How young professionals use mobile technology to consume news media

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones are increasingly used to consume the news. Young professionals are the most likely group to read the news on their mobile phones and most likely willing to pay for it. Yet, little research has been done to uncover the contexts in which young professionals consume the news on their smartphones. A small-scale qualitative study was carried out with four London-based young professionals to understand more about their daily routines and to explore how news consumption fits into their busy schedules. Some known themes were confirmed, for example reading the news in the morning, but several new insights emerged from the study.

INTRODUCTION

People increasingly use their smartphones to access the news [9]. News consumption reports [7,9] show departure from traditional media channels (TV, newspapers, radio) and a rise of mobile devices in all developed countries, especially for younger audiences. In the US, digital news consumption is the second largest behind the TV, with mobile being the primary force of the growth with most of the publishers in the digital sector now getting more mobile traffic than desktop [8].

Young professionals were reported to be the most likely users of smartphones when it comes to consuming the news [6,9] and most likely the ones willing to pay for the news [9]. This makes them an appealing group for the news publishers – knowing how to tailor their services to fit young professionals' needs could drive larger profits and give them a comparative advantage.

Although the news consumption reports [6,7,9] give a clear indication of the trends in a quantitative sense, little research has been done to uncover the drivers behind the rising mobile news consumption among young professionals and the situations in which they engage in reading the news.

A small-scale qualitative study with four London-based working professionals was conducted to understand more about the contexts in which they consume the news on a smartphone and what benefits mobile phones offer to them over other devices.

RELATED WORK

There have not been many studies published that would offer an insight into the news consumption habits of the general public and even less can be found on young professionals.

One habit that seems to be prevalent among mobile users is catching up with the latest news in the morning [3,9]. Deloitte report [6] shows a third of the UK smartphone owners reaching for their phones within 5 minutes of waking. In the UK, 16% of people access the news in the morning via a smartphone, which presents the third most used channel behind TV (32%) and radio (24%) [9].

Reading the news when travelling or when being home was reported by Constantinides, Dowell, Johnson and Malacria [5]. They surveyed 140 participants and identified 3 types of news readers: *Trackers* want to be informed about latest news and read news several times a day. They may be reading the news when travelling. *Reviewers* want to be up to date with the daily news and would read mainly at home. *Dippers* do not read the news daily and are interested only in particular topics, they read the news at home.

Cohen [3] conducted the most comprehensive qualitative study the author could find to the date. Cohen followed 17 participants (11 students, 6 professionals) for two weeks using online diaries and then carried out in-depth interviews. He identified a number of triggers for the news consumption: *Internal triggers* (break from study or work, need to be up to date with the latest news, boredom); *External triggers* (notifications and widgets, social feed skimming, waiting for people or technology, media multitasking, morning habit).

The study presented here aims to build on Cohen's findings and explore the habits of young professionals in more depth. Two research questions (RQ) were formed in order to structure the study.

RQ1: What benefits do smartphones offer to young professionals over other devices when consuming the news?

RQ2: In what places and situations do young professionals read the news on their smartphones?

METHOD

Participants and devices

Four participants (3 females, 1 male) took part in the study. These were between the age of 25 and 31, all working in

London and having achieved bachelor's or master's degrees. The participants were recruited from a sample of author's acquaintances who fulfilled the research requirements which were to live and work in the UK, to have achieved at least a bachelor's degree, be between 21 and 40 years old and to read the news daily using an Android-based smartphone or an iPhone.

P#	Gender	Age	Residence	Smartphone platform	Education
P1	Female	25	London	Android	BSc
P2	Female	27	London	Android	MSc
P3	Male	31	London	iOS	MSc
P4	Female	28	London	iOS	BA

Table 1. Participant information

Research methods

Experience sampling
Experience sampling (ES) is a method that allows researchers to connect with participants and ask questions in a particular moment, reducing thus a risk of cognitive biases which may appear with more traditional recall-based techniques like interviews or diary studies [1,4]. Messages or questionnaires can be delivered to participants' mobile devices either regularly in set intervals (schedule-based ES), or when a particular event happens (event-based experience sampling).

Several experience sampling tools (AWARE framework[1], LifeData[2], movisensXS[3], Experience Sampler[4] and PACO app[5]) were assessed by the author in order to identify one that would support event-based triggering of notifications. The PACO app was selected for the study for two reasons. First, it allows for event-based ES on Android-based phones and second, it can also be used for a traditional self-reporting ES on iOS-based devices (iOS does not let third party apps collect usage data and therefore cannot be used for event-based triggers).

Autoethnography
Autoethnography is a research method in which the researcher conducts the experiment on himself/herself first in order to gain empathy with the studied user group. It is also a useful way of piloting a study to uncover potential limitations and to gauge how much time and effort participation requires.

The author carried out a 7-day autoethnography study to assess the time burden of filling in surveys delivered by the PACO app and to assess whether the survey options were sufficient.

