

Mobile Internet News Consumption: An Analysis of News Preferences and News Values☆

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ABSTRACT

Internet news consumption is rapidly growing in Korea, and majority of that is being done through Naver, Korea's primary search engine. Naver is also the go-to search engine for smartphone use. This study analyzed 824 most popular news accessed via mobile gears; the news items were selected from Naver's 'Daily Top 10 Stories,' dating from March 2016 to December 2016. The results indicate that entertainment news were the most viewed, while political and social issue news were the most liked and commented by mobile users. With regard to news value, 'prominence' and 'impact' were the two most important factors that influenced a user's news selection process in a mobile environment. The degree of a news' 'prominence' was the most important factor that determined the number of views, while 'impact' was critical to determining "the most commented-upon" and "the most liked" news. The results also indicate that mobile news consumers prefer more dramatic storylines and events that incite public anger or grief, threaten the safety of citizens, or evoke emotional sympathy rather than 'hard news' about such subjects as politics and economics.

☞ keyword: Mobile News, News Preferences, News Values, Naver User Rankings

1. Introduction

The number of people getting their news from mobile devices continues to increase at a rapid pace in Korea. User rankings based on their mobile news consumption serve to provide data on the most popular stories, while the permanent availability of click rates for news stories, reader comments, and key figures of social media activity is changing the dynamic between journalism and its audiences [1]. Due to the difficult economic situation for many news entities, newsrooms are ever more sensitive to these 'click rate' data, and to shore up their numbers, media entities are investing more resources into creating new ways of reaching more audiences, especially via mobile platforms. On the other side, there are the mobile users who have various news sites literally at their fingertips thanks to the internet, and they are more than ever actively engaged in news production

and distribution [2].

According to Korea Press Foundation and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism [3], internet news accounts for more than 60% of the total news consumed by Koreans, and majority of them favor Naver, the primary search engine in Korea, as their default news portal. It should also be noted that the growth of mobile news and its impact on news users will clearly affect the future of the news industry [4]. For example, widespread usage of mobile devices has changed what we think of as traditional way of consuming news. It appears that mobile news users have distinctive media usage patterns and news preferences [5]. Understanding the preferences of these mobile news users will be invaluable for all news providers.

Previous researches such as Kim & Jung [2] and Pew Research Center [6] suggest that mobile news users have these tendencies; they are likely to follow the news often, use multiple news platforms/sources, seek practical utilities from news information, value highly news site portals, and share content with others via social media. There also seems to exist some interplay between popular news items and their intrinsic news values, as well as with the interactivity among news users [8].

Against this background, this study attempted to examine user preferences and news values to analyze if there is any

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correlation between the most viewed news items and preferred news values indicated by mobile news users. It also focused on analyzing the characteristics of mobile news classified by Naver news sites, which are comprised of three separately ranked categories; the most viewed news, the most commented-upon news and the most liked news. Specifically, a quantitative content analysis was conducted with regards to Naver's mobile news to determine what news values, story topics and story types (hard or soft) were present in the mobile ranking of news stories.

2. Literature Review

2.1. News Use and User Rankings

Despite continued growth in online and mobile news usage, most news organizations have found the transition to revenue-producing business model difficult. To this end, they have worked diligently to generate higher 'media use' across different platforms. However, even though media scholars tend to assume 'media use' as an indicator of popularity or diffusion, 'media use' alone does not fully reveal the complexity of online news consumption. Many online news use studies are classified under the uses and gratification approach that presupposes rational and proactive uses of media to fulfill certain needs or gratification, while another group of studies on the use of online news tilt toward measuring the displacement effect of the internet on the use of traditional media.

In this context, news user rankings promise new insights for the media outlets. The news ranking system enables news organization to utilize user patterns to measure what stories the public perceives is of the most interest to them as well as what news the news user is reading and interacting with at any given moment. Although user ranking system still remains "black boxes," because the algorithms upon which they are based are kept secret by the owner of the respective websites [7], different types of user rankings allow insight into the internet audience's news selection process in a very differentiated manner and almost in real time, without being biased by possible retention errors or by social desirability [8]. Online news readers of today, with the click of their fingers, are able to increasingly influence what news stories

are featured more prominently on news sites, however, this kind of audience selection process may conversely affect the journalistic selection of news [7].

