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**Reading Practices of Online  
Newspapers in Poland**

**Anna Tereszkievicz  
Senior Lecturer  
Jagiellonian University  
Krakow, Poland**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209  
Email: [info@atiner.gr](mailto:info@atiner.gr) URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
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**Reading Practices of Online Newspapers in Poland**

**Anna Tereszkievicz**  
**Senior Lecturer**  
**Jagiellonian University**  
**Krakow, Poland**

**Abstract**

The study focuses on the consumption patterns and uses and gratifications aspects of online newspapers in Poland. The aim of the study was to investigate the role of online newspapers among Polish consumers of news. The study, based on a survey conducted among the consumers, focuses in particular on the motivations for the use of online newspapers, reading patterns, exploitation of interactivity, and readers' approach towards traditional and online equivalents of a newspaper. Due to a lack of previous studies on the subject in Poland, the analysis sheds important light on the use of online newspapers after a decade of their introduction to the Polish mass media system.

**Contact Information of Corresponding author:**

## 1. Introduction

Both theoreticians of journalism and practitioners underline the extent of the changes in newspaper production triggered by the new media, affecting structure, content and function of newspapers, as well as consumption of newspapers in general. As Zeng and Li (2006: 139) emphasize, 'online journalism disseminating through the interactive medium is fundamentally different from traditional mass media.'

Previous research devoted to online journalism investigated the introduction and use of the new affordances of newspapers offered by the new technology, e.g. multimedia, interactivity, hypertextuality (cf. Deuze, 2001; Ward, 2002; Kolodzy, 2006). The research concerned as well the readership of online newspapers and focused on the differences in the approach to online and traditional press as well as on the consumption practices of online newspapers. The studies investigated users' preferences, motives for using both types of newspapers and potential changes in the approach to traditional and online newspapers.

In one of the first studies done into this issue, Mueller and Kamerer (1995) reviewed preferences between an electronic and a traditional newspaper. They found that the users considered online news more current, preferable for topic searches, yet difficult to browse and read.

Lin and Salwen (2006) studied the consumption of online newspapers along four dimensions of entertainment, interpersonal communication, information scanning and skimming. They found that online news pages proved better suited for news headline skimming due to content layout and hypertext affordance of the web. They also found that online newspapers more frequently served as a source of entertainment. As Lin and Salwen claim on the basis of a previous research by Tewksbury (2003), this may result from the appealing design of websites and multimedia offer, as well as from the ease of navigation online which encourages the users to seek stories of personal interest, rather than hard news (2006: 221). The conclusion they drew from the study was that 'online news outlets are complementary and ancillary to their offline counterparts, when it comes to audience uses and gratifications' (2006: 223).

A similar conclusion concerning the consumption of the respective editions of the newspapers was drawn by Chan and Leung (2005) in an earlier study of the press. Their research proved that there is a preference for traditional editions of newspapers as far as news on current events is concerned. Online editions, as the scholars concluded, serve as sources supplying additional, supplementary information. The study by Waal and others (2005) provided yet a further confirmation of these observations, proving that online news outlets are not a substitute, but rather a complementation of print newspapers and other information channels.

D'Haenens and others (2004) researched the consumption patterns of two newspapers in the Netherlands. They identified a number of similarities and differences in the reading patterns of online and traditional newspapers. For instance, they proved that users of online editions read fewer stories than those of traditional editions, but they devoted more time to reading the front page of the online versions, because of a larger number of content on this page, as the scholars presumed. They concluded, however, that there is no consistent pattern visible in the consumption of the respective editions.

Thus, the previous studies suggested that there may be a difference in the approach towards online and print news and in the consumption of print newspapers and online news outlets in general as well. As Waal and others (2005: 45) observe, the dissimilar consumption patterns may be associated both with the difference in the offer and

variety of content provided by the outlets as well as with a different structure and functioning of the two media, and hence different reading practices involved in approaching print and the web. As the scholars emphasize, non-linear, interactive and searchable nature of the web, on the one hand, may increase the activeness of the readers and their involvement, but on the other, it decreases the possibility of structuring attention and directing the reading paths of the readers (2005: 45).