After the week, "wanted to get up to date" option was added to the survey question 1 (Why did you read the news now?). Also, "eating" and "travelling" were added to the list of possible answers to the survey question 3 (What are you doing?). See Appendix 4 for the list of ES questions and options.

Procedure
The main study consisted of 3 parts: (1) Survey & instructions, (2) Experience sampling, (3) Semi-structured interview.

1. Survey & instructions
Participants were sent an email (see Appendix 1) with a link to a survey in which they provided information needed to set up the PACO app correctly. The survey (see Appendix 2) asked for information on which news and social media apps the participants were using. The email also included a step-by-step tutorial on how to install the PACO app (see Appendix 3).

2. Experience sampling
The experience sampling part of the study was carried over a period of 4 days – 2 weekdays and a weekend. For the Android users, the PACO app delivered a notification with survey questions every time a news app was opened or a browser window opened from a social media app. The iPhone users were briefed to self-report using the PACO survey every time after consuming the news on their phone.

3. Semi-structured interview
Participants were interviewed on a day following the completion of the experience sampling part of the study. The interviews were held either in person or via Skype and took between 20 and 30 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded for further analysis and were made of three parts:

The introduction included general questions about the news participants sought. The main purpose of this part was to put participants at ease and to introduce the news related topics.

Context in which the participant reads the news formed the main part of the interview and was designed to probe in depth

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[1] http://www.awareframework.com/

[2] https://www.lifedatacorp.com/

[3] https://xs.movisens.com/

[4] http://www.experiencesampler.com/

[5] https://pacoapp.com/

on participants' news-reading habits and situations in which they would read the news.

Using the PACO app. The participants were asked about their experience with the PACO app.

RESULTS

The participants found the PACO app "*user-friendly*" (P1), "*easy to use*" (P2), "*simple*" (P3) and "*intuitive*" (P4). Through the app, they reported on average four occasions every day in which they read the news (M=3.9, SD=1.0) with weekday average being higher (M=4.5, SD=0.5) than a weekend average (M=3.4, SD=1.1). Examples of contextual photos uploaded by the participants can be seen in Appendix 5. These quantitative results are interesting but they are not carrying meaning themselves as the experience sampling was only run for four days and the primary intention behind it was to elicit news-consumption awareness which would lead to richer data during the follow-up interviews.

A number of themes were identified using a thematic analysis approach [2]. The analysis uncovered some themes previously described by Cohen [3] and several new ones, specific to working professionals. The findings are therefore divided into the following two sections: (1) *themes confirming previous findings*, where a brief summary of replicated insights is provided and (2) *themes specific to young professionals*, in which new findings are presented.

Themes confirming previous findings

Boredom, waiting, taking a break from work
Motivations for reading the news generally followed findings made by Cohen [3]. "Boredom" and "killing time while waiting" were mentioned by all four participants as well as "wanting to know what's going on in the world". One professional-specific theme was reading the news as *a way to switch off from work or from thinking about it*. For instance, Participant 3 sometimes reads the news to "*disconnect from thinking about work... if I want to change my mindset*".

Morning habit
All four participants read the news in the morning, "*it's basically catching up with what happened in the world during the night*" (P3). Participant 4 noted, "[…]in the morning before going to work. I usually just go through my mobile phone and just check my regular apps that I use for the news".

Themes specific to young professionals

Reading the news as a multi-device activity
All participants use several devices to consume the news, primarily a smartphone and a laptop, both personal and work ones. Smartphones were appreciated mainly for their instant availability, "*it's always in your pocket*" (P2), "*it's just always with me*" (P4).

The size of the device has an impact on the reading experience with smartphones being more useful for short news and less comfortable for longer ones.

> *When you want to read a long article it's not ideal. […] You have little screen for text, so you have to scroll a lot […] I find it more difficult to focus on the text if it's very short lines...* (P3)

> *[…] if it's maybe like a regular kind of two swipe down article, that's alright. I wouldn't probably read book or longer articles on just the mobile phone because then it's too small* (P4)

Laptops, on the other hand, allow for an overview of a whole page and they offer extra options and information. That is important for work related news which is often more elaborate.

> *[reading work related news] will be usually, actually, on my laptop, so bigger screen for these... because they are usually bigger articles, maybe with some graphs as well, so it's better to just read them on a bigger screen, just to get all the details.* (P4)

> *On the laptop, it's like... easier for me to have the bigger view and to see more options on the website.* (P1)

Having all those extra options can be distracting, though.

> *[reading the news on the laptop is] more distracting when I need to concentrate. […] I'm just watching what's on the site and it's taking my concentration away from the reading.* (P1)

> *I think desktop has more distractions […] usually, on desktop I have more things open at the same time, so probably there is a lack of focus of the action of reading the news...* (P3)

Routines – structured weekdays, leisure weekends
Lives of the interviewed young professionals are structured around their work during the weekdays and less routine during weekends. This is reflected in their news-reading habits. As Participant 4 put it: "*It really depends on the time of the day, or weekend as well, or weekdays...*".

