

News Crawl: News-Nuggets or Fool s 'Gold?

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The relatively new development of the news crawl is sweeping cable news stations and spreading. What is news crawl? Also known simply as the crawl, it is the set of words that creep along at the bottom of the TV screen offering headline-style bits of data to viewers. Crawl is a form of dissemination in the information transfer process. The question is raised of whether dissemination in this form can effectively lead to diffusion and utilization, and who the crawl is geared towards.

News crawl came into vogue on September 11, 2001, but the concept behind it can be traced back to the stock market ticker. In 1869, Thomas Edison made an improvement in the stock ticker, calling it the Edison Universal Stock Ticker. This earned him \$40,000 and the patent on it. The stock ticker evolved from telegraph technology.

Now fast forward into the 20th century. Bloomberg Television is widely credited with bringing the internet web-site look to the U.S. television screen. As a financial television show, it has the lower part of its screen covered by a stock market ticker, while there are other graphics and videos showing on the upper part of the screen. The stock market ticker quickly displays the stock prices, scrolling them across the screen from right to left.

Less than a decade after Bloomberg Television's introduction, CNN Headline News was being revamped. It used a format that has been compared to Bloomberg, although Teya Ryan, the executive vice president and general manager of CNN Headline News, denied the influence (McClelland & Kerschbaumer, 2001). The new CNN Headline News format debuted on August 6, 2001 and featured news headlines appearing on the screen, along with other graphics.

A little over a month later, the events of 9/11 occurred. The September 11 terrorist attacks made Americans want updated information instantaneously. Almost every major news and cable news channel quickly added headlines to scrolling marquees to try to capture audiences

and to keep Americans informed. Susan Bunda, a senior vice president CNN/U.S. said, "It was very clear to us from the events of September 11 that the viewers just wanted as much information as we could give them. We found it [news crawl] an effective way to give more information" (Johnson, 2002).

While everyday news crawl has disappeared from the network channels, except for winter school closings and severe weather warnings, the cable TV news channels have kept the crawl; it appears to be a television fixture. There are disadvantages to news crawl as a means of dissemination, but there are also reasons why it is still with us. Ironically, the two are intertwined. The cable news industry is giving the American people the news crawl because Americans like it and want it, despite the concerns of how the information is being disseminated.

The issues of concern around news crawl include whether information is received in context; the actual content of the information; the sense of urgency that the form of the news crawl conveys; and the degree of distraction that it provides.

The crawls repeat up to 80 headlines in a 7-to-15-minute loop, with news-desk editors and writers inserting new headlines to replace old ones as they arise (Wolk, 2001). With only a sentence, the context and the content of the information being delivered is minimal. Unlike the early days of the crawl, when the information was all about the terrorist attacks, the crawl today covers bits of information from all over the country and the world. One news bit might touch on the number of SARS deaths in the world, with the next covering a recent murder in Seattle. The TV watcher is assumed to know the context of these headlines and why these updates are important. McClellan and Kerschbaumer (2001) quote Jill Geisler from Poynter Institute. "Crawls are good journalism when they augment a program in progress with important news told in context. They are bad journalism when they are dated, incomplete, alarmist or misleading." The content

being disseminated is a kernel of information that the TV station deems to be news-worthy and important. The content of the information is affected by the form of the crawl because of its historical use by television stations.

The crawl was originally intended to convey urgent and important information to TV audiences. It was information of critical importance to their health or safety, such as a warning of severe weather heading towards their area. The practice of using the crawl when there is no urgent news, keeps audiences feeling that there is pressing information they need to keep tuned in for. Beinart (2001) writes:

The crawl still conveyed urgency, but there was no urgency to convey. The form of the information misrepresented the content. In that way, the crawl epitomizes a common problem in the United States today. Cell phone calls interrupt daily life with an implied urgency; but their content is now mundane.