## 2. Newspapers in Poland

As far as the Polish experiences are concerned, despite a growing popularity of online newspapers in Poland, there has not been sufficient research done into readership patterns of the online press. The aim of the following study was to investigate the consumption of online newspapers in Poland from the users' perspective. The research was designed to approach the significant problem of newspaper readership in the era of technological changes, widespread digitalization, and dominance of the internet. In light of the current tendencies, it becomes more and more crucial to investigate the place and function of traditional and online newspapers and users' approach to these two forms of the press.

Specifically, the research aimed to account for the following phenomena:

- study the consumption and readership patterns of traditional and online newspapers – investigate the frequency, place, and content read most frequently by the consumers;
- study the motivations for the use of print and online newspapers;
- investigate the users' approach to traditional and online newspapers, readers' perceptions of both editions of newspapers, the advantages and disadvantages of both formats from the users' perspective;
- investigate the use of interactive, multimedia, and citizen journalism services offered by the newspapers.

A survey designed to investigate users' preferences and reading habits was conducted to examine the aforementioned aspects. The results of the survey are discussed below, preceded by a short overview of the newspaper market in Poland.

### 2.1. Print and online newspapers in Poland

There is relative diversity on the newspaper market in Poland. The offer encompasses both national and regional newspapers, of broadsheet and tabloid nature, as well as freely distributed city newspapers.

Among the national print newspapers, *Gazeta Wyborcza* is the leading daily. It is a broadsheet of a social-liberal alignment which has been published since 1989, i.e. the year marking the end of the communist era in Poland. The newspaper is considered as the first legal and independent newspaper in Poland. Second in popularity are two tabloid style dailies, i.e. *Fakt* and *Super Express*. *Rzeczpospolita* is another popular broadsheet newspaper. It represents a liberal conservative alignment and has been published since 1982 – first as an organ of the government and since 1989 as an independent newspaper. The table below presents detailed information concerning the readership and circulation of the most popular newspapers in Poland.

**Table 1. Newspapers in Poland – readership and circulation**

| Newspaper  | Readership                           | Circulation                            |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>   | 13,00%                               | 388 238                                |
| <i>Fakt</i>  | 12,32%                               | 477 726                                |
| <i>Super Express</i>   | 5,46%                                | 200 182                                |
| <i>Rzeczpospolita</i>  | 3,75%                                | 133 196                                |
| <i>Przegląd Sportowy</i> (sports oriented)                               | 3,16%                                | 103 699                                |
| <i>Dziennik Gazeta Prawna</i> (law oriented)                             | 2,38%                                | 71 446                                 |
| <i>Polska the Times</i> (format combining national and local components) | Varying rate depending on the region | 8000 to 95 500 depending on the region |

The majority of the newspapers have their online counterparts. The online editions are in most cases available for free. *Rzeczpospolita* was one of the first newspapers to restrict access to online content – selected content is available only upon registration, with up to 25 articles offered for free for registered users. Subscription and payment is required to access the whole offer of the online edition.

### 3. Results of the survey and discussion

The survey was conducted among 410 respondents of different age, different levels of education and different background. The survey produced interesting results and proved the existence of a wide diversity of consumption patterns of traditional and online newspapers.

#### 3.1. Consumption and reading habits

As far as the consumption of newspapers in general is concerned, nearly 26% of the respondents declared that they do not read any newspapers. As the main reason for not reading newspapers the users underlined the lack of time, abundance of duties and responsibilities (24%). The respondents emphasized that the papers do not offer content interesting and attractive enough to encourage a consumer to reach for the newspaper (5%). In a number of cases (9%), unwillingness to read newspapers was associated with the problem of lack of objectivity in the press. The respondents, namely, were discouraged from reading newspapers by the cases of bias, subjectivity, manipulation and distortion of facts which they have encountered before.

