
E-MEDIA & THE INDIAN JOURNALIST

-A STUDY CONDUCTED BY PR PUNDIT -

While there is little doubt that the immediacy of the web threatens to make any other form of communication seem almost obsolete, the penetration of Internet services has been relatively slow amongst media in India. Many corporations have begun to include web sites and other new media vehicles in their outreach programs. However, in their rush to go on-line, they may not have paid adequate attention as to how the media and other key audiences are utilising these vehicles. There do not appear to be any studies that analyse how Indian journalists utilise the Internet to gather necessary information.

PR Pundit has recently concluded a study amongst business & economic journalists in the metro cities of India with the objective to provide a preliminary assessment of how new media vehicles have begun to change the way Indian journalists access information.

The study attempted to answer questions like: are journalists open to receiving information by e-mail? Which features of the Internet do they find most useful and what types of information are they seeking? What are the preferred methods of receiving solicited information? How do journalists locate web sites? How frequently do they access the Internet and how many different web sites do they visit over the course of a month?

1. SURVEY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 To explore these and several other issues, a questionnaire containing 12 close-ended questions was designed and sent to 140 journalists from 32 publications in the cities of New Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai and Calcutta. These publications comprised mainline & business dailies, wire services, regional and language press, business and general interest magazines and also foreign media.

1.2 The journalists targeted for response were reporters and correspondents from the *corporate and economic bureaus only*. Further, an average of four journalists, covering different beats in each publication was targeted. The questionnaire was sent to an average of five journalists per business publication -- which have large corporate bureaus. Only chief of bureaus were contacted from the language press.

1.3 45 responses were received. 100 per cent response was received from the business dailies, magazines and wire services; 57 per cent from other mainline and regional dailies; none from the language press and 66 per cent from foreign media. Ten journalists were subsequently contacted for more in-depth interviews.

1.4 Targeted Publications:

Business Dailies

The Economic Times, Business Standard, The Financial Express, The Hindu Business Line and The Observer of Business & Politics.

Mainline Dailies

The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Indian Express, The Hindu, The Asian Age, The Pioneer and The Telegraph.

Wire Services

PTI and UNI.

Magazines

Business World, Business Today, Business India, Outlook and A&M.

Regional & Language

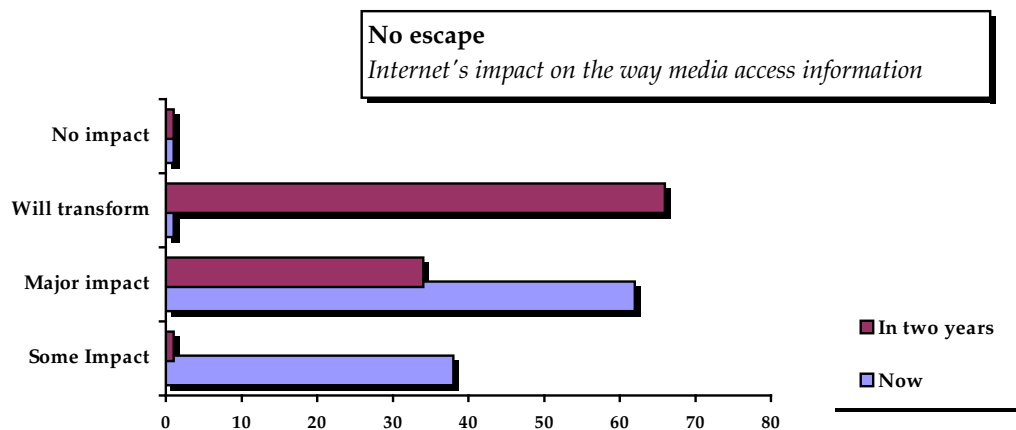
Afternoon Despatch & Courier, Amar Ujala, Anandabazar Patrika, Dainik Jagaran, Deccan Herald, Eenadu, Free Press Journal, Jansatta, Midday, Navbharat Times and Rajasthan Patrika.

