

# Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

VOL. 62 NO. 4 WINTER 2008

## The Search for True North: New Directions in a New Territory



### Words & Reflections

Photographs: Child Soldiers and Small-Town America  
Books: The Iraq War, Middle East, and Torture

# 'to promote and elevate the standards of journalism'

**Agnes Wahl Nieman**  
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Vol. 62 No. 4 Winter 2008  
**Nieman Reports**  
The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University

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Nieman Reports (USPS #430-650) is published  
in March, June, September and December  
by the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University,  
One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2098.

Subscriptions/Business  
Telephone: 617-496-2968  
E-Mail Address:  
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Subscription \$25 a year, \$40 for two years; add \$10  
per year for foreign airmail. Single copies \$7.50.  
Back copies are available from the Nieman office.

Please address all subscription correspondence to  
One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-2098  
and change of address information to  
P.O. Box 4951, Manchester, NH 03108.  
ISSN Number 0028-9817

Editorial  
Telephone: 617-496-6308  
E-Mail Address:  
nreditor@harvard.edu

Internet Address:  
www.niemanreports.org  
Copyright 2008 by the President and  
Fellows of Harvard College.

Periodicals postage paid at Boston,  
Massachusetts and additional entries.

POSTMASTER:  
Send address changes to  
Nieman Reports,  
P.O. Box 4951,  
Manchester, NH 03108.

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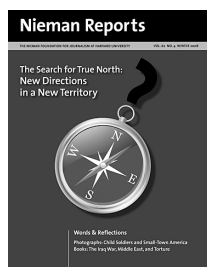
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# Clear Direction in Tough Economic Times

Economic volatility brings 'new meaning to the program's transformative nature.'

BY BOB GILES

As the Nieman Foundation's Advisory Board met in early November on the eve of the convocation celebrating 70 years of Nieman Fellowships, two questions dominated the discussions:

- Should the foundation reconsider its mission of midcareer education in response to the dramatic and disruptive technological and economic changes affecting journalism?
- How can the foundation give the fellows a more transformational experience to help them think through and prepare for their roles in the new world of journalism?

The press is less institutional than it was when the first Nieman Fellows came to Harvard in the fall of 1938. While most fellows still come from mainstream news organizations, especially newspapers, an increasing number of fellows arrive as freelancers, and many of them blog. Even those from established newsrooms bring with them a sense that their careers will head them in new directions.

The central design of a year of study in Harvard classrooms has remained steady through the years. Each fellow shapes a program designed to serve a specific need: filling gaps in education, exploring new fields of learning, preparing for a different assignment at year's end. Nieman Fellows have always been in transition in thinking deeply about what they want to do as journalists. For years, this meant enriching their minds as preparation for their return to their newspaper or broadcast news organization. Today, Nieman Fellows explore unfamiliar paths and use the knowledge and skills gained along the way as the keys to unlocking fresh opportunity.

These days fellows face buyout offers or circumstances that force them to consider taking alternative paths in journalism. This unsettling reality brings new meaning to the program's transformative nature, and we are addressing this challenge by supplementing the core program with seminars and workshops that acquaint fellows with the new tools necessary for storytelling in the digital age.

Fellows also benefit from Nieman initiatives serving audiences beyond Harvard.

- The Nieman Journalism Lab is finding a place in ongoing discussions about journalism in a digital world and the search for economic models that can sustain quality journalism. The lab, through its Web site, [www.niemanlab.org](http://www.niemanlab.org), is providing daily posts about issues of the journalistic craft and business models.
- Nieman Reports is enlarging its capacity in the digital arena, aided by the foundation's redesigned Web site. With

its own URL, [www.niemanreports.org](http://www.niemanreports.org), offering readers a separate link to each story, its online audience will be able to share articles with friends, leave comments, and publish links to stories related to various topics.

- By year's end, we plan to launch on our Web site, [www.nieman.harvard.edu](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu), an online community for alumni that will create a place for fellows to interact and share ideas about the program with the foundation staff.

The advisory board members reflected on these developments and talked about other fellowship programs that are introducing significant changes. At the John S. Knight Fellowships at Stanford, for example, applicants now propose a project—to be worked on during their fellowship year—that addresses a journalistic challenge with an emphasis on innovation and entrepreneurship resulting in a business proposal, a progress report, or a public conference.

Our discussions about the continuing role of the Nieman Fellowship program took place under the shadow of volatility in the financial markets and uncertainty that persists as a new economic reality. Some advisory board members wondered whether the changes in journalism and the downsizing of mainstream news organizations would influence the composition of future Nieman classes. Will the number of applicants increase or shrink? Would journalists be attracted to the program at earlier points in their careers as they look to buttress their journalistic values and acquire knowledge to influence their work in the years ahead?

Board members encouraged the Nieman Foundation to stay the course and preserve the original purpose of a year for fellows to learn and reflect, whether they are in transit or anticipate a return to their newsrooms.