Among those who declared that they read newspapers, 21% admitted that they only reach for the traditional print format, 14% expressed a preference for the online news outlets of newspapers, while nearly 39% of the respondents declared that they read newspapers in both formats.

As far as the relationship between the consumption and the age of the respondents is concerned, there were no clear tendencies to be seen. Among none of the age groups was the preference for a particular edition visibly stronger. It was only among the users aged above 50 years old that a higher number of users declared that they prefer traditional newspapers (61%, as against 39%), which was explained by the



respondents' dislike or infrequent use and access to computers and the internet. The users who declared they do not read newspaper websites underlined the use of other internet web pages instead (5% of the users). To the websites most frequently listed by the users belong news portals popular in Poland, such as *interia.pl*, *onet.pl*, or television news websites, such as *tvn24.pl*.

With regard to the question concerning the titles chosen and read most frequently, the survey proved that *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Fakt* and *Rzeczpospolita* belong to the most popular newspapers (listed by 18%, 14%, and 13% of the users, respectively). In addition, 16% of the users provided titles of local newspapers. With respect to online newspapers the users most frequently enumerated the address *wyborcza.pl* and *rp.pl*, i.e. the websites of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* (18% and 15% of the users, respectively). Quite interestingly, the respondents frequently mentioned the website *gazeta.pl* (16%), which, however, is not a newspaper outlet, but a portal run by the editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. There is a very strong connection between the portal and the newspaper, which may be the reason why the respondents listed this address in this context. Websites of local newspapers proved to be popular as well (18% of the users).

The results proved that there are differences in the reading practices of the respective editions of newspapers among the consumers. With respect to traditional newspapers the frequency was divided. The majority of the users (17%) admitted that they read the newspapers once or twice a week (17%) or every day (16%), with a smaller number reading the paper every second day (6%) or only several times a month (8%). The use of online newspapers is slightly different. The majority access the websites every day, a few times or once a day (15% and 11%, respectively). A significant number of users (23%) declared they read online news outlets once or twice a week. A definitely smaller number of the users access the pages every second day or less often (9%).

A number of differences were observed as far as the amount of time devoted to reading a newspaper is concerned. With respect to traditional print newspapers, the majority of the users spend 30 minutes reading a newspaper (21%). A high number of users devote 15 minutes or one hour to reading a paper (15% and 13%, respectively). With regard to online news outlets, most of the users spend 15 or 30 minutes on reading the newspaper (33% and 29%, respectively), with a significantly lower number of readers devoting to this activity one hour (13%).

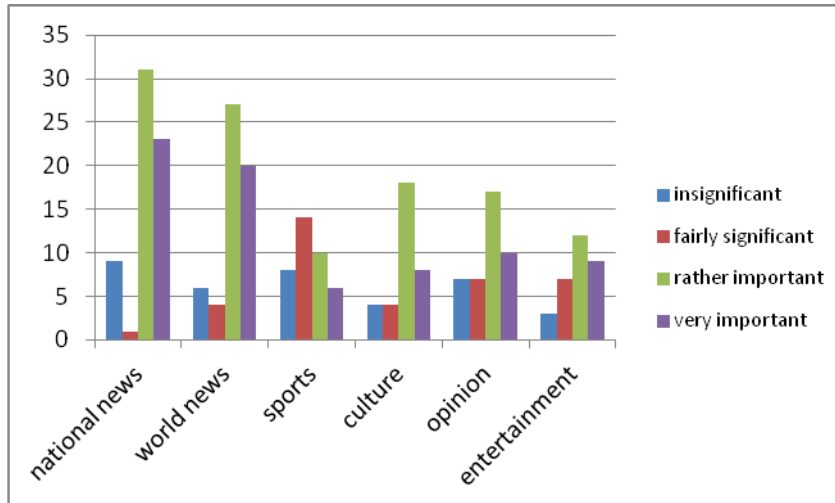
These tendencies may be associated with different manners of approaching the two media. Reading an online newspaper may be treated as a distraction, an activity performed while working on the computer. An online newspaper can thus be accessed continually in order to scan the website for new interesting headlines, which may explain the frequency of users accessing the websites several times a day for about 15 minutes. Reading a paper newspaper, by contrast, is usually performed as a separate, individual activity, to which more time is devoted as a rule.

