizable, this experiential way of coming to know and understand phenomena and the experience of these phenomena” (p. 32) can help to understand what news consumers want out of their new media technology.

Each video programmed into the NYOA app is approximately 11 minutes in length. Participants could’ve taken nearly 33 minutes to view all three stories. The first portion of the study was 40 minutes in length to give participants ample time to play with the devices. After that, I gathered the participants and interviewed them collectively in focus group settings. The questions were open-ended to allow participants to respond freely on their subjective experiences with the aforementioned media technology. The questions are as follows, but were not limited to:

- Do you use mobile apps to read/watch the news?
- Does the news outlet make a difference?
- How do you perceive mobile video news?
- How does visual design and touchscreen capability affect the content?  
Describe your experience using the mobile news application.
- How did you perceive the options offered for viewing non-linear video news stories? How many options are too many? Do too many choices affect willingness to explore non-linear video news stories?
- Does cost play a role in mobile news app usage?

- After using this application, would you continue using it for news consumption?

The responses were documented by a Marantz audio recorder and handwritten notes then analyzed for recurring themes or patterns within the subjective experiences of the phenomena.

## RESULTS

The overall objective of my study was to explore a new direction for video news on mobile platforms. I sought to understand how people interact with news consumed on mobile devices with an emphasis on touchscreen surfaces and self-directed news content.

I wanted to find out how a user's ability to manipulate and navigate through video news content impacted the experience. I believe you will find as you read my conclusions that I have successfully achieved my goals.

As I mentioned earlier in my research report, it would've been ideal to follow a subject around for hours a day noting how the subject experienced NYOA on the iPad. In the interest of time and organized structure, that option was not feasible.

Participants were given headphones to subjectively experience NYOA. In retrospect, I realize the headphones placed participants in a bubble and they might've been less-likely to share or interact with others during the first portion of the focus groups because of that. Still, I do not feel closed-off experience of NYOA was a detriment to my research or a hindrance to my findings.

I observed most participants sitting quietly while playing with NYOA. The only times participants removed their headphones and emerged from their personal bubbles were to ask me questions about a function of the app or raise an issue. I recall participants asking how to get back to the main selection screen or noting that the app crashed. The first 40 minutes of each focus group session wasn't recorded, mainly because there was no discourse.

Also previously mentioned in my research report, all participants were engaging and contributed greatly to each discussion with the exception of one focus group. I

assume the deviant group finished in less time than other focus groups and contributed fewer points to the discussion for any number of reasons; they might've been bored, preoccupied with thoughts of other assignments or maybe even just less outspoken than other participants. At any rate, none of those assumptions were brought up in their discussion and their contributions were generally no different than the contributions of previous groups.

### **News Consumption**

*Where do you consume the news? What is it you like best about those sources? How big a role does cost play in news consumption?*

The majority of participants in each focus group mentioned frequenting the websites and smartphone/tablet apps of news outlets as their primary sources of information. Those outlets included (but were not limited to) CNN, The Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, Yahoo! and ESPN, though very few get the majority of their news from TV and even fewer mentioned newspaper or radio. The appointment viewing schedule of TV news was not a preferred medium, but it was supplementary to news they could get on their own terms. "Control" was a word used over and over to describe the relationship between consumer and news outlet; according to one participant, "with TV, you're forced to watch whatever they want to show you."

Getting to preferred news sources on different devices yielded similar responses throughout focus groups. I found the majority of participants use Twitter on their phones and computers and the Twitter app Tweetdeck exclusively on their computers to consume accounts of a day's events. Twitter was regarded as a "fast" and "convenient" way to get

news from trusted sources. Some said attractive or enticing headlines led them to delve deeper into a story by clicking links on tweets posted to their timelines.

Those with smartphones and tablets said news outlet apps were much easier to navigate and personalize than websites. One participant didn't open the app unless an interesting notification was sent about a particular story: "...like, CNN. I feel like I get stuff from them all the time, but I might not be interested in everything." By altering the settings within the apps, participants can receive push notifications of specific news topics directly to their home screen. Breaking and updated news stories were preferred with app usage and notifications.

Participants said cost played a large role in whether or not they would use an app; if it's not free, they probably won't use it. One participant summed up the overwhelming consensus on this question, saying, "you can *always* get it somewhere else for free."

One or two participants from each focus group said they would pay for what they called "high-quality" content, which included feature or long-form news and sports stories. One participant gave justification for and against paying for certain content:

The Chicago Tribune is \$13 for every four weeks and for me, I'm on a pretty strict budget. I can't do that. ESPN is \$2 a month to get their insider stuff, so, of course I'm going to do that because you get a lot more content that I think is high-quality. I'm willing to pay for quality if it's in reasonable economic range.

## Newsy's News Your Own Adventure

### *What did you like about the app? What did you dislike about the app?*

Participants used words like “interactive,” “innovative,” “complex,” and “confusing” to describe NYOA (Figure 1). They liked the way political topics in the NYOA videos were chunked down into smaller portions. One participant said, “It just gets to the meat of the issue.”