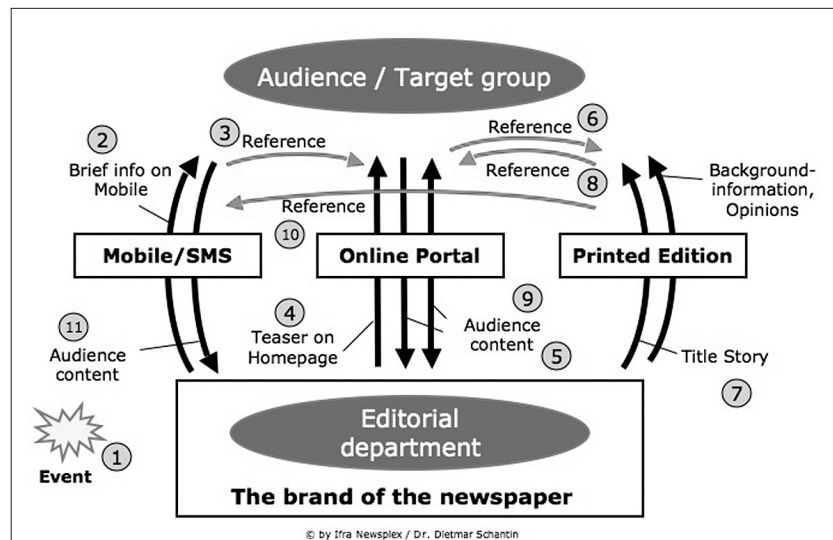
Here at Harvard, President Drew Faust has told the university community that even though universities have for centuries shown remarkable resilience and creative power in the face of unpredictability and change, the present downturn will have an impact on even well diversified portfolios such as Harvard's. What the impact will be is influenced by the university's prudent policies over the years in distributing endowment payouts.

Harvard's management practices are designed to weather this kind of downturn and enable endowed units, such as the Nieman Foundation, to avoid making sharp cuts in its educational programs. In this time of uncertainty, the foundation is weighing options and discussing strategic steps that will enable us to continue a strong fellowship program for the class of 2010 and beyond. ■

# The Search for True North

Journalists: Start your engines. The digital road awaits, and it favors those with a sturdy back and daring attitude. Don't forget to pack the digital recorder, headphones and mic, the BlackBerry, maybe an iPhone, too, the Flip camera, and perhaps a digital camcorder. Toss in a tripod and grab an underwater case for your Flip. Who knows? The news might be a flood or fire. Then, squeeze in the notebook computer, assorted USB cables, batteries, chargers and a few flash drives. Oh yes, be sure you have the digital camera for those slideshows and, for old-times sake, throw in a few pens and a paper notebook.

Packed up. Ready to go. Now the tough part begins. Your work—once destined for print or broadcast with advertising paying your way to bring this news to eager subscribers and newsstand customers—will emerge now in search of “eyeballs” and “clicks” and with the hope of topping the “most e-mailed list.” To follow possible routes laid out on one map (below)—the vision of Dietmar Schantin, the director of IFRA's Newsplex—is to absorb a sense of the ricocheting ride of words and images in the digital media.



Consider news as a contagious “germ”—a germ that sets in motion the viral experience of shared knowledge as it travels through the neighborhoods of social media. Links are made, comments, too, and pretty soon, an audience—the intended one or not—finds its way to the news report, takes a look, rates it, ships it

off to friends, and so the cycle spins.

How all of this affects the way journalists do their work or what elements of journalism will survive this digital transformation remains a work in progress—with fewer answers than questions, with less confidence and more concerns. Business-models-in-waiting top the list of worries, even as experimentation is underway to find new ones.

We live in a time when President-Elect Barack Obama breaks news on his Web site's newsroom blog, speaks to the nation through YouTube, and invites everyone to share ideas on change.gov. At the same time, newsrooms confront the reality of a broken business model, and journalists search for direction in this new territory as they seek to reset the bearing of what “true north” means. In this issue, neuroscientists and social media analysts, digital journalism entrepreneurs and newsroom reporters and editors, explore how the best of what journalism can be can find a home in the era of digital media. ■—Melissa Ludtke

## If Murder Is Metaphor

Novels, at times, speak to truth in ways we, as journalists, can find hard to do.

BY STEVEN A. SMITH



The newsroom of The New York Times. September 1942. Photo by Marjory Collins, 1912-1985. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

**T**here has been a murder in the newsroom. An office secretary at the fictional New York Globe has discovered the body of one Theodore S. Ratnoff.

Ratnoff's eyes were closed. His face looked peaceful. But there, in the center of his chest, was a four-inch-wide green hunk of metal. She recognized it immediately. It was the base of an editor's spike, used in the old days to

kill stories. The metal shaft protruding from it was sunk into Ratnoff's blue-and-red-striped shirt, hammered in so hard that it had created a tiny cavity filled with bright blood. The end of his red tie dipped into it, like a tongue into a martini glass. Fixed to the spike was a note.

She leaned over the body to read it. It was in purple ink.

It said, simply: "Nice. Who?"

John Darnton's novel "Black & White and Dead All Over" may be a roman à clef for those steeped in the world of New York newspapering. I suppose a Big Apple media watcher might recognize Darnton's twisted characters in the city's real world newspaper journalists. But to a West Coaster who has never worked in New York, the novel is strictly metaphor.

It's not just an editor who has been killed, but old-time newspapering, maybe even the newspaper. How appropriate the metaphorical weapon is an old lead spike. So the question, "Who killed Ratnoff?" could as easily be "Who is killing (or has killed) newspapers?"

Darnton's answer to both questions is the same: Malevolent corporate tycoons, greedy and devious publishers, self-promoting editors, hack reporters, and assorted other hangers-on who have forgotten the values of their craft in order to pursue their own interests.

There are heroes in Darnton's world. The dogged young investigative reporter who unravels the mystery is a newspaper archetype. So is his buddy, the in-the-cups veteran reporter whose world-weary cynicism can't disguise both talent and commitment. And the traditionalist managing editor seems to command some level of respect from journalists who think he has at least some integrity.

But the real hero, in the end,

is a young computer whiz who saves the day by taking his newspaper online to break the big story.