### **3.2. Evaluation of the content of traditional and online newspapers**

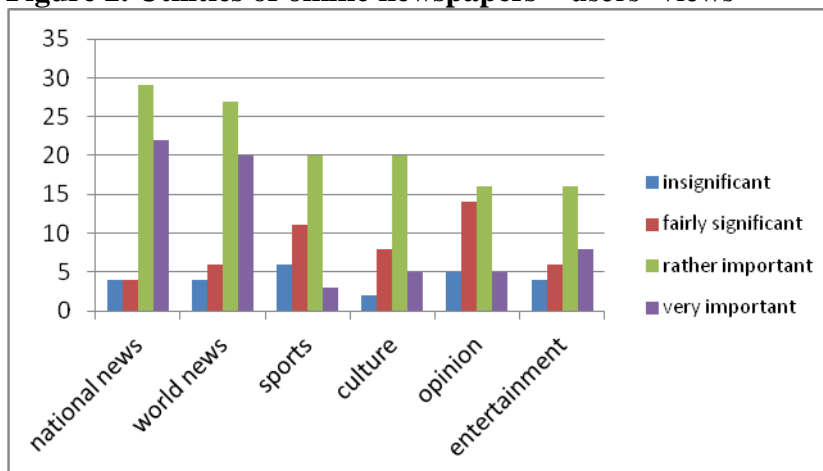
A noticeable tendency may be seen to emerge with respect to the motives for using a traditional newspaper. Traditional print newspapers are predominantly considered as a rather important and very important source of information on national and world news. A lower number of the users perceive them as an important source of information on cultural events and opinions. They constitute a fairly significant source

of information on sports or entertainment. Newspaper websites are also mostly considered as a rather important or very important source of information on national and world news in particular. In comparison with traditional newspapers, they are perceived as a source of greater significance with respect to information on sports, entertainment and culture. Newspaper websites, namely, were more frequently marked as a rather important source of information on these areas of interest.

**Figure 1. Utilities of traditional newspapers – users’ views**



**Figure 2. Utilities of online newspapers – users’ views**



It can be noticed that there are slight differences in the use of both formats of the newspapers. The two editions of the newspapers are used with different motives and are perceived as sources of information on different areas of interest. It is online newspapers that are more frequently treated as a source of entertainment, which may result from an expanded section on soft news on the analyzed websites, relatively rich multimedia content, as well as links to external materials of an entertaining character offered by the newspapers. It is also online newspapers that are considered as a source of information on sports, culture and science more frequently than offline newspapers. These properties of newspapers are associated with the lack of space restrictions and increased storage capacity, which gives online newspapers the possibility of providing

separate sections devoted to specialized areas of interest, with expanded, in-depth illustration of the topics covered.

In contrast to newspaper websites, the primary motive for the use of traditional editions of the newspapers is to obtain information and news, as well as interpretation of facts. The users underlined a noticeable difference between online and traditional newspapers with respect to the content concerning current affairs – with the former, in the users' opinion, offering a more cursory, superficial treatment of the themes in question, without an extended and satisfactory interpretation of the events. It is traditional newspapers, as the readers claim, that serve as a source of more comprehensive analyses and commentaries. These observations are in line with Chan and Leung's (2005) observations that traditional newspapers are more frequently considered as primary sources of information, with online newspapers being regarded as sources complementary to the long-established news dissemination channels.

As far as the evaluation of content is concerned, the offer on national and world news in both editions was assessed as good or very good by the majority of the users. The areas visibly neglected in both editions encompass opinion sections, reportage and cultural information. The majority of the users underlined the need to expand the content devoted to these areas.