Weekday routines
Apart from the previously mentioned morning habit, lunch also presents an opportunity to catch up with the news.

> *Sometimes I'm the first one to arrive, so then while eating, I'd be checking a couple of interesting articles.* (P2)

> *When I'm having a break at work for lunch and then in the evening. That would be the three times that I have more proactive approach to check the news.* (P3)

Next, some of the participants mentioned evenings as a time to read the news.

> *[…] after the dinner I usually sit for a couple of minutes, as I said before, and check what's going on* (P2)

> *And then in the evening it's mostly again, to catch up with what's happening in the world.* (P3)

Weekend (non)routines

All participants mentioned reading the news less during weekends, mainly because they want to enjoy their leisure time. Weekends lack the structure of the weekdays and so does reading the news.

> *Usually, I have some program that is more interesting than reading news on my phone.* (P1)

> *I don't usually have a routine during a weekend […] I'd probably read less because during the weekend I usually try to go somewhere and do something a little bit more interesting than to be looking at the phone.* (P2)

> *On weekends sometimes I buy newspapers, actually... so... yeah, I'm a bit old school with that. I just like to read on the paper sometimes. So, on weekend I would check less the news online.* (P3)

Time efficiency

Young professionals are busy people and from the language they used during the interviews (e.g. *quickly*, *brief*, *having just a couple minutes*), it was apparent that they do not have much spare time and if they do, they want to use it efficiently.

> *I'm subscribed to, for example, a service called Launch. They send two brief summaries of news every day, one in the morning and one in the evening with links to different news.* (P3)

> *I have some subscribed websites at work, work related, so... that's what I'd read very quickly, like 10 minutes.* (P2)

> *Yeah, sometimes in the afternoon if I'm waiting for a coffee or a tea, I would just go through some articles quickly.* (P4)

Presence of other people

People around can encourage or discourage reading the news. Young professionals in London spend a considerable amount of time in the public transport. Reading the news can be a way to escape strangers' looks: "*you don't want to stand there just looking at people for 40 minutes and we're in London, so it's not really comfortable for people to look at each other*" (P2).

Through the experience sampling, the participants reported being with strangers and alone but also with their families when reading the news. When asked about the family context, two participants started talking about living with their partners and about readings the news at the same time. This creates an interesting social situation in which reading the news can be a shared but independent activity.

> *I went to work with my boyfriend and he's reading and I'm just reading some news well.* (P1)

> *In the morning and evenings usually my husband [is with me when I read the news] and he might also, actually, read some articles at the same time.* (P4)

DISCUSSION

Two research questions were set at the beginning of the study. Here, the author discusses how they could be answered based on the data collected.

RQ1: What benefits do smartphones offer to young professionals over other devices when consuming the news?

The instant availability of the device was mentioned as the main benefit. Participants use their smartphones to get a quick overview of the latest news and to read articles – but only to a certain length. When reading longer articles they prefer laptops since larger screens make reading more comfortable. Laptops were also preferable for work related news which may include large infographics and charts. Smartphones, though, offer an immediate access to work unrelated topics, helping to switch off from thinking about work.

RQ2: In what places and situations do young professionals read the news on their smartphones?

There is a big difference between weekdays and weekends. During weekdays, reading the news is structured around work hours with three main checkpoints: (1) morning before setting off for work, (2) lunch break, (3) evening after dinner. Some may also read the news while commuting but this was not confirmed as a salient theme among the interviewed young professionals.

Weekends were much less structured and participants would generally read less news and even less on their smartphones, since when being at home they prefer using larger screens.

Apart from the above, two new interesting themes, specific to young professionals, emerged during the study. First, *reading the news as a couple activity* could present a design opportunity for the news publishers if they managed to support this behaviour. Second, *time efficiency* was indirectly mentioned several times. When using their phones for consuming the news, young professionals have only a short amount of time and they want to get a brief overview of the most important news that interest them.

Limitations of the study

The study has several limitations due to time and budget constraints. First, given the exploratory nature of the study,

four participants present only a small sample of the target group of young professionals, who are likely to have various interests and daily routines.

Second, participants were recruited from the author's acquaintances which may have affected the results. The author strived to minimise the impact of a personal relationship by formalising all study procedures.

Third, the experience sampling was conducted in four days to elicit news consumption awareness rather than to gather quantitative data. To collect enough data for a quantitative analysis, this part of the study would have to last at least two weeks to accommodate for various daily routines and random events.

CONCLUSION
In this study, the author aimed to extend Cohen's [3] findings on mobile news consumption for a specific user group of young professionals. Several themes not described in the literature previously were identified. Given the small-scale nature of the study, there are many questions left - would any new themes emerge with a larger sample? Are there any differences between professionals from large cities and countryside? Do habits of older professionals differ? These and many others are the questions for future research.

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