

Web News Readers Have Greater Attention Span: Study

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People who use the Internet to read the news have a greater attention span than print readers, according to a U.S. study that refutes the idea that Web surfers jump around and don't read much.

The EyeTrack07 survey by the Poynter Institute, a Florida-based journalism school, found online readers read 77 percent of what they chose to read while broadsheet newspaper readers read an average of 62 percent, and tabloid readers about 57 percent.

Sara Quinn, director of the Poynter EyeTrack07 project, said this was the first large public study internationally to compare the differences between how people read the news online and in newspapers.

She said they were surprised to find that such a large percentage of story text was read online as this exploded the myth that Web readers had a shorter attention span.

"Nearly two-thirds of online readers, once they chose a particular item to read, read all of text," Quinn told Reuters on Thursday at the American Society of Newspaper Editors' annual conference where the study was released.

"That speaks to the power of long-form journalism."

The study also found that people paid more attention to items written in a question and answer format or as lists, and preferred documentary

news photographs to staged or studio pictures.

The study involved testing nearly 600 readers in four U.S. markets - readers of the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, The St. Petersburg Times in Florida, the Star Tribune of Minneapolis, and the Philadelphia Daily News.

The test subjects, who were 49 percent women and 51 percent men aged between 18 and 60, were asked to read that day's edition in either print or online over 30 publication days.

Two small cameras were mounted above the subject's right eye to monitor what they were reading. They were allowed to read whatever they liked.

The study found about 75 percent of print readers were methodical compared to half of online readers.

Methodical readers tend to read from top to bottom without much scanning around the page, read in a two-page view when reading in print, and re-read some material.

But whether online readers were methodical or scanners, they read about the same volume of story text.

Quinn said a prototype test also found that people answered more questions about a news item correctly if the information had been presented in an alternative manner rather than traditional narrative.

This could have been a question and answer format, a timeline, short sidebar or a list.

"Subjects paid an average of 15 percent more attention to alternative

story forms than to regular story text in print. In broadsheet, this figure rose to 30 percent," the study said.

Large headlines and photos in print were looked at first but online readers went for navigation bars and teasers.

Quinn said more findings from the study would be released at the Poynter conference in April.

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