### **3.3. Evaluation of the format of traditional and online newspapers**

The respondents were also asked to point out advantages and disadvantages of both formats of the newspapers. The aim was to find out users' preferences concerning the format of the newspapers and their approach to the formats in question. The answers thus shed light on the features of the respective formats which are considered vital, relevant and valuable by the users. The answers provide important insight into users' consumption practices and their approach to print and electronic media as such.

With respect to traditional newspapers, among the aspects evaluated positively were the properties associated with the format and content of the newspaper – the comfort of usage (14%) possibility of transporting it (11%) and clarity of presentation (5%). More specifically, the users commented that a print newspaper:

- has a handy and more permanent format (12%);
- can be easily and effortlessly read (5%);
- may be easily transported, taken everywhere, read on the train, over a coffee, etc. (11%);
- is easily available (7%);
- does not require access to electronic devices (5%);
- offers content presented in a clear and lucid way (5%);
- offers a possibility of rereading articles (4%).

With reference to the content of traditional newspapers, the users underlined that in contrast to a newspaper website, a traditional newspaper:

- provides more reliable and trustworthy information (10%);
- guarantees the authenticity of the facts presented (9%);
- offers a variety of interesting content (3%).

These answers point to the features which the readers consider advantageous and relevant. As it can be seen, the respondents predominantly underlined the advantages resulting from the paper format of the newspaper – the comfort and pleasure of reading such a newspaper. The respondents emphasized that the reading of a traditional newspaper is easier and less demanding and tiring for the eyes. They underlined the advantage of a direct contact with a paper newspaper, the appreciation of the feel and smell of paper, claiming that ‘it creates an intimate, individual relationship with the reader.’ Quite interestingly, the answers have revealed that the users perceive the content of traditional print newspapers as more authentic and reliable. In the users’ opinions as well, the traditional format of a newspaper creates the impression of stability, also recognized as a positive feature. These answers may be seen as a confirmation of Lin and Salwen’s observations that the users appreciate the more permanent physical presence of a newspaper (2006: 220).

The answers pointed to disadvantageous features of the online format of the newspapers as well. It appears that the basic inconvenience associated with website editions of the newspapers is the technological dependence of such formats, i.e. the need of access to a computer and the internet. This, in turn, is further connected with the difficulty the users experience with reading and processing texts displayed on the screen, which, as the respondents emphasized, is more time-consuming and straining for eyesight. Moreover, the enthusiasts of traditional editions pointed out the variability and irregularity of the content presented on the websites of the newspapers as a negative property which decreases the reliability of this source of information. Low dependability of the content offered by the websites may be further strengthened by the anonymity of the authors, as in online articles the identity of the journalists is frequently not disclosed. Moreover, as pointed out by 3% of the respondents, the publications in online editions more often suffer from a low stylistic value and higher frequency of language errors.

These approaches may result from the users’ perception of the web as such, as a medium characterized by freedom of access, egalitarianism and lack of centralized control. Free and unrestricted flow of content and information in particular is assumed to influence the degree of users’ perception of credibility and trustworthiness of the news spread via this medium (Gunter, 2003: 158). These views may also be associated with the presence of user-generated content on some of the websites, which is often perceived as unreliable and subjective.

As far as the advantages of online newspapers are concerned, most of them were associated with the format and functionality of a newspaper website. To the most frequently enumerated advantages belong accessibility (39%), free usage (11%), and currency (7%). More specifically, the users stated that an online newspaper:

- can be easily accessed (39%);
- is available for free (25%);
- is frequently updated (11%);
- provides a search engine (5%);
- offers the possibility of sharing content with others (3%);
- offers thematic segregation of content (4%);
- offers a lot of news in one place (6%).

Moreover, the users underlined the advantages of the medium of publication itself, emphasizing that:

- the access is fast and continuous (21%);
- many newspapers are available in one medium (8%);
- there is no need to leave home to buy a newspaper (5%).