International

Bloomberg, Dow Jones Newswires and Reuters.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 IMPACT ON THE WAY JOURNALISTS ACCESS INFORMATION



All respondents were convinced that the Internet had the potential of transforming the way journalists access information. 62 per cent of the journalists believe that the Internet has already had a major impact; while 38 per cent of the journalists believe it has had some impact now.

In two years, Internet will transform the way journalists access information, say 66 per cent of the respondents. 34 per cent believe that it will have a major impact in times to come.

In discussing how the Internet is transforming journalism, one respondent said, "One frequently gets onto the net to get background information on a company or retrieve some archival data. Also, to some extent, Internet has

helped eliminate hoarding heaps of paper and documents– all you need is a precise address, and the inclination.” As for the future, “time will come when we will realise how best to use Internet, and then all other communication tools will become redundant.”

2.2 ACCESS TO INTERNET AND USAGE PATTERNS

94 per cent journalists have access to Internet, either at their workplace or at home. 71 per cent of respondents indicated they access Internet on a daily basis. 11 per cent indicated weekly access and nine per cent monthly. A small nine per cent marked rarely or never.

Follow-up conversations with respondents revealed a high level of interest in this new ‘gizmo’, but many said that since they do not have individual access, use of the Web is restricted, and is a time-consuming activity. One editor sums up: *“Most newspaper management’s tend to view use of the Web by employees during and off working hours with suspicion. Also, a lot of the correspondents are too bogged down with interviews, editing, filing copy, and press conferences to surf the Web for too long except for downloading desired information. Though many of them also have e-mail accounts they are not too frequent users of these.”* One journalist remarked, *“We have one terminal for a staff of 20.”*

When asked how many different web sites they had visited over the past month, 17 per cent indicated between 1-5; 29 per cent 5-10; 37 per cent from 10-25 and, 17 per cent over 25. The response varied regionally. Journalists in Bangalore indicated least amount of web sites visited, with no journalist marking over 10. Journalists in Chennai visited maximum web sites, and none marked below 25. All journalists in New Delhi and Mumbai visited between 10-25 web sites.

‘Search engines’ were by far the most popular method of locating new web sites, with 60 per cent of the respondents relying on these. Besides the popular Yahoo!’s and Infoseek’s, Indiatimes.com had a high recall for searching India related information. The second most popular method for locating web sites was ‘links’ with 20 per cent of journalists preferring this method. 14 per cent respondents preferred ‘announcements and releases’, and 11 per cent relied on ‘advertisements’.

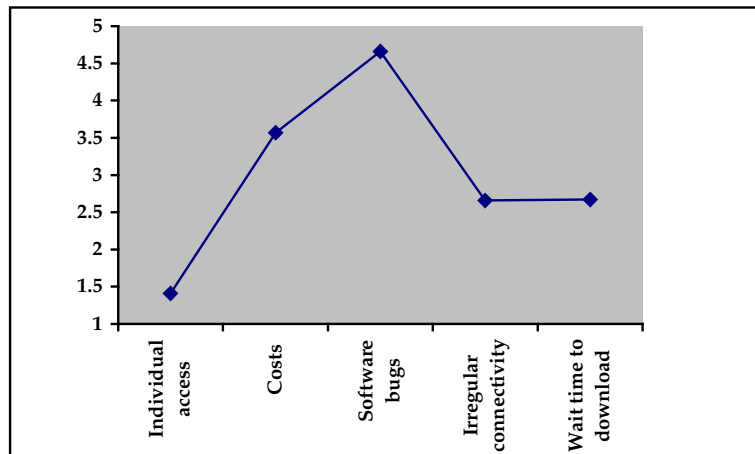
2.3 ATTRIBUTES FOR RESTRICTED USE

Many reasons

This was interesting! While majority of journalists believe that lack of individual terminal access is *the* most critical attribute for restricted use of this new medium, follow-up conversations revealed two interesting attributes for limited usage:

- Lack of awareness of the potential of this medium; and,
- Lack of adequate **relevant** information on the web sites of Indian corporations.