The ability to navigate their own way through a news topic seemed to be a similar refrain heard within all of the focus groups, with one participant saying, “I felt more engaged because I was making a decision.”

Many of them were familiar with Newsy’s main video products that use multi-source news analysis

to give a range of

perspectives on a news topic. They felt NYOA had some of the same qualities but in a more interactive format. Participants described NYOA as a “one-stop-shop” for in-depth information on complex political issues.

There were also a plethora of negative critiques about the app, most of which came from technical glitches. Editing issues, non-working tabs or buttons and unclear navigation directions were the most prominent problems.



Figure 1: News Your Own Adventure title screen

In terms of editing, participants noticed the presenter’s words were cut off when moving from one video feature to another. For instance, participants would press a tab to view more information on a topic, and the on-camera presenter’s introductory sentence would be incomplete as if the first or second word in the sentence was missing.

Participants were frustrated with malfunctioning tabs that did not redirect them to a portion of a video when pressed. One participant observed clicking either the “47%” or the “Religion” options (Figure 2) would direct users to a screen other than where they



Figure 2: Menu Screen for “Vice Presidential Debate Recap”

wanted to go. Another mentioned a similar issue in “Meet the Firsts of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress”: “I was trying to hit one [option], but after I watched one segment of it, it kicked me back to the beginning.”

Judging by their comments, the success of a self-directed video news product would hinge upon a number of factors including the ability of a news outlet to identify technical problems before publishing a story.

There was a consensus among participants in all six focus groups that pause, fast forward, rewind, and skip features would enhance the viewing experience. Admittedly, there was no way for anyone to stop or replay the videos without restarting the video

from the very beginning. Participants would've liked to see a YouTube-like progress bar at the bottom of each video within an NYOA story.

***How did the presentation play a part in understanding the subject matter?***

The visual displays and graphics were a plus for participants. Most of them liked the look of the tabs and the animation (ex: highlighted states for options in “Meet the Firsts of the 113th Congress” (Figure 3) or video box options in “Vice President Debate Recap”). Although

participants said the format and layout of NYOA was visually appealing, the inability to go back and review information without starting from the beginning was an outstanding problem in terms of getting the information they wanted when they wanted it.



**Figure 3: Menu Screen for "Meet The Firsts..."**

Opinions varied on the actual presenters themselves. Some felt the presenter was on screen too long during some of the videos. One participant said, “Sometimes I lost interest in them... I would've liked to see a VO (voiceover) mixed in at some parts.” Other participants agreed they would've liked to see more graphics or visual elements instead of the actual presenters.

***What were your thoughts on the amount of options displayed?***

The amount of initial onscreen options ranged from four (“Vice President Debate Recap” and “News Your Own State of the Union”) to nine (“Meet the Firsts of the 113th Congress”). Participants enjoyed the number of displayed options for the stories, but agreed more or fewer options would not dissuade them from exploring NYOA stories.

Nearly all participants said they liked having options to delve deeper into a story. Each NYOA feature displayed more options after tapping one of the initial tabs. In “News Your Own State of the Union,” participants could tap one of four topics President Obama covered in his annual address. After being directed to a part of Obama’s speech, users had the immediate option of viewing responses from either Republican Senator Marco Rubio or Republican Senator Rand Paul (who represented the Tea Party in his address).

Participants said they enjoyed the options that led to more options, which allowed for self-discovery of the topics.

***What types of stories would you like to discover using this app?***

The majority of participants agreed more dense topics would be best for NYOA. They would like to see complex and complicated topics, namely politics, broken down into a more easily digestible format like the stories within NYOA.

More broadly, any story with a conflict or long-term consequences would be a draw to the app. Investigative stories, in-depth sports features, and trending news were brought up in discussion.

Participants felt breaking news and daily stories wouldn't work for the app because of how it is constructed. Participants said they would rather get a quick view of breaking news and daily stories on news outlet websites or Twitter.

### ***Side Notes and Suggestions***

During the six focus group sessions exploring the NYOA app, participants outlined a laundry list of things they would like to see, most of which centered around more control and personalization of the news experience.

Only three political news stories were programmed into NYOA. If more stories were available, participants would've liked to see them categorized by topic. Story tags and a search bar were also mentioned so that users would be able to find stories based on keywords.

What participants liked about the news sources they frequented is their ability to personalize their experience with those sources. Twitter users can follow news outlets they trust and can categorize them to fit specific purposes. Likewise, people with smartphones and tablets can alter settings within mobile apps to receive specific notifications. That kind of personalization was something the majority of participants would've liked to see with NYOA. Beyond that, I feel personalization is something participants like in most of their preferred methods of news consumption.

Overall, nearly all participants agreed they would like the ability to have even more control over their news consumption experience.

## CONCLUSION

This was the first time anyone outside of the Newsy staff got a chance to actually use the app, with the exception of a handful of representatives from tech companies. I knew the first few minutes in discussing the app would yield first reactions, and then more expanded feedback on the product. While everyone wanted to know when it was coming out and when they'd have a chance to download it, but I feel that NYOA and similar news apps would benefit from changes I'll outline here.