Existing researches suggest that online news media is interactive in nature, enabling readers to interact with others [9]. Due to the more interactive feature of mobile media, news readers can now easily share news and express their opinions to others by posting comments to social networking sites or on the news articles directly. Many news organizations, in order to allow public access to online news readers' data, choose to list the most popular or most-viewed stories on the homepage of their websites. Meanwhile, news editors use the aggregated data from news sources, the number of news clicks and engagements by readers to make online or mobile story placement decisions. Naver does this by providing its users with four different mobile news categories as follows; the most viewed news, the most commented-upon news, the most liked news, and the most shared news on SNS. Such categorization reflects news users' influence on news classification and even on the news values which, in the past, were determined by journalists.

Of course, there are criticisms of the page-view driven system in that it does not necessarily provide a solid gauge for general public interest or journalistic importance, but rather what is most popular at the moment [10]. Nevertheless, these lists do provide researchers access to information that can illuminate what types of online stories readers prefer [8]. Also, user rankings can also be considered a feedback channel, by which the audience influences the decisions of news editors, although this process may often occur unintentionally and unknowingly [11].

2.2 News preferences of topics and news values

Frequent users of online versions of newspapers and readers of free dailies were found to adopt mobile news at a higher rate than the general public. For the online news audience, entertainment news topics (such as animals, curiosity, humor) were the mainstay [8], while mobile news users preferred more information-driven content soft news such as 'lifestyle' [12]. Meanwhile, Wendelin, et. al. [11] found that journalists preferred political issues and neglected

soft news, while the internet audiences favored soft news over political news. In this regard, user rankings mirror closest the offline tabloids in terms of topic selection. Their results also suggested that the tabloid press is trying hard to appeal to mainstream audiences [13].

In terms of news value, it is a relevant criterion for both journalists and their internet audiences. News values are not simply qualities that define news stories, but characteristics of journalists and their judgment about the relevance of news factors [14]. Historically, journalists relied on a story's news value to determine whether it was worthy of publication. Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge introduced the concept of "news values", arguing that journalists relied on twelve different values to determine the "newsworthiness" of an event [15]. News values as currently accepted include categories such as conflict, human interest, magnitude, unusual nature, prominence, proximity, tragedy and timeliness [16][17].

The most relevant 'news values' to online news readers were 'proximity' and 'conflict', while the least relevant were 'timeliness' and 'prominence'. Not surprisingly, news stories that incorporated the greatest number of news values were the ones most likely to be selected by readers [8]. According to one of the earliest researches about online news consumption, 'crime and disaster' news were heavily favored by the public. Same study also revealed that the most-viewed category among the twelve measured topic categories was lifestyle, followed by crime and disaster [18]. The Pew Institute [6] also revealed that the topics generally preferred by the average news reader have not deviated significantly in the past twenty years. According to the report, of all the news categories studied - from political scandals to natural disasters - only the money news category trended upwards. However, some critics still suggest that there has been a shift in content from hard news to soft news in the United States [19]. For the last few decades, it has been argued, "the trend toward soft news has contributed to declining interest in the news" [19].

Concerning news topics and news rankings, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein show that news stories focusing on public affairs were more likely to appear on rankings of the most commented-upon stories (selective participation) than on rankings of most viewed and most e-mailed articles [11]. These findings suggest that topic selection among journalists

and the internet audience vary across public and nonpublic affairs [7], the press preferring to report on public affairs while online news users preferring to read and share nonpublic affairs topics. In user rankings of the most commented-upon stories, social-significance dimension of the news was most significant factor [20][21]. These researches suggested that news factors and topics are not necessarily independent from one another [14] [22], and on the basis of the few such studies available and their findings, we formulated the following research questions;

RQ1: What are the characteristics of mobile Internet news that are highly rated by the audience?

RQ2: What are the similarities and differences among the most viewed news, the most commented-upon news and the most liked news stories in terms of news values and topics?

RQ3: What are the story characteristics that rate highly in all three categories concurrently?