How is that for metaphor?

## Blogging About the Past

For me, Darnton's newspaper murder mystery came along at just the right time. Some months back, foreseeing the massive layoffs coming to my newspaper, *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, I posted on my "News is a Conversation" blog an essay titled "Still a Newspaperman."<sup>1</sup>

I wrote it late one night after a particularly dismal day at the office when it appeared as if all of my efforts to stave off budgetary disaster had come to nothing. It was intended as a quiet meditation on the sort of newspapering I knew when I was first coming into the business in the early 1970's. Of course my reminiscence was rose-colored. The newspaper world of 1973 had its own problems, from a less rigorous ethical framework to blatant sexism to dull and lifeless stenographic reporting.

But it was a good time, too. Newspaper journalism was vital to our democratic systems, to our communities. Newspaper journalists were (mostly) credible, even respected. And newsrooms were fun places. Smoke-filled, loud, profane, busy. Newspapering was fun even when the journalism was hard, maybe most fun when it was hardest.

Darnton remembers those days. His fictional *New York Globe* is a throwback in almost every way except for the rank incompetence that seems to be killing it. The characters are stereotypes, certainly. But their like, for good or ill, could, in my early years, be found in every American newsroom.

In Darnton's book, investigative reporter Jude Hurley solves the murder mystery with the help of a young computer whiz who may be the *Globe's* new owner. I would guess that Darnton saw this as an optimistic conclusion,

the marriage of shoe-leather newspapering and online publishing saving both the *Globe* and the day.

That marriage may yet prove successful. Newspapers, as with the *Globe*, will continue, almost certainly, in some form. But in real life it's an imperfect ending. As newsroom after newsroom eviscerates its staff, losing veteran journalists with their connections to an important past, the generations-old foundation of American newspapering erodes further, perhaps beyond the point of no return. And it's not just institutional and craft memory that is being lost.

We're losing a sense of our purpose, our mission, our values. Those of us older than a certain age learned those things from our mentors, the great generation of journalists who walked up the hill from train stations all over the country in 1945 and '46 to take jobs at newspapers big and small. But this generation's mentors are leaving before their job is done, and those who are left, young and old, are so busy fighting for their professional lives—while trying to stay ahead of light-speed technological change—they have little time to think of journalism beyond today's deadline.

I now think that was why there was a palpable sadness permeating my elegy to the past.

Response to my blog posting was astonishing. I received hundreds of e-mails, letters, phone calls, and blog comments from all over the world. It's fair to say the majority came from journalists of my generation who saw something of their own experiences in my writing. But I also heard from younger journalists who argued it was time for the oldsters to move on, to leave the field for those who know more about computers, mobile devices, social networking, and other journalistic tools of the 21st century. Some suggested I was living in the past and, by staying there, I had become irrelevant to our industry's future.

It was a fascinating debate, with

the sides defined by generation and experience.

After all of that, I remain convinced that our profession is losing something, something important to our craft and the citizens we are called to serve. It is not a disservice to our future to understand that.

At the end of Darnton's book, the surviving *Globe* journalists gather in a bar (where else?) to talk about the paper's future. With the veterans is Clive, the Web-savvy whiz kid who now owns the paper. As Darnton describes it, the lively gathering degenerates into "a round of inebriated, hopelessly optimistic proposals."

Let's get back to our roots, get back to the basics. Afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. That's the motto.

Let's be who we are. Let's stop trying to be everything to everybody and just tell it straight.

Let's get back to hard news, do hard-hitting investigations.

Let's swagger a little. Let's be brave again.

Let's dump the ombudsman!

By Christ, print's not dead yet!

Jude watched Clive's face. At one point, he heard him mutter, almost to himself, "Some of that, yes. But not all. We can't go back. The Internet is here to stay and we have to adjust to it."

We have no choice in the matter. We must adjust to young Clive's world.

But don't tell me I can't cry a bit over the loss of mine. ■

*Steven A. Smith was, until October 1st, 2008, editor of The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Washington. His blog is stillanewspaperman.com. Another article by Smith—about his engagement of younger reporters in transforming the newsroom— is on page 32.*

<sup>1</sup> Smith's July 31, 2008 blog entry can be read at [www.stillanewspaperman.com/2008/08/12/the-original-still-a-newspaperman-thread/](http://www.stillanewspaperman.com/2008/08/12/the-original-still-a-newspaperman-thread/).



# Where the Monitor Is Going, Others Will Follow

A decade ago, resistance at The Christian Science Monitor to its online site almost killed it. Now, the newspaper is depending on the Web for its survival.

BY TOM REGAN

**E**xcuse me for a moment while I get this off my chest—I told you so.

For about two years now, I have been telling friends and colleagues that The Christian Science Monitor was going to dump its Monday to Friday print edition, shift the bulk of its daily reporting and analysis onto its Web site, [csmmonitor.com](http://csmmonitor.com), and create a Sunday print edition. And I said it would happen near the paper's 100th anniversary in November 2008.

I only wish I was this good with lottery tickets.

Now that new Monitor editor John Yemma has confirmed this scenario will become a reality next April, I say bravo! It's a great idea and continues the Monitor's pioneering tradition of breaking ground for online media. (The Monitor was the first news Web site to include audio, and it was also the first news organization to send a reporter to cover the Iraq War specifically for a Web site.)

While many fans of traditional models of publishing have bemoaned this decision, it is absolutely the right direction for the Monitor to head in. This decision is one that many other news organizations will make, too, in the next few years. Someone of the Monitor's stature just had to jump off the cliff first.