As it can be seen, the users pointed to the advantages of online newspapers resulting from the affordances of the medium. What appears to be particularly useful for the consumers is the currency and up-to-dateness of information. In addition, the readers appreciate the organization and thematic arrangement of the materials, which facilitates the access to and exploration of the content. Still, one of the greatest advantages of newspaper websites is the availability of the content free of charge. It seems, therefore, that the financial aspect is among the decisive factors determining the usage of this edition of the newspaper.

It can be seen that the newspaper websites gain advantage in comparison with traditional print newspapers with their low cost, frequent up-dating and broad scope of publications covered. The cost, restricted range of topics and relatively quick loss of validity are thus the major shortcomings of the traditional newspapers.

### **3.4. Proposals for changes in the traditional and online formats**

The respondents were also asked to suggest the areas which should be modified to improve the quality of both formats of newspapers. The users emphasized the need to broaden the offer on cultural events, reportages, and opinion columns, which was recommended for both offline (8%) and online newspapers (5%). This seems to indicate an important niche which should be filled in order to attract readers and satisfy their needs.

Among other suggestions expressed by the users was the need to provide more visual content – photographs and infographics in print newspapers (6%), and audiovisuals in online newspapers (4%), which, according to the users, would help authenticate the coverage. This suggestion may be associated with the power of the visual, with the role of television, perceived as the central mass medium in use among the respondents, but also with widespread presence of multimedia on the internet. The users also saw the need to decrease the number of advertisements and gossip in both formats of the newspapers.

Quite significantly, the users emphasized that the level of objectivity in newspapers in general should be increased. This suggestion was voiced by 8% of the consumers in the case of traditional and 5% in the case of online newspapers. The readers stated explicitly that there is too much influence and persuasion exerted on the readers instead of pure information.

With respect to online newspapers, the users saw the need to lower the degree of sensationalism of selected newspapers – this in particular was mentioned with reference to the form of headlines (5% of the respondents). The readers underlined that the headlines very often do not inform about the real event described in the story, but dramatize the news in order to increase readership. A number of suggestions (11%) concerned the format of newspapers and the need to facilitate access to the archive, simplify the design of newspapers by reducing the colourfulness of the design and increasing its clarity. The respondents underlined the need to improve the quality of the content– the correctness of the content in general by reducing the occurrence of stylistic and language mistakes.

### **3.5. The use of multimedia and interactive options**

The use of interactive options – encompassing interpersonal interactivity and interactivity with content – remains at a relatively low level, with nearly 55% of the respondents declaring no use of such options. The most frequently used options are commenting (18%), recommending and rating of content (16% and 10%, respectively), and e-mailing (11%). The use of other affordances associated with the functionality of the newspapers is infrequent as well. A considerable number of the respondents (39%) stated they do not use any of the options. Among the options used most frequently were the search engine (34%), the archive (18%), the newsletter (10%), and the log-in option (10%). E-editions were popular among 7% of the users. This proves that the users take advantage of the basic, we may say average and most common interactive tools.

As to the use of multimedia, nearly 50% of the respondents admitted that they view photographs and videos offered by the newspapers, while 37% declared openly that they are not interested in multimedia on the websites. The use of social media remains at a low level as well, with 22% of the users declaring the use of social media profiles of the newspapers on such media sites as Facebook and/or Twitter, mainly to obtain information (13%) and comment on the news (6%). Mobile versions of newspaper websites designed for mobile phones or tablets proved not to be popular as well, with only 14% of the respondents declaring the use of newspapers via these media.

As far as the activity of the users and their interaction with the news outlet are concerned, it turned out that the users are not willing to contribute content to newspapers. Only 13% of the users admitted that they provided content to a newspaper. The content supplied most frequently included letters (6%), photographs (4%), and information about an accident or event (2%).