Many journalists believe that one of the greater stumbling blocks for limited usage of the Internet is not much related to its access or irregular connectivity, but related to the understanding of how to optimally use and utilise the plethora of different kinds of information available. Say's one journalist, "*Lack of knowledge about the Internet and its capabilities is a major hurdle for Indian journalists today.*"



(1-most critical; 5-least critical)

This could well be related to attitude and low inclination towards use of any new technology, argues another journalist. Sharing similar concerns one journalist remarked: "*Journalists in India are not yet aware of Internet's immense potential.*" And another more candid journalist remarked: "*We are still trying to learn more and more...!*"

On the other hand, there was a set of Internet-savvy journalists who shared concerns about the lack of availability of *quality information* on most Indian Company web sites. Majority of these sites contain the regular sections like the pressroom and mundane information about the company and its products or services. How many megabytes a site holds is no indication or guarantee of quality information on it. Says one journalist, "*Indian corporations have to learn to use Internet effectively as well. Many of them have sizes, but not enough information on them.*" Another journalist remarked, "*For journalists, access to Internet is a boon as information otherwise is pretty difficult to come by in this country...most organisations have not invested in research information...*".

Costs, irregular connectivity and wait time to download were stated as other important attributes for limited usage of Internet. Said one journalist, "*The Internet continues to be a costly affair for the average journalist. Very few have it at home, and at work, time is often a restraining factor.*"

2.4 INTERNET INFORMATION & FEATURES

60 per cent of the respondents look for industry information, research reports and economic statistics on the Internet. Press releases and speeches were not solicited on-line, but were referred to from archives for gaining understanding of an issue or for general information. Archive data and general background information were other kinds of information frequently solicited on the net. However, one journalist re-iterated, *"Information on web sites was restricted to mundane material, and no real value-add information is available"*.

Elaborating on the kind of information Indian corporations should include in their web sites one respondent said, *"Indian journalists can tap very limited information on local issues. There is very limited industry information, research material & comparative figures."* For example, the journalist added, *"If one is following the pharmaceutical beat and logs onto a company's web site - there is very limited information available on domestic industry trends, copies of research analysts reports, company's own assessment of how policies are likely to impact their businesses, etc."*

Speed, email and search ability of the Internet was found most useful features. Option of on-line conferences was not considered particularly useful. However follow-up conversations revealed most respondents based their disinterest on the general lack of awareness of how these vehicles can be utilised.

As technology advances, and software programs such as Lotus Notes and Microsoft Exchange grow in popularity, more organisations may begin to host interactive applications. These vehicles may come to provide valuable feedback and offer tremendous potential to organisations that wish to use these vehicles to conduct research and to test new concepts and messages.

2.5 E-MAIL

94 per cent of the journalists had e-mail addresses, and were willing to share addresses with marketers and corporate communicators. However, in the same voice, all respondents were highly concerned and sensitive about being inundated with unwanted and unnecessary information. It was distinctly felt that the journalist's ease and comfort of sharing e-mail addresses was restricted with people they know or for specific requests only.

Remarked one of the journalists, *"Press releases and tonnes of other corporate information tend to pile up on my desk. E-mail gets almost immediate attention and therefore to avoid receiving thirty to forty messages everyday, I prefer making contact by phone and then requesting the option of e-mail delivery."*

Sharing similar concerns, said one journalist, *"e-mail is useful for receiving solicited information. This however is most often not the case. The attitude is - let's send it by e-mail anyway"*.

One wire service noted that they did have an e-mail address, but correspondents did not have individual addresses, making the use of e-mail difficult to manage. It was also stated they were still away from offering individual access to the Internet from journalist's PC's.

51 per cent of the respondents who had e-mail addresses had both official and personal accounts. 29 per cent had only personal accounts and 14 per cent had only official accounts.