My findings show that personalized settings are preferred when it comes to news consumption. Control was a word mentioned over and over again to describe the relationship between consumer and news outlet. People wanted to have the ability to manipulate the product even more than NYOA provided.

The most prominent issue was the absence of stop, skip, pause, and rewind options, something akin to a scrubber on a YouTube video. Regardless of where participants said they get video news content, the ability to control the progress of the video is always present. At times, participants wanted to skip intros and sections of the three NYOA stories to get to the next video.

How participants responded to options available within NYOA videos was an essential part of my research. My findings show that the nine initial options in "Meet the Firsts..." and the four initial options in "Vice Presidential Debate Recap" were neither too many nor too few. Depending on the type of story, participants would like to see even more options.

Two examples: If the same design from "Meet the Firsts..." was used for a nationwide look at gun legislation, I don't believe users would be averse to 50 options,

one for each state. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a story with less depth could begin with two initial options and allow users to explore from there.

Despite Newsy's attempt to place the user in full control, one participant outlined a problem in the content presented: "For the State of the Union, it picked things for us to choose from, but I think you need to be careful when you're telling people what to listen to or what to think..."

I've heard that all news is subjective because at some point, someone has to make a decision as to what sort of content will be presented to news consumers. However, I think it's important to consider what options news producers are placing in NYOA features to keep users from feeling short-changed by their experience.

Participants definitely wanted a full gamut of stories. I explained that NYOA is essentially in its Beta stage and very few stories have been plugged into the app. Part of my research was to observe how they responded to the product as it is, but participants agreed that utilizing the black space on the side when first opening the app would enhance the user experience. They suggested the empty space be used for categories and adding a search bar somewhere in the layout. I imagine if NYOA had 100 videos, categories and a search bar would help users find the video topics that most interested them.

It would behoove news outlets to provide user accounts for notifications and key words to bring up stories pertaining to those topics. Those notifications could be pushed to the home screen of whatever device they're using to immediately grab their attention when a new video is posted.

To expound on that idea, I feel that a network allowing users to manipulate the settings and categories would be a useful way to incorporate many of the things participants suggested.

Another suggestion was a bookmarking feature. I use The Atlantic's app for iPhone and there is a folder where users can place stories if they want to read them later. Participants felt that a bookmarking feature would allow them to do the same thing — select videos they couldn't get to in a single sitting and watch them when time permits. Participants said more interesting headlines would draw them into stories. Those that used Twitter and Tweetdeck said engaging headlines and teases would move them to click on links to certain stories.

I would liken NYOA to a TV newsmagazine or an alternative weekly newspaper in terms of content: those two forms of storytelling don't relate breaking news but allow for news consumers to experience more in-depth or feature pieces. Overall, those are the stories that have the most value in terms of what NYOA has to offer.

My findings are specific to the future success of NYOA, but as I mentioned earlier, I believe the results can be generalized to better enhance news apps for mobile devices.

## LIMITATIONS

The sample size of my research project was satisfying; I was able to gather 35 student participants, which was just shy of my goal. But 35 participants isn't a very large sample size. I feel more participants would've surpassed the point of saturation, though it's very hard to argue that more participants would've also yielded even more opinions on NYOA and what works best in digital news content delivery.

There were very few male participants in my research — nine of 35 — mainly because I was recruiting strictly from one class within the journalism school. The female students greatly outnumber the male students in the class. So much so, that if I were to get every male student in the class to participate, I believe the female students would've still outnumbered the males. A larger diversity of opinions would've greatly benefitted my research, and I feel more male participants would've helped me accomplish that.

In terms of the product, NYOA has a total of five videos. The three politics videos in the small inventory were downloaded to the iPads used for the focus groups. I chose the three politics videos for the sake of homogeneity, but also because I didn't have much else to present to the focus groups. Although the politics videos were designed with different formats in terms of options and content, I feel three videos with different topics would've given participants a better look at what NYOA has to offer and what sort of videos work best.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Very little research exists on self-directed video news content. Collecting information for my literature review was a daunting task because there is no precedent for this kind of research endeavor. However, I feel my project is the very tip of the iceberg for studies on control and personalization with a product like NYOA or others like it. Here I'll outline a few suggestions for further research.

Firstly, my research project was qualitative in design, and a good first look at getting peoples reactions to NYOA. But, looking ahead, I think this particular sub-field of journalism research would benefit from some sort of experiment that uses a system of measurement to gauge data and extract empirical results. It would be interesting to see whether or not the control and sense of play will encourage people to spend more time with a story than they would with a traditional video. Other studies could compare information retention rates between self-directed videos and more traditional linear storytelling and multi-media. Additional questions might include, does this technology help in understanding complex subjects? Does it help in digesting news events?

Another research undertaking could examine how the interactivity directly relates to attitudes toward the site as opposed to sites of moderate or low interactivity.

I think NYOA is a piece of technology ripe for experimentation and research. It is a news product that could greatly benefit from some form of quantitative research to help supplement my findings, or even move in a different direction from the one I have laid out.

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