CHAPTER 3

Tailor-Made News: Meeting the demands of news users on mobile and social media

“Tailor-made news: Meeting the demands of news users on mobile and social media.”
**Introduction**

The audience’s relationship with news is shifting. According to Purcell et al. (2010: 2), news use is becoming “portable, personalized, and participatory”: in 2010, 33 percent of US cell phone owners accessed news on their cell phones, 28 percent of internet users personalized their home page with news they were particularly interested in, and 37 percent of internet users shared or commented about news or contributed to its creation. As new technologies have made it possible for users to tailor news entirely to their own preferences and practices, we will refer to portable, personalized, and participatory news as “tailor-made news”.

However, despite users being able to decide what news to consume when, where, and how, millions of Dutch people still settle down in front of their TV every day to have the news presented to them. The evening news is especially popular: in 2012, the Eight O’Clock News (NOS) had a market share of 29.5 percent, attracting an average of 1.8 million viewers per night (NOS 2012). In fact, between 2000 and 2010, the average time per week Dutch viewers spent watching TV news increased from 67 to 103 minutes (Wonneberger, 2011). Chyi and Chadha (2012) found that as a news source, users rate (on a scale of 0 to 7) television (6.09)—as well as print newspapers (5.94)—as more enjoyable than laptops (5.89), iPhone (5.52), iPad (5.46), e-readers (5.07), and non-iOS smartphones (4.72). Participants in research by Courtois, Verdegem, and De Marez (2011: 87) describe television as offering “the most pleasant experience because of its sound and image quality, its usability, accessibility and broad array of connectivity”. As opposed to TV’s lean-back experience, portable devices such as smartphones require more of a lean-forward experience, due to “the need to multi-task e.g. text messaging, … minimal screen size, the need to physically support the device” (Cui, Chipchase, and Jung 2007: 202). Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian (2011: 34) point out that mobile media are used for news particularly during “the interstices of the daily routine”, when and where traditional platforms are unavailable or inconvenient. It seems hardly surprising, then, that in a media-rich environment, users choose television over newer, portable devices.

It appears that users are not flocking toward personalized news either. Despite the result of Purcell et al. (2010) that 28 percent of internet users personalize their home page, editors of 11 major news sites claim that reader surveys indicate little interest in “the more demanding and complex forms of personalization” (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012: 386): not even 10 percent of their audience employs any tools for personalization that require their direct input (i.e., “explicit personalization”). The editors expect that demand is so low because “[readers’] interests are probably not as narrow as we imagine [they] are” and because it takes “time and effort to personalize something” (386). Yet, none of these suggestions are supported by actual audience research.
Finally, the participatory tendencies of contemporary news users are also questionable. The presence of news on social networking sites (SNSs) does appear to be growing: while Baumgartner and Morris (2010) found that 26 percent of US college students get news from SNSs (e.g., Facebook, Myspace) three or more times a week, Hermida et al. (2012) found that on a typical day, 42 percent of Canadians receive news on SNSs (Facebook, Twitter) through family, friends, or acquaintances. However, such results tell us very little about the actual participatory nature of news use: to what extent do these users (re)share, like, or comment on these news updates? Picone (2011: 105) found that the average user needs an incentive to engage in produsage—“the personal productive use of information”—like having a connection to the news story, an altruistic motive, or a need for self-expression. Bakker (2013) discovered that when it comes to (political) news, only 6 percent of the Dutch population contributes content to any participatory platform (e.g., writing a tweet) at least once a month.

Reviewing all these “ifs” and “buts”, it is doubtful whether news use really has become “portable, personalized, and participatory” (Purcell et al., 2010). Despite the technological possibilities, users have not turned en masse from passive receivers who consume news on the producers’ terms, into active users who tailor news to fit their personal preferences and practices. Unmistakably, some power has shifted from producers to users, but it is unclear to what extent users actually wish to exert their newfound control. Under which circumstances do users want to tailor-make news, and under which circumstances do they not?

**Methods**

Taking as a focal point users’ everyday experience with tailor-made news, our research breaks with two traditions within journalism studies. First of all, research tends to focus on news production and news content (Bird, 2011). The personalization of news is often introduced in passing as a logical reaction to the abundance of information users are confronted with nowadays (e.g., Delato et al., 2003), all but ignoring the question concerning the extent to which users actually desire or make use of personalized news. User preferences are even discussed without conducting audience research (e.g., Thurman & Schifferes, 2012).