3. Methods

3.1. Data Gathering and Sampling

The present study analyzed a sample total of 824 news items which were ranked by Naver as belonging in the 'top 10 stories', based on their 2016 ranking system. With the 'top 10 stories' across different categories, Naver provided to users a broader range of topics and news values, which in turn facilitated a well-rounded view of the average mobile Internet news user's topic preference. Using individual stories as the unit of analysis, we examined and analyzed what mobile news readers found newsworthy.

We chose to analyze the data from Naver, Korea's dominant web news portal, because it posts daily news user rankings for those who accessed news via mobile connection. We collected 28 days of sample data from 2016. 'Top 10 Stories' (n=824) with the highest page views, the most commented-upon, and the most liked were collected at 12:00 a.m. each day for the second week of March, June, September and December, using open tracking online metrics provided by Naver's software program. This specific time was chosen because traffic on Naver.com is generally at its lowest during the hour, and we also excluded sports news

(Table 1) Cross Tab: News Topics & User Rankings

	Politics	Economy	Social issues	Life/Culture	World	Entertainment	Total(n)	X ² (df)
Most Viewed	55	13	63	11	9	110	280	215,650(6)***
Most Commented	112	8	103	3	5	39	280	341.800(6)***
Most Liked	77	9	140	8	14	1	264	427.939(6)**
Total(N)	244	30	306	22	28	150	824	

p<0.05*, p<0.01**, p<0.001***

from our study samples.

Those samples belonged to three different categories: the most viewed(280), the most commented-upon(280), and the most liked news (264). The most viewed news were counted daily according to the number of user clicks. The most commented-upon news were counted daily according to the number of user comments. The most liked news were counted daily according to the number of user clicks of the ‘like’ icon, the icon indicating the user’s support, agreement, or sympathy for the news in question.

3.2. Coding

News samples were coded by two communication major graduate students for the following: news topics (politics, economy, social issues, lifestyle/culture, IT, world, entertainment, etc.), themes(crime/safety, politics, economy, education, health, living/culture, entertainment, oddity/bizarre, emotion, weather, etc.), story forms(text, text & picture, text & picture & graphic, text & graphic, graphic & picture, etc.), news types(hard news or soft news), tones (positive, negative, or neutral), news styles (straight, analysis/explanation, feature, opinion, picture), and news values(conflict, human interest, impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, tragedy/disaster, usefulness, etc.)[14][15]. Each variable was operationally defined. Among variables, the categories of news topics were drawn from the news categories that Naver used on its news service. News themes include slightly different categories of news topics, in order to reflect the traditional classifications used in past studies.

In order to test the inter-coder reliability with Scott’s Pi index was calculated. 80 articles (9.7%) out of the total 824 were selected and two coders analyzed those articles. The lowest coder-agreement was .89 which coded the news values. Since the inter-coder reliability was satisfied, we proceeded

with the coding process.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of highly ranked mobile news

The results show that the average number of views for news stories in the ‘most viewed’ category was 606,521. Among these, 18 were viewed more than a million times. The average number of comments for news stories in the ‘most commented-upon’ category was 3,872, and the average number of ‘likes’ for news stories in the ‘most liked’ category was 1,761. The cross tabulation analysis of news topics and user rankings shows that the ‘most viewed’ news were came from entertainment stories (39.3%), followed by social issues (22.5%) and political stories (19.6%). For ‘commented-upon’ category, political stories (40%) rated the highest, followed closely by social issues (36.8%). In the most liked category, social issues (50%) was the top topic, followed by political stories (27.5%). And these results were statistically significant(see Table 1)

These results indicate that the mobile news users tend to consume more entertainment stories, which are typically ‘soft’ in nature, than any other topics. Without the impeachment news of former Korean president Park Geun-hye, which was a huge deal in the second week of December, the average views for entertainment news would have been even higher. In fact, the percentage of entertainment stories spikes to 46.2% if the second week of December is excluded from the study sample. Our result, that there is a dominant preference for entertainment news among Korea’s general public, supports the argument of previous studies that user rankings most closely resemble those of offline tabloid journalism in

terms of topic selection by users.