The use of citizen journalism sections of the newspapers remained at a relatively low level as well. Among the surveyed, 27% declared the use of such sections, while 59% stated that they are not interested in such content. The use and interest in citizen journalism sections, however, does not entail active contribution of materials to the websites. Namely, from among the respondents, only 6% declared that they provided content to such sections. User-generated content in these cases encompassed information about and description of accidents, incidents or other events (3%), and photographs (2%).

### **3.6. The future of newspapers**

The respondents were also asked if print newspapers would survive the web era or would be replaced with online newspapers in the future. The answers to this question prove that the users are not unanimous as far as the future of newspapers is concerned. The respondents predicting the survival and flourishing of traditional print newspapers constituted the majority, with 51% claiming that newspapers will continue to be issued in this form. Nearly 39% of the respondents, however, predicted a demise of this form of publishing in the future, while others (12%) admitted that it is difficult to provide a clear judgment.

Among the most significant properties which make the traditional form imperishable and more durable the respondents enumerated the attachment to tradition (13% of the users). The newspapers, namely, are considered as an element of

tradition, a widely acknowledged and accepted genre with a long history. Moreover, what was emphasized by the users is that throughout ages they have grown accustomed to this format of a newspaper and the practice of reading a traditional newspaper. As one of the respondents stated ‘the reading of a paper newspaper is a form of a ritual.’

Among the reasons given against the survival of the paper form, the users enumerated the inevitability of technological progress, which, in the respondents’ opinion (11%), will unavoidably lead to a replacement of old forms of publishing and disseminating information with newer ones. Other factors in favour of the dominance of online newspaper outlets entail the availability and easier accessibility (15%), free or cheap access to a newspaper website (8%). Quite interestingly, the users emphasized a lower cost of production of online newspapers (5%), as well as its ecological character (3%) as the factors in favour of the future dominance of this format of the press. The respondents also underlined the use and the potential of the internet in the process of the dissemination of information, and contacting with others in general, judging that the internet constitutes the best tool for this purpose.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The results of the survey, the answers provided by the users and their perspectives on online and traditional newspapers confirm the previous observations concerning the use of the press and show that there is low consistency in the consumption of newspapers and reading practices. Instead, a lot of individual factors and preferences play a role in the approach to the press.

However, some common tendencies and preferences may also be seen. With respect to online newspapers in particular, the results confirm currently observed tendencies in society connected with the consumption of information, reading practices and behavioural trends in general. The survey shows that what is the most significant for a consumer nowadays is quick, easy and free access to information which can be quickly and easily processed. What is equally important is accuracy and currency of information, as well as a variety of content. The survey also proves an interest in specialized, more thematically oriented materials.

These approaches, the need for quick information and the desire to satisfy personal interests is also confirmed by the interactive options most frequently used by the respondents, i.e. search engines, newsletters, and archives. The emphasis on the use of these affordances reflects the need the users feel to be informed on a specific area of interest without too much effort.

The survey revealed as well a number of other preferences relevant for both formats of a newspaper. What is particularly meaningful and worth underlining is that among the most crucial aspects influencing the use of newspapers the respondents placed the level of objectivity and credibility that the newspapers represent. Thus, the provision of trustworthy and authentic information may be one of the important roles that newspapers may assume in the midst of the mass of unprofessional and unauthorized news outlets available online.

The expectations the users expressed to be offered more content on reportage and feature stories reveal interest in a personalized, anthropocentric perspective in the news, the desire to see average people and their opinions. Finally, a poor rating of opinion columns in the newspapers proves that the users would appreciate some improvement in this area as well. It may signify that the users expect not only

information, but also interpretation of the events and professional, insightful analyses of the news.

The results are in many cases analogical to the results obtained in previous studies evaluating users' practices and consumption patterns in other countries, e.g. Lin and Salwen's (2006) study of American respondents, de Haenens and others' (2004) and/or Waal and others' (2005) study of Dutch readers. Similar perceptions of the two channels of distribution of news among the readers point to a degree of universality and internationalization of the consumption patterns and users' approaches to newspapers, regardless of the differences in the advancement and diversification of online news outlets in the respective countries.

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