

Digital assistants hone skills to deliver the news

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"What's the news?" has become a familiar refrain for consumers with smart speakers, opening up a new channel for publishers but also raising concerns about the growing influence of tech platforms in media.

Devices such as Amazon's Alexa-powered speakers, Google Home and Apple HomePod are increasingly delivering [news](#) flashes and summaries, and giving users the option to get more in-depth news, just by asking.

For beleaguered [news organizations](#), voice could be a new channel to connect with consumers seeking updates or specific information on demand.

News organizations such as the BBC, Washington Post and National Public Radio are among those having developed "skills" for digital assistants that enable consumers to listen to updates or other reports.

"Smart speakers are a potentially rich terrain" for news organizations, said Damian Radcliffe, a journalism professor at the University of Oregon.

For consumers, the speakers are being used instead of radio or television for on-demand news.

For struggling news organizations "these technologies create fresh ways to reach news audiences," Radcliffe said.

An Adobe Analytics survey found 32 percent of US households use a smart speaker, with most of them using them daily.

According to an Edison Research report for NPR, 77 percent of consumers said news was an important reason for owning a smart speaker, and that one in three listened to news briefings.

A separate study by Oxford University's Reuters Institute of consumers in the US, Britain, Germany and South Korea found 43 percent used smart speakers to "access the latest news."

Editorial role?

Greg Sterling, a technology analyst and contributing editor to the Search Engine Land blog, said consumers are becoming more comfortable with voice search as the underlying technology improves, and are comfortable with "on demand" services like Netflix or podcasts.

Many news organizations that lost readers in the shift to digital see this as an opportunity, Sterling said.

"A lot of newspapers watched and waited as people took away their audiences, and now they want to get out in front," he said.

The Washington Post—owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos—offers updates on Alexa-powered devices so users may ask, "Alexa, what are my notifications?" or "Alexa, what did I miss?" to hear breaking news.

Rick Edmonds, a media analyst at the Poynter Institute, said there may not be quick payoff though voice-delivered news but that "news organizations see this as a way to build a bigger audience."

Ethical questions

But giving tech platforms a bigger role in delivering news raises a number of ethical and legal questions, says Tim Hwang, head of the Harvard-MIT sponsored Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence Initiative.

"It really puts the platform in the role of curator in a very clear way," Hwang said.

Amid growing concerns on misinformation, Hwang said that device

makers may be in a more difficult position in signaling credibility of certain news sources of reports.

"It's an interesting question about where this news comes from," he said. "We're just getting started with this and we don't have a lot of standards."

The media rights group Reporters Without Borders questions what it will mean to give tech firms' proprietary algorithms more power to choose the news being delivered.

Elodie Vialle, who heads the journalism and technology desk for the organization, said that voice assistants "are liable to reinforce the opaque and often pay-based methods of media content distribution that exist already."

Radcliffe said that "tech companies like Google, Amazon and Apple have already been digital gatekeepers to news for some time," and this is likely to increase with technologies such as smart speakers.

He said the firms need to be more transparent about how they choose news and sources.

"It's not enough to say 'we are not a media company' if you're distributing content, and making decisions about how to distribute it," he added.

Most of the updates are radio-style reports read by humans. But relationships with the news could be transformed if synthetic voices such as those from Alexa and Google are involved.

"A lot of these voices are modeled as being a trusted companion" which is different from the role of a news announcer, says Judith Donath, a

researcher and advisor at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center who is writing a book about technology, trust and deception.

Donath said it is conceivable that computer-generated voices can offer some of the same emotion and tonality people expect, but this raises delicate questions.

"Are we comfortable having news delivered in a voice that conveys an emotional response to a tragedy or happy event, when the emotion was programmed in?" she asked.

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