For more than a century, the newspaper industry has been a dominant source of news in the U.S. (Stephens, 2010). Newspapers have experienced substantial declines in circulation, advertising sales, profitability, and readership (Tucker, 2009). Some print newspaper organizations are transitioning to online news distribution models in an attempt to sustain their businesses. Such transitions require traditional print news media companies to conduct staff reductions, then offset the loss of high cost, highly trained journalists and editors through the addition of user generated news article content. This quantitative study focuses on the effectiveness of media company transitions from print to online through an evaluation of readers' trust in news media organizations, as well as readers' desire to read user generated articles written by citizen reporters.

**Background Information**

Several well established large syndicated print newspaper companies have closed their print distributions. In 2009, Rocky Mountain News, with a print run of about 350,000 copies (Tsai, 2009), and Seattle Post-Intelligencer represented two out of 105 victims of this trend. Also in 2009 alone, 10,000 newspaper jobs were lost, print ad sales fell 30% in the first quarter, and 23 of the top 25 newspapers reported substantial circulation declines in the range of 7% and 20% (Dumpala, 2009). One newspaper conglomerate, Gannett Co. Inc., has laid off more than 10,000 employees since 2007, while another major conglomerate, The Sun-Times Media Group, was forced to file for bankruptcy in April 2009 after losing $4.5 million per week between January and March of 2009 (Dumpala, 2009). As one journalist for the Atlantic pointed out, "We're not witnessing the breakup of a monopoly... We're witnessing the death of a business model" (Mcardle, 2009). Two primary causes include the inability of traditional print media companies being able to sustain their businesses on print advertising sales through a substantial period of recession, and the other is the rise of Internet technology (Busswood, 2010; Mcardle, 2009; Dumpala, 2009; Tucker, 2009).

The rapid expansion of the Internet has brought rise to online social media mechanisms such as user generated content systems. Many traditional media companies are struggling to transition from print to online mediums. One of the challenges is that building a sustainable online news model requires a significant investment in time, resources, and funding. One example of a traditional media company that has succeeded in this transition by focusing on electronic viewing through high-quality product design, is the Washington Post.

Initially the Washington Post experienced annual losses of over $100 million to build out its web infrastructure in the late 1990s (Busswood, 2010). Now, through the global reach of the Internet, over 83% of the Washington Post readers come from national and international markets (Kuttner, 2007). This is significant given that a majority of its traditional print readers were primarily within a local geographic area. Many print media companies are scrambling to transition from print to online news models in a desperate attempt to sustain their businesses.

However, they lack the time, resources, and funding to replicate on the success of the Washington Post through fast-to-market production deployments. Another major challenge is that once a web infrastructure is created, media companies must continue to deliver high quality news that is trustworthy and credible (Kuttner, 2007). This is a significant barrier to entry given that many newspaper companies are forced to reduce their workforce as a cost cutting measure, leaving them with fewer professional journalists to write in-depth investigative articles. Many are looking into viable ways to offset their employee losses with user generated content written by community members that act as citizen reporters (Busswood, 2010).

**Statement of the Problem**

Evaluations have been published on newspaper industry decline causation and impact (Riley, 2008; Morton, 2010; Tucker, 2009; Arango, 2009). Research has been conducted that evaluates the trend of newspaper organizations restructuring from traditional print methods to online news distribution models (Perry, 2008; Gunther, 2007). However, little is known about the impact such a transition has on readers’ trust in the media content. Further, insufficient data exists that establishes correlations between a reader’s level of trust, their socio-demographics, perceptions of online news features value compared to traditional print, or online user engagement performance.

The problem is the newspaper industry is changing to sustain business operations, however little empirical evidence is available that indicates readers will accept a transition to online news powered by user generated content written by citizen reporters. The focus of this quantitative study will be on print and online news reader’s level of trust in transitioning media content, socio-demographics and perceptions through a survey of selected Deseret News readers with Internet access. Results of this study may offer vital insights for leaders in the newspaper industry attempting to restructure from print to online news distribution models that rely on user generated content written by citizen reporters and to leaders in Internet technology that are evaluating the emergence of online news through user generated content.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative experimental study is to examine and determine correlational patterns between reader socio-demographics, levels of trust in user generated online newspaper article content, and perceptions in newspaper organizations transitioning from print to online, through a structured Likert-type scale survey of a sample of 1,000 print subscribers of Deseret News with Internet access within the United States. Results may help struggling newspaper organizations to proactively identify, plan, and develop online features that support the needs and demands of their readers prior to a transition from print to online. Results could lead to a significant improvement in reader retention levels and higher level of trust in user-generated content for newspaper organizations during and after a transition from print to online.