## History Is Prologue

Before talking about why this move makes so much sense for the Monitor, let me share a bit of history. In 1995 I designed and helped build the

Monitor's original Web site (along with colleagues Ellen Berrigan and Dave Creagh). In those early days, the idea of a Web site for the Monitor was not exactly popular in the newsroom. The organization had just gone through a painful experiment with television that almost killed the paper. When I began to design the site, for instance, I was not given a desk anywhere near where actual journalism took place. Instead,

Washington editor.) More than once, he would call me into his office so that we could discuss ways to make the Web site "bullet proof." He often called the Web site the Monitor's "lifeboat."

There were people in the newsroom in those days who would have pulled the plug on us in a heartbeat. Many saw the \$1.5 million it cost then to run the site as just another drain on resources—funds for another printing plant or several more reporters. At one point, the board of directors was receiving information that there were too many of us for the task at hand, and we needed to be cut back. So the board came over one day and watched us as we did our job. By the time they left, after seeing how much work was involved, they were saying that we needed an increase in funding.

There were two key moments in the history of the Monitor that led to greater acceptance of the Web site: the introduction of the Internet into the newsroom and the aftermath of 9/11.

Once reporters and editors had a high-speed connection on their desktops, and they saw what other news organizations like The New York Times and The Washington Post were doing, our Web site made a lot more sense. As for 9/11, you have to understand that the Monitor is a newspaper that is delivered by snail mail. (I can recite from memory even now the angry e-mails I would receive from subscribers who would get three Monitors all on the same day and each several days late.) In the week after 9/11, when all planes in the United States were grounded, the print product

The screenshot shows the Christian Science Monitor website with a navigation bar including 'WORLD', 'USA', 'COMMENTARY', 'MONEY & VALUES', 'ENVIRONMENT', 'INNOVATION', 'ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT', 'BOOKS', 'LIVING', 'LEARNING', and 'THE HOME FORUM'. A main headline reads 'Monitor shifts from print to Web-based strategy'. Below this, a sub-headline states: 'In 2009, the Monitor will become the first nationally circulated newspaper to replace its daily print edition with its website; the one-year-old news organization will also offer subscribers weekly print and daily e-mail editions.' The article is by David Cook, Staff Writer of The Christian Science Monitor, dated October 20, 2008 at 1:30 p.m. EDT. The page features several images and text blocks, including a photo of two men at a computer, a 'THE SPORTS CLUB/LA' advertisement, and a 'Photos of the Day' section. A sidebar on the right promotes 'Monitor Mall' and 'Daily podcast'.

I was placed about as far away from the newsroom as possible—in a small office in the circulation department on the far side of the old Monitor publishing building. I wasn't really discouraged from talking to journalists about the idea, but I wasn't exactly encouraged, either.

In those early days, I often felt our survival was a week-to-week proposition. It was only the determined support of David Cook, then the Monitor's editor and a strong believer in the future of the Internet, which kept us alive. (Dave is now the Monitor's

couldn't reach subscribers. The Web site became *the Monitor*. I saw a lot of light bulbs go on in the newsroom after that. After 9/11, there was never any real talk again of doing away with csmonitor.com.

This brings us to today and why this decision makes so much sense. It's not a new idea. Former csmonitor.com managing editor Karla Vallance and I would often close the door to her office to talk about the future of the Web site. Even 10 years ago, it was obvious that the Monitor's future was online. And I believe that even a decade ago, the people at the top of the Monitor knew the same thing but, as Dave Cook once said to me, "No one wants to be the last editor of the 'newspaper.'"

But the reality of the Monitor's publishing model worked against the print product. Every time the Monitor got a subscription to the paper, it cost them money. The paper, as I noted above, was delivered by mail—not a really great distribution method in an age of instant news and faster analysis. While the Monitor always stayed away from breaking news because of this situation, those late-arriving newspapers only underlined the fact that the Monitor's readers weren't getting the news in a timely fashion. But the real problem was the audience. I remember we were once given a talk about the average age of a Monitor subscriber. It was over 65. At the same time, they found that the average age of a visitor to the Web site was about 45.

## Future Is on the Web

One method of distribution obviously had more room for growth than the other.

Now I know that some people are saying to themselves, "Well, the Monitor is a special situation, not like other papers." And this is true to a degree. The Monitor receives funding from the Christian Science church that helps make up the difference in what the paper lacks in ad revenue and circulation.

But I noticed that when Yemma was talking about the shift last month, he

noted that the Web site now generates more ad revenue than the newspaper. That's a pretty important fact of the Monitor's life. And while the cost savings of no more crushed ink on dead trees, trucks, gas, etc., won't entirely cover the cost of lost subscription fees, it will come close. And don't forget that Sunday print edition. More than a few surveys have shown that Sunday is the day when people have the most time to sit down and read a paper—about an hour and a half, if I remember correctly. It makes sense for the Monitor

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**Statistics show that each of the past four generations has relied less and less on print. And that change was happening even before the Internet accelerated it.**

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to take its style of thoughtful, analytical journalism to a Sunday audience. I very much agree with Yemma that advertisers will also find this a more attractive advertising model.

The Monitor's decision to shift to a focus on the Web during the week, with a Sunday print edition, is going to make a lot of sense to a lot of publishers. Monday to Friday always produces the best numbers for the Web. This makes sense when you think of people's lifestyles. The Web is a much smarter choice during the week when you have a job and a family, and the opportunities to sit and read a newspaper are limited. (With four kids in our house, I haven't had a newspaper subscription for several years. I read all my news online. A couple of months ago, my wife decided to get a subscription to the regional paper for our son, who she thought might need it for his civics class. But he uses a special Web site created by

his teacher to find stories. Meanwhile, the papers often sit unopened until I get a chance to take them out to the recycling bin each Friday. The one day I do read our family's new paper subscription—Sunday.)