2.6 PREFERRED METHOD OF RECEIVING SOLICITED INFORMATION

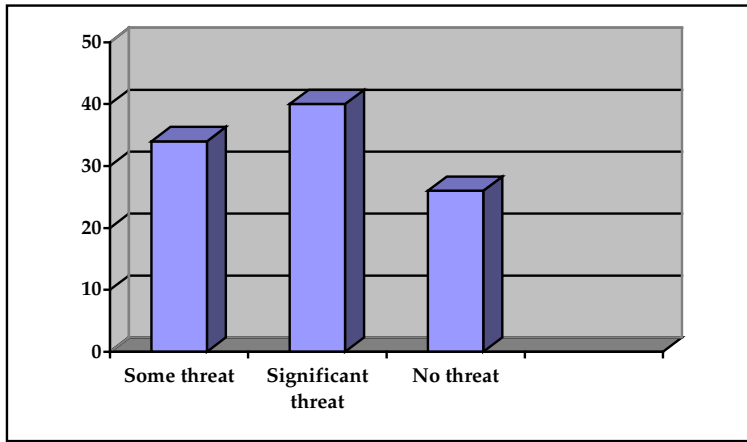
While a clear-cut preference could not be established, facsimile and e-mail are the most preferred methods for delivery of solicited information. E-mail exhibited a mean score of 1.8, marginally higher than facsimile (1.9). However, journalists prefer to receive 'urgent and important' information by facsimile. When asked to elaborate 'urgent and important', one reporter remarked, *"Not the standard press releases"*. This also indicates that effective delivery of press materials by e-mail and the web may still be premature. Surprisingly, receiving information by phone ranked higher (2.9) than traditional mail (3.25).

Technical issues also influenced these preferences. One reporter said, *"If the access to Internet is restricted at work, there is a time lag, hence relevance of important information may get lost."*

2.7 THREAT TO WIRES

74 per cent of the respondents believe that the Internet could pose some or significant threat to the wire services. Significantly, journalists from the wire services themselves believe that in years to come newer media could pose a significant threat to the traditional wire services. Others believe that the Internet does not have the potential to pose any threat to the wire services. Says one journalist, *"...but no way can Internet even make a dent in the print medium, especially news and features."*

Time will tell



3. CONCLUSION

By the end of 1999, the number of cities and towns in India with Internet access is expected to go up from current 40 to over 70. 1.5 million users online by year 2000. 10 national ISP's, 15 regional ones, and close to a hundred city-based Internet access providers. From growing MNC investments in local Internet companies to increased awareness of information-age strategies by Indian corporates, the writing is on the wall – the Internet revolution is being unleashed.

Journalists (and consumers) have strong expectations from the web sites they visit. When going online, the journalist is meeting the brand directly – an important relationship is being developed. The challenge for the corporate marketer is to match these expectations and strengthen relationships.

A journalist from a rather traditional publication remarked: "*Internet will undoubtedly be the medium of communication in the next century.*" While this may be true, there remains a lacuna in most journalist's mind as to how this medium can be effectively used to retrieve 'applicable information'. It is critical for marketers to understand the needs of this crucial audience, and make attempts to utilise this indispensable tool to effectively disseminate valuable information. **Web users, including journalists will not go online to read an advertisement – they will visit web sites that contain valuable up-to-date information.** Also, web presence is an evolving (and not static) process. To treat it as such would be undermining the potential of this interactive medium.

Another important aspect of this study is the apparent lack of interest (or lack of inclination) amongst the language press. Considering that the **top ten all India** urban and rural publications, having a combined readership of close to an astounding 73 million*, are language or vernacular press, corporations may seriously consider the option of providing online information in Indian languages. Well, if L'Oreal has option for web users to read its site in French, why cannot a Ranbaxy (or even L'Oreal India) provide the option to read in Hindi or Tamil?

Further, it is important for marketers to treat the new media as a valuable tool that complements, rather than replaces, traditional communication methods. The time has not arrived when traditional methods of communications can be ignored in favour of e-mail, the web and other new media vehicles.

For trends in e-technology usage patterns by media across the world refer to Annexure II in this document entitled "International Study of Journalist Attitudes towards using Technology".

*Source: Business India

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop - Your Practical Interface With Media, held in New Delhi on August 24, 1999)