The survey will be facilitated by sending an email invitation to Deseret News print subscribers with online access, provided from a subscription mailing list maintained by Deseret Digital Media, under the guidance and approval of Deseret News CEO, Clark Gilbert. The email invitation will be limited to subscribers within the United States, and will provide a redirecting link to a web application provided by SurveyMonkey. The Survey will be limited to close-ended Likert-type scale ranked questions. Aggregated survey data results will be exported into a Microsoft Office Excel 2007 table by way of a comma-separated-values (CSV) file into .xls table format, and then evaluated by the researcher through descriptive statistical analyses.

**Significance of the Study**

First round literature review for this research study produced no empirically validated evidence to determine whether readers will accept a transition to online news powered by user generated content written by citizen reporters. This study, and its resultant correlational data, will present newspaper industry and Internet technology leaders with substantial insight into factors and considerations that may be weighed before attempting to transition from a traditional print to online news distribution model. Further, an evaluation of readers' level of trust in user generated content articles written by citizen reporters will illuminate potential drawbacks and opportunities in effectively reaching a global audience with timely, trustworthy, high quality, in-depth, and investigative news.

Deseret News is the leading newspaper in the Intermountain West Region of the United States. Deseret News was founded in 1850 (Lythgoe, N.D.), and underwent a significant restructure in 2010 including staff reduction and online implementation of user generated content articles through citizen writers. A quantitative correlational research study of Deseret News print subscribers with online access will yield in-depth empirical data on readers' trust in news media, and level of desire to read user generated content written by citizen reporters. This proposed study may provide newspaper industry and Internet technology leaders with considerable decision-making insight when determining barriers to entry and plotting roadmap tactics and strategies to optimize their traffic and revenue through online news distribution models.

**Nature of the Study**

This proposed quantitative research exposition will include a correlational study from an aggregate collection of survey data. Variables will be evaluated against two secondary null hypotheses, and one primary null hypothesis, where the unit of analysis will be Deseret News subscribers in the United States that have Internet access. A quantitative research method is appropriate because relationships between multiple variables can yield statistically significant data-driven insights with a high level of confidence through close-ended survey questions to a substantial sample population size.

A correlation study enables a measure to be ascertained for the relation between two or more variables. A T test is suitable for a sample population of greater than 30 individual samples where two or more variables is compared in one observation set to determine a difference of means. A correlation coefficient through a Pearson r correlation analysis will assist in identifying a level of proportional correlation on an interval scale of matrices from +1.0 (perfect positive correlation) to -1.0 (perfect negative correlation). Crosstabulation will enable multiple variables to be combined and crossed to examine and interpret frequencies of specific categorized observations to identify relations. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) will enable survey responses between grouped means to be tested for statistical significance. Finally regression analysis will focus on the relationship between the defined dependent and independent variables.

**Research Questions**

The research questions posed are supportive of a correlational analysis that will be used in this quantitative study. Data variables collected from survey results will be evaluated for associations using multiple statistical techniques including T test, Pearson r correlational analysis, crosstabulation, ANOVA, and regression analysis. Correlational coefficients will be measured to determine associations between variables, then relationships between dependant and independent variables will be identified and examined. The first question evaluates socio-demographic dimensions of Deseret News subscribers to identify patterns against reader perceptions in online news propagated by user generated articles. The second question seeks to identify reader awareness and insights across multiple socio-demographics in the transitions that newspaper organizations are undergoing. The third research question attempts to discern a relationship between readers' level of trust in news media and readers' level of desire to read user generated news articles online.

RQ1: What is the relationship between reader socio-demographics and readers' level of trust in online user generated newspaper article content?

HO: There is no correlation between socio-demographics and readers' level of trust in online user-generated newspaper article content.

HA: There is a correlation between socio-demographics and readers' level of trust in online user-generated newspaper article content.

RQ2: What is the relationship between reader socio-demographics and readers' perception in newspaper organizations transitioning from print to online?

HO: Reader socio-demographics has no effect on readers' perception in newspaper organizations transitioning from print to online.

HA: Reader socio-demographics has an effect on readers' perception in newspaper organizations transitioning from print to online.

RQ3: What is the relationship between readers' level of trust in the news media and the level of desire to read user-generated news articles online?

HO: There is no correlation between readers' level of trust in the news media and the level of desire to read user-generated news articles online.

HA: There is a correlation between readers' level of trust in the news media and the level of desire to read user-generated news articles online.

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