Meanwhile, the ‘most commented-upon’ news topic was politics, followed by social issues. This result suggests that mobile news users are likely to be active participants in news and its consumption, expressing and sharing their opinions on political and social issues. Another noteworthy result is that a similar pattern was found in the cross-tabulation analysis of news types and user rankings. 58.9% of the most commented-upon stories were hard news, whereas for ‘most viewed’ stories 64.6% was soft news (See Table 2). In terms of news tone in the ‘most viewed’ category, negative stories (45.4%) ranked significantly higher than neutral stories (39.6%) or positive stories (15%). Negative stories (47.9% %) also ranked significantly higher than the neutral stories (23.9%) or the positive stories (22.5%) in the ‘most commented-upon’ category. Negative story usually means a critical narrative. Our results show that negativity/ criticism has a strong appeal to audiences in their mobile news consumption.

(Table 2) Cross-Tab.: News Type & User Rankings

	Hard	Soft	Non	Total(n)	X ² (df)
Most Viewed	97	181	2	280	171.864***(2)
Most Commented	165	115	0	280	8.929**(1)
Most Liked	127	137	0	264	.379(1)X
Total(N)	389	433	2	824	

X² 36,277, df=4, p<0.05*, p<0.01**, p<0.001***

4.2. News values, news media and mobile user rankings

With regards to correlation between news value and user rankings, the ‘most viewed’ stories were associated overwhelmingly with the news value, ‘prominence’(41.4%), among the eight values considered. The ‘most commented-upon’ news, on the other hand, was most closely associated with news values ‘impact’(28.2%) and ‘conflict’(27.5%). The news value of the ‘most liked’ stories was associated closely with ‘impact’(28.2%). ‘Prominence’ as preeminent news value for the ‘most viewed’ category likely is a reflection of the internet news user’s outsized preference for entertainment news, which deal mainly with show business celebrities of ‘prominence’. By contrast, the ‘most commented-upon’ stories and the ‘most liked’ stories have close association with news values ‘conflict’ and ‘social impact’ which are reflective of hard news. (See Table 3)

The relationship between news media and user rankings is also interesting. In the most viewed stories, ‘sports’ and ‘entertainment’ news media are the main news providers (36.1%), followed by news wire services(30%). Many daily newspapers and national broadcasters, the traditional ‘mainstream media’, accounted for only 16% and 10%, respectively. Especially noteworthy was news from wire services like ‘Yonhap’ and ‘Newsis’ accounting for 55.7% in the ‘most commented’ stories and 45.1% in the ‘most liked’ stories. This result is important in that wire services are now playing the role of the mainstream media, at least for the mobile news users, having surpassed newspapers and broadcasters as main news providers. However, this may be problematic for the news environment in general; with only three news wire services providing a lion’s share of popular

(Table 3) Cross Tab: News Values&User Rankings

	Conflict	Human interest	Impact	Timeliness	Prominence	Proximity	Tragedy/Disaster	X ² (df)
Most Viewed	31	9	70	26	116	7	12	372.757(8)***
Most Commented	77	3	79	46	51	6	12	369.514(8)***
Most liked	54	35	74	44	16	5	23	160.364(8)***
Total(N)	162	47	223	116	183	18	47	

p<0.05*, p<0.01**, p<0.001***

news compared to what 19 daily newspapers and 10 broadcasters supply daily on Naver, a balanced reporting could be at jeopardy.

4.3. Characteristics of Top 10 ranked stories in all three categories

Of the 824 news stories analyzed, 171 were ranked in the top 10 in all three categories. These stories are worth reviewing separately because they can show the characteristics of news which are popular, participative, and empathetic at the same time. These stories are mainly related with 'social issues' (49%) in news topics, 'hard news' (60.2%) in news types, 'negative'(53.8%) in news tone, and 'impact' (32.2%) in news values. Dividing these stories by sub-themes, 'crime/safety' was the most dominant topic with 39.2% share.