Instead of continuous urgent messages, however, the crawl has become a digest of largely normal news (Beinart). Richmond (2002) says:

Unfortunately, with this kind of constant on-screen bombardment, the cable newscasters have tried to turn all of us into professional worriers. That sort of seems to be the idea — keeping us in an acute state of paranoia. The irony is that it often has the opposite effect, inspiring viewers to dismiss the bluster and posturing as much ado about zippo.

Besides the concerns about the context, content, and implied urgency of the information conveyed in news crawls, there is an issue about the degree of distraction they involve. Everybody out there is intelligent enough to read a crawl and watch television at the same time, Fox News assignment manager David Rhodes asserts (Wolk, 2001). Not everyone agrees, however. Saltzman (2001) writes about the increased dissemination of information in the crawl, There is

just too much to do, too much to see, too much to evaluate. Beinart (2001) concurs. He says,

What the audience really experiences is what Microsoft researcher Linda Stone has called continuous partial attention. It's the same thing that happens when you talk on your cell phone and drive at the same time—you grasp all the incoming information less clearly. Another common distraction for people receiving the information from the crawl is to miss part of the message.

The information is then out of context, and they must either wait out the crawl's loop to catch the first part of the headline, or try to forget it altogether (King, 2002).

Yet despite the disadvantages, news crawl remains popular. The cable news industry has continued using it, with an increase in their audience numbers, even though the critics opine.

Reasons for its popularity can be traced to how Generation X, Y, and Z receive and process information; to what Americans have come to expect from their news; and to how Americans are reacting in an age of information overload.

Generations X, Y, and Z are the generations that came after the baby boomers. They are extremely comfortable with both computers and television. Speaking specifically about Generation X, Karen Ritchie, author of *Marketing to Generation X*, says, They can watch several programs simultaneously or surf 90 to 100 channels without viewing it as a waste of time. They can watch TV, do homework, and chew gum at the same time. They just simply have more control over the medium (Owen, 1997, p. 8). This is known as multi-tasking. A faster pace is also expected in shows targeted at Gen X viewers. Jonathan Murray, executive producer of *The Real World*, says, You don't have to connect the dots. These people [Gen X] are used to getting information in a fast way, in a way they can comprehend it (Owen, p. 14). With advertisers drooling over the potentials for marketing to Generation X, the cable news channels recognized that they needed that audience. Thus, the revamped Headline News and now the news crawl is

to capture more young viewers by presenting the news in a manner appealing to the presumably web-besotted youth of Generations X, Y and Z (Isherwood, 2001).

Americans have come to expect instant access to information in our information-rich world. In an informal survey of a handful of women and men, all said they enjoyed the crawl. Those polled were not from Generation X, but were from ages 40 to 75; they were well-educated and articulate Americans. They used the crawl as an update to news they already had information about. Their sources of information included newspapers, magazines, books, websites, and television news programs. They used the information being disseminated in the crawl to build onto their previous information base. One person surveyed said that the news crawl provided him with information to discuss with other people, to stay updated and connected.

Is the news crawl really providing us with connectedness though? David Shenk, in his book *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut* (1997), speaks about news-nuggets. "Although his book was published before the news crawl came into vogue, the term news-nuggets aptly works for the information in the crawl. He writes, 'To actually learn about the subject requires not a series of updates, but a careful and thoughtful review of the situation' (p. 168). He adds:

News bites continue not because they are valuable, but because they are dramatic and entertaining —and, because, in an age of very little common information, they give us all some small nugget of common information to grasp onto for a few hours. They give people a false sense of connectedness and understanding, and make us feel informed when we really aren't.' As such, we would be much better off without them. (p. 168)

It turns out, writes C. John Sommerville in his 1999 book *How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society*, that being informed really means knowing

what the people around you are talking about (p.43). He calls them "talking points."