And none of this accounts for an even more important shift in how news is consumed. For that, we need to look at the lifestyle of young people who increasingly rely on mobile devices for information and communication. At one time I thought that as they grew up they would move towards print. But that's not the case. Statistics show that each of the past four generations has relied less and less on print. And that change was happening even before the Internet accelerated it.

If large news organizations are going to publish a newspaper, I predict they will move towards the model developed by many metro newspapers—a smaller tabloid that is given away for free. It's the one way that publishers can maintain the high circulation numbers that will interest advertisers.

What I love most about the Monitor's decision is the courage behind it. I'm not a Christian Scientist, but I am a fan of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the paper. She once said that she always wanted the Monitor to "keep abreast of the times." Those few words have inspired generations of Monitor editors, reporters—and Web producers—to not take the safe way. This is not easy when publishers, to invoke Robert Frost for a moment, come to two paths that diverge in the woods. But taking the one less traveled does make all the difference. And I suspect that the Monitor will not find itself alone on that less traveled path for very long. ■

*Tom Regan, a 1992 Nieman Fellow, works for the Online News Association, where he was its executive director and now assists his successor in a variety of tasks. He has also been the news/politics blogger for NPR and worked in various editorial positions for csmonitor.com for 12 years.*

# To Prepare for the Future, Skip the Present

‘... today’s obsession with saving newspapers has meant that, for the most part, media companies have failed to plan adequately for tomorrow’s digital future.’

BY EDWARD ROUSSEL

“Burn baby, burn.” These are the unforgettable words of a top-ranking Yellowstone National Park ecologist as fire ripped through the park’s forests in the summer of 1988. Few people cared that Don Despain’s words were taken out of context. The remark was used to pour scorn on the supposed devil-may-care approach of the National Park Service, which favored allowing natural fires to burn off accumulations of undergrowth in order to facilitate forest renewal.

A triple whammy of slumping advertising revenues, soaring newsprint costs, and competition from the Internet has left newspaper executives struggling to contain their own inferno. Tactics that helped newspapers survive for decades—budget cuts, promotions, the shuttering of peripheral publications—have failed to restore confidence among investors. In the first 10 months of 2008 alone, the shares of The New York Times Company dropped by more than 40 percent, while Gannett Company, Inc. shed two-thirds of its value.

The best approach for battle-weary media executives may be to let the fire run its course—however counterintuitive that might seem. That’s partly because there is little the newspaper industry can do to stop the advancing flames. But it’s also because today’s obsession with saving newspapers has meant that, for the most part, media companies have failed to plan adequately for tomorrow’s digital future. The economic downturn has added to the urgent need for a change of direction.

“This is a time for rigor, you need to know what you want to come out with at the other end of the tunnel,” said Jack Welch, who was known as “Neutron Jack” when he was CEO of

General Electric because of tough steps he took to reshape ossified corporations. “This is not a time to skimp on resources but to focus them on your best businesses: stop the weakest, invest in the strongest.”

Newspapers still tend to define themselves by their paper rather than their news. By doing so they make a critical error at a time when readers and advertisers alike are going cold on paper and turning their attention increasingly to Web media. Newspaper executives have been slow to come to terms with the reality that the fat profit margins of previous decades are gone forever. Audiences, in decline since the 1960’s, have been on an accelerating downward trajectory—from a slow glide to a nosedive—since the Internet’s invasion.

Newspaper executives have often justified their lack of attention to digital media by pointing to the lower advertising yields. “When will the Web match the revenues generated by newspapers?” Maybe never. But it’s the wrong question. The whole point about the Web is that it costs a fraction of the amount of a newspaper to reach your audience, meaning that the break-even point for a newsroom stripped of the need to produce a newspaper is some 65 percent lower.

The probable elimination of a raft of second-tier newspapers during this economic downturn will provide a fertile environment for a new generation of digital media businesses to flourish. Here are 10 ways that will help newspapers make the transition to digital media companies:

**1. Narrow the focus.** When newspapers operated regional monopolies, readers depended on them to cover a wide range of subjects. Newspapers

still routinely use their own reporters to cover a gamut of stories, ranging from politics to sport and business. That’s nonsensical in the Internet era, when readers may choose content from a variety of sources. Instead, media companies need to invest more money in their premium content—editorial that is unavailable elsewhere but that is highly valued by readers. Go deep, not wide.

**2. Plug into a network.** Media companies should finance the additional spending on premium content by eliminating editorial costs in areas where they are unable to compete with the best on the Web. If you are weak in sports coverage, link to the best Web site for your local sports. Well-curated hyperlinks to other Web sites are a valuable service for readers, and they cost nothing. Media companies will increasingly see themselves as part of a chain of content, as opposed to a final destination. Journalists will act as filters, writing with authority but also guiding readers to sources that add depth to coverage. The future of journalism is selling expertise, not content.

**3. Rolling news with views.** Newspaper deadlines suit publishers, not readers. News is a continuum. It never starts or ends, and coverage should reflect that reality. That doesn’t mean a newsroom needs to be open for business 24/7. If 90 percent of readers don’t log on between midnight and five in the morning, there is little point in being staffed overnight. But it is critical to be alert at the time when your traffic surges—typically between 8 and 10 in the morning and again around lunchtime. Remember: It’s not simply about serving breaking news—the AP

and Reuters can handle that. The role of a newspaper company on the Web is to add value: look at a story from a number of angles, engage your audience, add multimedia.