Among the 171 stories, there were three articles that ranked first in all three categories on the same day. One was a story about a seven-year-old child who was abused by his stepmother and buried secretly in a mountain (March, 12, 2016). This story was the top for the 'most viewed' category with more than 1.7 million clicks (7,799 comments, 3,475 likes). The other two were political news related to the former president Park Geun-hye. One was the news that Korean National Assembly had passed an official resolution to impeach president Park Geun-Hye(December, 9, 2016). The story got 1,348,054 clicks, 17,465 comments and 19,440 likes. The last one was also a report on Park, criticizing her for wasting 90 minutes on her hair on the same day as the Sewol ferry disaster(December 6, 2016). This news story garnered more than 1.3million views (1,310,645 clicks, 17,173 comments, and 13,646 likes).

However, there existed a significant difference among the top three ranked 'most viewed', the 'most commented-upon', and the 'most liked' stories regarding sub-themes. 'Entertainment' was popular in the most viewed stories (33%), while 'crimes/accidents' and 'social affairs' were more popular in other categories(51.5%, 50%). This result suggests that the essence of news, which provides audience with a report of recent events, is still the most appealing to the active and participatory news readers. The two sub-categories also seemed to encourage mobile news users

to support or sympathize with related news stories by clicking 'likes'.

Among the top ten ranked news stories across all three categories, those related to inhumane/cruel news and those threatening 'public safety' were also very popular with mobile news users. For instance, a news story in which a 20-year-old female teacher was raped by three students' parents at an island school resulted in many views, comments and sympathies. Among 18 news stories which had more than 1 million views, 5 were about crimes and their victims. The story about South Korean Go master Lee Se-dol and 'AlphaGo' in their man-versus-computer saga was also highly ranked in all three categories. The results indicate that news stories that rouse public anger or grief, threaten the safety of the people, or evoke emotional sympathy have strong appeal to mobile news audiences.

5. Conclusion & Discussion

No research has been done on the news values and news topic preferences present in the 'most-viewed' and the 'most commented-upon' mobile news stories. This research attempted to figure out which news topics and news values selected by the mobile readers are most attractive to them. Specifically, the correlation of news topics and user rankings as well as that of news values was analyzed for the 'most viewed' stories, the 'most commented-upon' and the 'most liked' stories.

The assumption made with mobile news ranking is that mobile news readers are clicking the stories they believe are most newsworthy. The topics measured in this study were politics, economy, social issues, lifestyle/culture, world, entertainment and other. And the presence of news values such as conflict, human interests, impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, and tragedy/ disaster was also examined with regards to news user rankings. In order to evaluate mobile users' preferences on news topics and values, the study further analyzed news types and news sources.

The major findings of the research supported previous studies in that mobile news readers are more likely to click non-public affair news stories such as entertainments, sports and crimes, which are often labelled "tabloid journalism"

topics. Of particular note was that the ‘most viewed’ mobile user rankings were similar to the offline tabloid in terms of topic selection. This finding could be explained by the tabloid press’s effort to appeal to mainstream news audiences [11].

On the other hand, it was found that mobile news users actively interacted with ‘comments’ when it came to public affair news such as ‘politics’ and ‘social issues’. This result implies that there is potential for growth in participatory journalism spearheaded by mobile news users. Of the 824 news stories analyzed, 171 top 10 ranked news across all three categories were mainly hard, negative news with social implications such as inhumane acts of crime and ‘public safety’ issues.

These somewhat contradictory findings suggest that the growing importance of mobile news consumption can accelerate the change of news preferences and news values further and perhaps even the role of news media. In fact, the result shows that in the most viewed mobile news, ‘sports’ and ‘entertainment’ news media are the main news providers, followed by news wire services. Especially, the role of wire services is increasing in the mobile news platform, replacing that of mainstream daily newspapers and national broadcasters. Thus, further examination of how Naver decides the placements of news and by whom, and how real-time user ranking system actually works is critical.

Finally, this study has several limitations. First, it does not represent all of the mobile news stories because of limited sampling size and period, and thus the results cannot be generalized to cover all mainstream mobile news. Another limitation is that user ranking system itself, which measures only the number of clicks (automatically) and not necessarily whether a story is actually read or not. It should also be noted that the topic categories of news and its placement dictated by Naver may affect the likelihood the story will be viewed. Lastly, though this study analyzed mobile news stories according to traditional news values, future research could include the addition of other news values such as usefulness, emotion, deviance, etc. Moreover, what the mobile users will deem in the future as the standards of ‘quality journalism’ should be further explored.

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