Second, research on tailor-made news that does focus on users usually concerns quantitative studies (e.g., Chyi & Chadha, 2012; Hermida et al., 2012). Although ratings, shares, and surveys do provide information about frequencies of news consumption and user opinions about news, they offer little insight into the ways users actually experience and value tailor-made news in the context of everyday life. Previous research has also taught us that users’ experience of news is a better predictor of their actual news use than their opinions about news (Costera Meijer, 2013).
To gain a comprehensive understanding of factors involved with the tailormaking of news, we approached our research question from three different angles: product, producer, and user (qualitatively as well as quantitatively). For the latter two projects, we used NOS News—the Netherlands’ largest, public news organization—as a case study. First, we made an inventory of the options NOS News does and does not offer users for the tailoring of news (product). Second, we held in-depth interviews with five (chief) editors and policy makers at NOS News involved in decision making about tailor-made news (producer). Third, we held in-depth interviews with a wide spectrum of news users (e.g., laggards, early adopters), reaching a point of “theoretical saturation” (Charmaz, 2006) at 24 interviews. The interviews were comprised of creative methods including the think-aloud protocol, ranking exercises, sensory ethnography, and building one’s ideal news site. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using interpretative repertoire analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Finally, we checked the distribution of the user patterns we found in a survey (N = 270).

Results
Using triangulation when approaching our research question, as well as using various qualitative and quantitative methods, ensured the robustness of our conclusions. It allowed us to compare the supply, demand, and experience of tailor-made news, as well as both the producers’ and users’ underlying assumptions and rationales. Per section, we will first discuss the results from our NOS News case study (product and producer), setting the stage for the findings from our user project.

From Portable to On-demand
Both the inventory and the interviews with professionals clearly indicate that it is a major priority for NOS News to make its news available on portable devices. Within our tracking period (August 2012 to June 2013), NOS News released and optimized mobile apps for all major smartphone brands (Android, Apple, Blackberry, Windows Phone), as well as for the iPad, Windows 8 tablets, and laptops (and PCs). In 2012, the news organization also introduced a policy of internet first: each item is made available online immediately after it is finished, so that users no longer have to wait until the next bulletin for a news update, but can decide for themselves when and where to check these items.

By making its news available on portable devices as well as on-demand, NOS News clearly meets the demands of its users. Our survey demonstrates that users check news sites and apps throughout the day, and consequently expect news to be readily available at any place and any time. Whether that is the case is dictated first of all by the
“findability” of news. News should be easy to find; users do not, for example, want to search for the link to the latest bulletin. Second, users expect news items to be available separately. This goes for text as well as audio and video; users do not want to sit through a full bulletin for one particular item:

> What I like about [NOS.nl] is that you can listen to radio clips and clips from the [TV] bulletin without having to go through the entire bulletin … Then I think, good, now I can make my own selection. I want to feel like I have a hand in that. (Rosa, 26)

Although none of our research participants listen to or watch news clips on-demand frequently, they still appreciate having the option to pick any item they please. They want control: to be able to choose.

**Personalized: Fatties with a Limited Worldview?**

Our inventory of news “products” suggests that NOS News is reluctant to allow users to personalize their news. In terms of “explicit personalization” (Thurman, 2011), the news organization only offer RSS-feeds, which, according to Domingo (2008: 694), editors do not consider “a customization option that may take editorial power from their hands”. In terms of “implicit personalization”—in which preferences are inferred from user data—NOS News only offers “contextual recommendations” (“Read also”) and “aggregated collaborative filtering” (“Most watched”, “Most listened”) (Thurman, 2011).

Our interviews with professionals illustrate why NOS News is so hesitant to let users personalize their news: they fear personalization will lead to “only fatties” with “a limited or damaged worldview” (i.e., tunnel vision). The underlying assumption is that given the option, users will eat “junk news”. The professionals feel that NOS News should “occasionally put a healthy sandwich in between”, i.e., provide users with news stories that they “should read”, selected by professionals because they “can make that selection better than the user”. These results match what Domingo found on the basis of ethnographic research in news rooms:

> Journalists defended their professional values in selecting current events and deciding the hierarchy of what stories were the most important. Customization and audience active involvement in newsworthiness decisions were not comfortable ideals. (Domingo 2008, 697).

Paradoxically, the same NOS News professionals also claimed it would be paternalistic to uplift viewers and decide for them what they should know.
The fear of “fatties” with “a limited or damaged worldview”, however, is unfounded: our results show that users are not too interested in personalizing their news menu. First of all, users are not willing to put time and effort into personalization. Both our qualitative and quantitative user research demonstrates that the vast majority (89 percent) of users prefer to accept news sites and news apps the way they are. They may not be interested in all the news offered to them, but if they do not want to read specific news items or categories, they simply skip them. Indeed, ignoring uninteresting news involves so little effort that it requires too much effort to change settings in order not to have to see this news anymore:

I don’t know how to do that and uh [laughs] I’m not going to spend time doing that, I just think uh, the app is the way it is, and if I want to read [a news item], I’ll read it, and if I don’t want to read it, I’ll skip it. (Carina, 30)

Users seem to be more willing to personalize news when it irritates them. This is particularly the case with sports news: one NOS News professional informed us that the lack of option to block push notifications about breaking sports news drew criticism from users. Also, during our in-depth interviews, some one-third of our participants claimed to want to get rid of the category “sports”. However, the think-aloud protocol revealed that there is a marked difference between what users want and what they do. Koen (26) replied affirmatively (“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes”) when asked if he would want to throw sports news out of his app, but during the think-aloud protocol he admitted he had never taken the time or effort to look into this. The number of users who would actually personalize their news, then, could be even lower than our survey indicates.