**4. Engage with your readers.** The explosion of blogging and social media Web sites has created a culture in which consumers of news expect to be included in the news publishing process. Closed operations that shun reader engagement will increasingly be seen to offer a second-rate experience. Create functionality that encourages readers to share eyewitness accounts of breaking news, rate services such as restaurants and hotels, and get into discussions and debates.

#### 5. Bottom up, not top down.

The reporters on the ground are closest to your readers. They are therefore best placed to conceive, create and nurture community Web sites. Look at which reporters or editors get the largest mailbags and free them up to manage blogs on subjects that your readers are passionate about. That's likely to be narrow areas such as gardening or a mom's network, rather than broad subjects, such as politics or sports.

**6. Embrace multimedia.** Train editors to see video, photo galleries, graphics and maps as equal storytelling forms to text. A story about Tina Fey's takeoff of Sarah Palin is incomplete without video highlights from "Saturday Night Live." A story about a soldier's life on the frontline in Afghanistan is best told with video, a map, and pictures as well as text.

**7. Nimble, low-cost structures.** About 75 percent of newspaper costs have nothing to do with the creation of editorial content. In a digital era there may not be any need for printing presses or vans to transport a physical product. But the switch to digital should also be an opportunity to challenge the need to hold on to other in-house

costs. Newspaper companies are bad at technology, so a digitally minded chief technology officer will be able to get cheaper and more effective services by outsourcing. Newspaper sales teams don't do particularly well at selling ads on the Internet; too often they sell ads that are irrelevant to a reader's interests in an era when Google has made relevance key. If your sales team can't beat Google, then outsource to Google.

**8. Invest in the Web.** Don't try to suck too much revenue from your fledgling



network. Your Web site needs investment before it can fly. Large networks, such as rail, phone and utilities, took decades to yield substantial returns. A Web revenue-growth model cannot simply be a mirror image of the decline in your newspaper sales.

**9. Shake up leadership.** One of the biggest obstacles to planning for a digital future is the senior editor or manager who is wedded to the analogue past. If the people who run your newsroom aren't passionate about your digital future, it's certain not to materialize.

**10. Experiment.** We are operating in the most creative phase of the media industry's history. A time when broadcast, text and social media are colliding. Don't be afraid of failure. Try new projects, see what works, and build on success.

None of this will come easily. It breaks a newspaper culture forged over a 400-year period. For decades now, newspaper newsrooms have centered on "going to press," which has meant pointing all efforts towards a single deadline that culminates in the publishing of a definitive version of a story. Journalists who've spent a lifetime working around this kind of deadline often cannot make the switch to the continuous reporting demanded by Web audiences.

Nor are reporters and editors particularly good at interacting with readers. As long as newspapers have existed, editors have determined the news agenda and then rammed it down readers' throats. Sure, readers are welcome to send a "letter to the editor." It may even get published. But typically most editors have little interest in an ongoing dialogue. Linking to competitors' news services certainly doesn't come naturally to newspaper editors either, whereas it's seen as a sign of sophistication on the Web. Then there's the lack of familiarity with multimedia and the art of stitching together text, video, photos, maps and graphics.

Still, the dominant newspapers have a huge advantage over start-up news operations: They are trusted brands at a time when the proliferation of news sources has made trust a premium for readers and advertisers alike. That's a good springboard for success. But time is running out. ■

*Edward Roussel is the digital editor of the Telegraph Media Group (TMG). He manages the Telegraph.co.uk Web site and oversees the development of TMG's expansion into other digital media, including the recent launch of Telegraph TV, a news-on-the-Web service in partnership with ITN. He was instrumental in restructuring the Telegraph's newsroom, with a view to placing digital media at the core of the 153-year-old newspaper group.*

# Journalism as a Conversation

‘Today digital publishing is practiced by the masses, and it’s inseparable from the practice of journalism.’

BY KATIE KING

Last night, just before I turned out the light to sleep, I grabbed my mobile from the night table. With a wireless Internet connection, I used the device to flip easily through headlines on the BBC and The New York Times. Nothing new there. I turned instead to my Twitter feed. Twitter is a microblog, a free Internet service for conversations and short-form publishing. Posts are limited to 140 characters. You can post from your mobile device or your desktop/laptop, updating whoever is reading your post real-time day and night, wherever you are. Who reads? People who choose to follow you. In turn, you choose to follow other people’s posts. You can reply publicly or privately to posts. It’s a short form, immediate and ongoing digital conversation.

About the time I was going to bed in London, Kirk LaPoint, managing editor of The Vancouver Sun, was attending a luncheon speech by former President Bill Clinton in British Columbia about the economy and the U.S. election, among other things. LaPoint was twittering (a new verb, like Google and blog have now become verbs) the speech. I’d started following his tweets since I met him briefly at the Online News Association conference in Washington in September. I only met him once, but by following his posts I learned more about what Clinton was thinking (or at least saying) from his nine 140-character posts than I have from any traditional news stories on the speech.

Twitter is fast becoming my preferred filter and guide to news and

information as the people I choose to follow help me sift and sort the flood of data washing over me every day. They do this by finding, commenting on, and linking to news and information.

## New Technology: Figuring Out What It Does

Why is this important? Because it is an example of how technology allows “the people formerly known as the audience,” as New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen calls them, to interact with and become part of the news process.<sup>1</sup> And it is a glimpse at how this technology, which we used to just call blogs, is in the process of changing our world, and journalism, in ways we can’t begin to imagine.