Are talking points taken from the crawl a way to diffuse and utilize information, to make sense of the bigger picture, and to understand the connotations and implications of that information in context? Or are the talking points a way to sensationalize and ultimately trivialize an event? Sommerville (1999) says:

If you insist on news, there is only one kind: an addictive substance that you can never get enough of. And we have become jaded, requiring an ever-increasing level of excitement. It had better be good or our minds may wander. The industry, like any good entrepreneur, does its best to give us what we want, and what we want is a limited number of stories that we can follow for a few days and that involve us in some way. What we get is a teeny bit of our world, vastly enlarged to fill our vision. (p. 20)

Thus, you can feel connected as you talk to colleagues around the proverbial water-cooler about the latest facts in the latest news story. A few days later, the story still exists, but there is a new story to follow, with the news crawl disseminating information at a pace of 80 headlines per loop.

Two effects occur in our information-glut age, both of which the crawl encourages. One is that Americans try to take in as much information as possible, causing us to react with symptoms similar to Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). The other effect is that the news is "dumbed-down" to make today's news-nugget appear to be more significant.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is increasing in our information-glutted world. There is so much information, it is impossible to focus on one thing at a time and make sense of it. Instead, we flit from one piece of information to another, not fully understanding what we are being informed about. The news crawl aids us with our ADD symptoms. It only allows you to

focus on one headline at a time, with no time to fully digest what you've just read before another headline is creeping along. Shenk in *Data Smog* (1997) writes:

Our fast-paced, high-stimulation society leaves many people complaining about being overwhelmed, while many others are becoming unhealthily addicted to the mania. People seem to be developing a form of Attention Deficit Disorder without inheriting it, " says Dr. Theodore Gross, an expert on attention-span disorders. The information explosion has something to do with it—all the faxes and e-mail and calls come in, and people can't keep up with it. (p. 36)

The news crawl is just another distraction, disseminating information that we feel we need to keep up with, but can't possibly fully understand. Our attention-spans are shortened; we can't focus on the big picture because our mind is cluttered with facts that we are unable to organize and process.

The news industry might also be dumbing down the news for a similar reason. Joe Marconi, in *Future Marketing: Targeting Seniors, Boomers, and Generations X and Y*, writes:

Commentator and former presidential adviser George Stephanopolis has indicted the modern media for what he calls their preoccupation with "psychological reductionism in the information age. It's an interesting new euphemism to describe the process of reducing things to their simplest form. Generalizing can be clever at times, and it might even be necessary at times to make sense of the world and the variety of mixed messages coming and going at blinding speed. (2001, p. 60)

What is the news crawl, but a reduction of information to its simplest form, which contains mixed messages coming and going at a crawl across the bottom of a television screen? In *How the News Makes Us Dumb* (1999), Sommerville states:

The product of the news business is *change*, not wisdom. You need to go elsewhere for

wisdom. Wisdom has to do with seeing things in their largest context, whereas news is structured in a way that destroys the larger context. You have to do certain things to information if you want to sell it on a daily basis. You have to make each day's report seem important. And you do that by reducing the importance of its context. If readers were aware of the bigger story it would diminish today's contribution to that story. So news-industry profits absolutely depend on dumbing us down by deconstructing our world in dailiness. In reporting today's news they have to make us want to come back *tomorrow* for more news —more change. (p. 14)

Sommerville is speaking of the news industry as a whole, but the crawl takes the dailiness to a faster pace, where you have to be connected, to know minute by minute what is happening.

The news crawl may continue to be used as a source for the cable news industry to disseminate information to Americans, but people should attempt to resist its allure. In an age where there's an overabundance of information in our everyday world, disseminated news-nuggets aren't the best source to use in order to understand the information in context; much less to take that information, diffuse it and utilize it. While the crawl may be used as an update feature now, soon time-pressed Americans will be using it as their main information source. If we are truly moving from the Information Age into the Content Age, then it is obvious that these crawling headlines have very little content and should be eschewed. The news crawl is disseminating information that we think we want, not what we really need. Sommerville may have been forecasting the future of the crawl when he wrote, "So headlines get bigger, stories get littler, words get shorter, brains get smaller" (1999, p. 34).

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