Many of our participants were not particularly interested in economic news either, yet were adamant about keeping this category in. They might skip it 9 out of 10 times, but still want the option to pick out that one interesting story. The second reason users do not want to personalize their news, then, is that they do not want to miss anything. Even if they do not actually click on all or even most of the news, they still want to “check” (Costera Meijer, 2008) or “monitor” the headlines “so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of events” (Schudson, 1998: 310). A few informants even admitted they did not want to personalize their news out of fear to get “tunnel vision”; they are afraid of the very same “limited or damaged worldview” that the NOS News professionals worry about. On a more positive note, our participants enjoy “serendipitous news discovery” (Purcell et al., 2010), i.e., coming upon news they did not know would interest them.
The third reason users do not want to personalize their news is that they want the news organization to do this for them. That is, they want editors to select and present them with the most relevant and topical news—the stories that they “ought” to know:

If I choose to read a news site that means I think they are good at filtering the news for me, so if they think something is important, I assume it is. (Willem, 30)

Both our qualitative and quantitative user research clearly demonstrates that users appreciate being presented with news selected on the basis of classic journalistic values like relevance and topicality. They may not read it attentively or click on it, but they appreciate it being there because it gives them an impression of what is happening in the world. This research result might contradict findings from Boczkowski & Mitchelstein (2013) that there exists a gap between the news that producers provide and the news that users desire.

**Participatory: Social Medium or News Medium?**

Our inventory of tailor-made news and our interviews with professionals show that NOS News is searching for the best way to present news on social media. During the first months of our research, their news stream on both Facebook and Twitter mirrored the one on NOS.nl: each item that was placed on the website was automatically posted on these social media. However, having since realized that both news platforms require a specific approach, NOS News began to cater to the particular demands users have on each platform. On Twitter, they put out tweets that were longer and more informative than the headlines on NOS.nl. On Facebook, they attuned to the social character of the medium, addressing users as a community (“Good morning, Facebook”) and posting news more sparingly and accompanied by enticing captions (“What do you think about this?”). One professional noted that it is exactly Facebook’s “social” nature that makes finding the right news strategy a challenge; Twitter is easier as that “of itself is more of a news medium”.

Our survey confirms these expectations. Whereas only 17 percent of Twitter users wish not to encounter any news at all, this goes for almost half of Facebook users (49 percent). Most users (78 percent) log onto Facebook to communicate with friends. Only a small minority uses Facebook to check (14 percent), share (14 percent), or discuss (12 percent) news. When our participants do share news on Facebook, this usually concerns funny or entertaining stories. In contrast, on Twitter, a much larger group comes to check (46 percent), share (30 percent), and discuss (27 percent) news.² While news does

---

² Compared to Bakker (2013), these numbers may seem high. However, as we only asked our respondents to rate such statements as “I come on Facebook to [communicate with friends, check/share/discuss the news etc.]”, the frequencies of these user practices are not known.
seem to play a relatively substantial role within Twitter, Facebook is predominantly seen as a medium to share personal stories. These results, then, underline the importance of differentiating between social networking sites: treating Facebook, Twitter, and other SNSs as if they, and, by extension, the accompanying user practices, were all one and the same, is to overlook critical differences between the genre conventions of these platforms.

More than Information

Although the focus of our research was on tailor-made news, we also explored in more detail the circumstances under which users do not want to tailor news to their own preferences and practices. This is the case particularly when people use news less as an end (i.e., to inform oneself) than as a means, e.g., to structure one’s day or for social reasons. Firstly, 33 percent of our survey respondents have news on in the background when they are home. Jantien turns on the news while she is preparing dinner. It moves to the foreground when she is cutting her vegetables, but it is just as easily relegated to being a background noise when she walks into the kitchen:

I walk on and off between the kitchen and the TV, but I also cut my vegetables in front of the TV … I’m not like, “Oh it’s 6 pm, I’m going to watch the news”. It’s more that it coincides with, I’ll go cut the vegetables and … I’ll turn on the TV with it, because I just think that’s nice. (Jantien, 28)

Jantien is not in the first place interested in the content of the news; instead, the news structures her evening as a “behavioral regulator” (Lull, 1990: 36). Time to cook is time to watch the news. The news also offers “a flow of constant background noise [and] a companion for accomplishing household chores and routines” (36). During these moments, Jantien is not interested in tailoring news to her own preferences and practices. In fact, when she settles down in front of her TV she just wants to sit back and enjoy the show.