It is the nature of disruptive technology that we almost always get it wrong when we try to guess the real use and impact of a new invention. In his book, “The Victorian Internet,” author Tom Standage describes how, after inventing the telegraph, its creators struggled for years before the world figured out how it might actually be used. In 1844, with a U.S. government-funded telegraph line functioning between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, its inventor, Samuel F.B. Morse, was still trying to convince a skeptical world of his invention’s usefulness. “Yet after a while [Morse] realized that everybody still thought of the telegraph as a novelty, as nothing more than an amusing subject for a newspaper article, rather than the revolutionary

new form of communication that he envisaged,” Standage writes.

Morse had originally tried to convince Congress to fund and use the telegraph for government communications, but the invention really took off when it started to be used for business and commercial communications. By the early 1850’s, sending and receiving telegrams had become “part of everyday life for many people around the world.”

Now, a century and a half later—and almost 15 years into the digital media revolution—there seem to be a few important things to note.

We don’t know what the impact will be of this flood of free, ubiquitous, easy-to-use new digital communication, content creation, and publishing tools that relate to journalism. “What tools?” we might ask. Well, the list changes so quickly that it will require updating in the time between when I write this article and when it is published. But here are a few examples:

- Blogging services, such as Google’s Blogger and Window’s Live Spaces and sharing, linking and tracking tools such as Technorati
- Microblogs, such as Twitter
- Video blogs, such as YouTube, Kytetv and 12seconds.tv, phreadz.com
- Mobile blogs, such as qik, moblog
- Social media sites including Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, LinkedIn, Plaxo, Flickr, Picasa
- Tagging and sharing sites such as del.icio.us, Digg, last.fm.
- Blog and Web site ads and promotion services, such as Google AdSense

<sup>1</sup> Jay Rosen’s piece, “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” appeared on PressThink, his blog, in June 2006. It can be read at: [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html).

There are, of course, many more being used by hundreds of millions of people around the world. And all of these tools I've mentioned allow anyone who can afford something as simple as a camera-enabled, Web-connected mobile device to create text, pictures, video and audio, post this content to a Web address, promote and potentially monetize it.

### **Journalism: 'A Process, Not a Product'**

Which brings me to my second point about blogging and journalism today.

The debate is over. Hand-inked bibles, horse-drawn carriages, pagers: A few still exist, but they have mostly been overtaken by newer technology. The same is true for the monopoly of the publisher. Journalists no longer control the message. Today digital publishing is practiced by the masses, and it's inseparable from the practice of journalism. Newsgathering and distribution has changed forever, and the audience is part of the process.

Journalists, editors and media executives everywhere are struggling to come to terms with this fact and do what Gutenberg couldn't have done with his printing machine—understand and predict where this innovation will take the economy, media, politics and society.

Journalists use blogs and journalists compete with blogs.

Media blogger and journalism professor and blogger Jeff Jarvis ([buzzmachine.com](http://buzzmachine.com)) writes and speaks frequently about a new role that journalists should embrace in a world in which The New York Times competes less with The Washington Post for readers' attention than it does with blogs and social media. Jarvis, who teaches at the City University of New York, argues that journalism today is a "process not a product."<sup>2</sup> Journalists must sift, sort and curate the news,

he contends. "Do what you do best. Link to the rest."

The question Jarvis poses is this: Do we need more information or do we need, as a society, journalists dedicated to finding the gold nuggets amidst this raging river of content? The reality is that there are bloggers with passion and expertise on topics that exceeds anything that even the best reporter coming in on assignment could match.

This is where traditional editors typically weigh in, saying "Yes, but bloggers aren't trained journalists, they aren't committed to fairness or objectivity the way journalists are." In response, bloggers will point out that many readers don't believe the mainstream media today are fair or objective, either. Instead, many leading bloggers argue that the Web forces transparency on any digital writer. If you fib, if you fake it, if you get it wrong, someone will notice and call you out. Analysts like Jarvis argue that this is peer review on a global scale. There's even a name for it: "crowdsourcing." [See Jeff Howe's article on page 47.]

Crowdsourcing does not replace what traditional journalists do in interviewing, fact checking, verifying and making available important information to the public. But traditional journalists are no longer the only ones who can do this. Our work must incorporate and connect to the information being produced by specialists all around us.

An unpleasant and unproductive feature of the early years of mass digital publishing was that journalists and early bloggers spent a lot of time debating each other with red faces and pointed fingers about which side was more worthy, more reliable, more honest, and better served the readership and society. Thankfully, rhetoric has cooled as the digital media industry matures, and most mainstream journalists and editors embrace bloggers as part of the news process as well as blog-

ging tools to engage in conversations with their readers, get tips and story ideas, and promote their own work. Many editors, including me, hesitate to consider a young journalist's resumé unless they have a blog or some sort of social media site that will demonstrate their ability to report, write, use multimedia, interact appropriately with readers and, most importantly, think. Except for a few stragglers, most of my friends, colleagues and business contacts have some sort of Web site or blog, are on Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn or Twitter.

So—brace for it—what this means is that we are all bloggers now. We are all participating in the media revolution.

I was asked recently to participate on a panel of London editors discussing the future of news. The question was posed: Are we living in the Golden Age of news or in its Dark Ages? It's neither, of course, though all the online editors on the panel said Golden Age since it is certainly not the Dark Ages. To my mind, this revolution can be seen more as the next phase of the Enlightenment, which puts publishing and communication in the hands of the many, instead of the few who have traditionally controlled the media.