Second, 35 percent of our survey respondents enjoy watching news with other people and commenting on it. Here, too, it is less about the content of news as a source of information than it is about news as a resource of sociability: watching together. Fien used to watch just “one show a day”, but when her son moved in, her viewing habits changed:

Since Koen is here, I watch a lot more TV … It becomes sociable when you watch with someone, you can comment on it, especially if it’s mildly ridiculous. (Fien, 56)
When news is used as “a resource for the construction of desired opportunities for interpersonal contact” (Lull 1990, 38), personal preferences are temporarily put aside so that users can enjoy their experience of watching the news together.

Thirdly, 32 percent of our survey participants admitted to following the news so they have something to talk about with other people. In these cases it is not their personal selection that counts, but what other people find relevant and important. Here, news organizations’ strategies of “implicit personalization” (Thurman, 2011) prove useful. On his ideal news site, Joost wants a “Most read” section because this allows him to quickly gather what people are talking about:

I don’t follow the news the entire day, sometimes I miss it, sometimes I forget it, so here you can always see, “Oh, this is a big issue to everyone.” (Joost, 28)

When Marjolijn (25) visits her relatives, she quickly reads up on the latest sports and gossip news. She is not interested in the content itself, but it serves to create common ground with her family: “[I like] it better to be part of a conversation, than all the time going: ‘Oh I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know’”. With this “communicative function” of news (e.g., Costera Meijer, 2008), users do not want to tailor news content to their own preferences, but they do expect news to be available on-demand, so they can consult it whenever and wherever they need to.

**Old Habits, New Habits**

New platforms have enabled new habits, such as “checking” the news (Costera Meijer, 2008), and research suggests that these habits coexist with older habits, like watching the evening news (e.g., Van Cauwenberge, d’Haenens, & Beentjes, 2010). Surprisingly, our results show that old news habits are also maintained on new media. Bram (28) claims, on the one hand, that watching NOS Journaal on-demand on his laptop gives him a feeling of control: “You no longer have to sit down at a specific time.” However, he still likes to watch the Eight O’Clock News (NOS) through live streams. Regardless of the possibilities new media offer to take control over the time (and place) of news use, the Eight O’Clock News continues to structure Bram’s evening. Similarly, in the morning, Dick and his colleague watch the news together on his iPad. This activity marks the start of their workday, offers them a sociable moment, and gives them something to talk about:

It’s about that coffee moment together before you really get to work … I find I really enjoy that, watching the news together and afterward discussing the things that caught your eye. (Dick, 55)
Unlike Courtois, Verdegem, & De Marez (2011) suggested, the tablet computer is taking over some of the functionalities of television. When we first interviewed Joan (55), she could not imagine watching the news on her newly bought iPad, noting it could never compete with the picture and sound quality of her TV. However, three months later she informed us that she had in fact started watching NOS Journaal on-demand on her iPad, mostly during the weekend when she is unsure about the NOS airing schedule. If new media are not replacing old media, then, our findings indicate that new and old habits are at the very least intertwining. In December 2013, we launched a five-year research project that looks at how digitalization enables and inhibits new habits and patterns of news consumption, and how news organizations can optimally cater to these changing practices and preferences.

**Conclusion**

News organizations feel pressure to keep up with the latest technological developments for fear of being left behind (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012). Although technology has made it possible for users to tailor news entirely to their specific preferences and practices, our results suggest that users have limited interest in personalizing or participating in news. What they desire is control: to be able to consult all content whenever and wherever they want it, and to be able to choose anything without having to choose anything. Being in control means that news items should be (1) readily and separately available. News should also be (2) easy to pass or ignore at all times. Users want to be able to read or scroll past uninteresting items effortlessly. News should be (3) presented in a clear manner. Users do not want to be flooded with an abundance of information. A layered or opt-in presentation of the news (e.g., hyperlinks) helps: it gives users control over the amount of information they see (Lagerwerf & Verheij, 2013). Finally, news should be (4) selected and presented by the news organization on the basis of relevance and topicality. Users want to be able to see the most important and most current news at first glance. They experience this news selection and presentation as professionalism rather than as paternalism; it is this particular kind of tailoring service they expect from professional news organizations. Although users might not click on all or even most of the headlines, they want to be aware of the major news stories. They want the option to choose any story that fits their needs at any given moment.