There is a human cost to any revolution. The printing press put out of work a lot of monks skilled in the art of lettering exquisite hand-made bibles. A unique skill was lost, or marginalized, but in exchange we gained nothing less than the flowering of knowledge and education of the masses, creating the fertile ground in which democracy has since flourished.

In the United States, the newspaper industry is being ravaged by cost-cuts and layoffs. A brain trust of experienced, highly trained reporters and editors are losing their jobs. Pulitzer Prizes and reader popularity do not protect these talented professionals from pink slips today. But even as newspapers are downsizing, dynamic new online publications arise. One

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<sup>2</sup> Read Jeff Jarvis's blog posting on this subject at [www.buzzmachine.com/2008/04/14/the-press-becomes-the-press-sphere/](http://www.buzzmachine.com/2008/04/14/the-press-becomes-the-press-sphere/).

of the more intriguing new digital publications is Tina Brown's *The Daily Beast*. Gloriously named after Evelyn Waugh's fictional British tabloid in "Scoop," Brown's "Beast" is an excellent example of journalism in the age of Web 2.0. It provides original interviews and reporting, staff blogs for context and analysis, and it focuses a lot of attention on filtering through important voices in the blogosphere

and highlighting good blogs to help readers make sense of a vast array of data.

Is the U.S. newspaper industry going to die? No, but it clearly is undergoing massive, wrenching change. Former Nieman Foundation Curator Bill Kovach often says that each generation creates its own new culture of journalism. We are clearly in full creation mode right now. I can't

predict how that will play out, but I am enthusiastic and optimistic about the changes ahead for journalism and for the ability of citizens to get the information they need to participate in a democracy. ■

*Katie King, a 1994 Nieman Fellow, is creative and development editor for MSN in the United Kingdom.*

## Digital Natives: Following Their Lead on a Path to a New Journalism

By understanding how young people 'process various types of news and formats' using new media, journalists enhance their ability to adapt their work to emerging technologies.

BY RONALD A. YAROS

In his book, "Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives," John Palfrey, who codirects Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, observes how "grazing digital natives" read a headline or at most a paragraph with little or no context. Only those who take a "deep dive" into the content will end up making sense of the news.<sup>1</sup>

Based on the rapidity of digital change we've experienced during the past decade, the news audience of 2019—and the technology they use—will be very different. What we can depend on, however, is that those raised with digital technology will represent the majority in that audience. So if Palfrey's observations accurately describe the audience of the future, this "expedition" that all of us are taking will benefit from understanding how digital natives now use media for entertainment, information, education and social networking.

Admittedly, the map to guide us is

crude. But it is reasonable to believe that the digital natives are leading the way—and are way ahead of news organizations. This belief is based on three predictable phases when new technology is adopted:

1. Awareness and exploration of the new technological tools
2. Learning how to use the new tools
3. Applying these new tools to daily life.

Digital natives who download iTunes on iPhones and blog about YouTube on MySpace are in the third phase. At the same time, if conferences such as the Online News Association held in September are accurate indicators, the industry is perhaps at the threshold of phase two. More print reporters are learning video, TV reporters are starting to blog, and professors are teaching new skills to communicate with an audience that values shorter, fact-driven multimedia.

All of these efforts address the formidable challenge for journalists to provide future news users with information relevant to them. In short, an industry in phase two still delivers most of its content on pages of text with links. Meanwhile, digital natives know what they want, how to find it (or even produce it), and whether it's worth their time.

Consider a future news model—one that integrates research by educators and psychologists with what we know about journalism to propose four concepts of value to digital natives. Online, we can already find plenty of examples of such concepts, but it is from this combination that research suggests the most effective way to attract and retain the news audience of the future. The problem, as confirmed by a recent study from The Associated Press, is that readers are "overloaded with facts and updates" and "having trouble moving deeply into the background and resolution

<sup>1</sup> <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/palfrey/?s=Grazing+digital+natives>

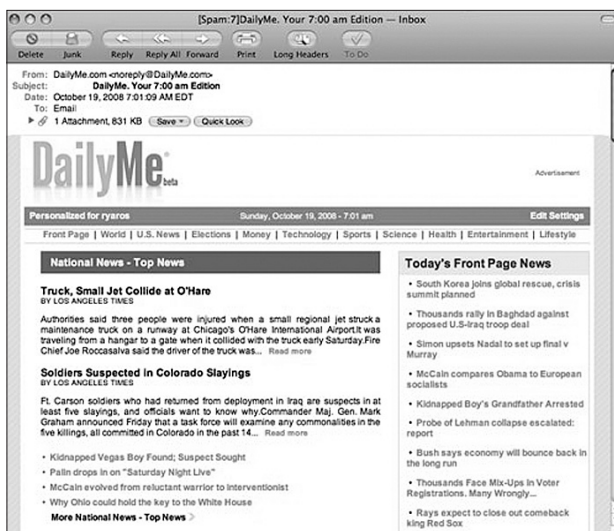
of news stories.”

Since 1998, the Lab for Communicating Complexity Online has been investigating how younger audiences process various types of news and formats. Measuring the “usability” of a Web site or tracking eye movements on a Web page can be valuable, but the lab uses a wider lens to focus on broader media behaviors and audience preferences.

Preliminary results tell us that it requires more than efficient aggregation of news to satisfy a savvy audience that interacts with video games and personalized social networks. The PICK news model, shown in the diagram on page 15 of three overlapping concepts, synthesizes what we know about personalization, involvement and contiguity (or coherence) in news with minimal distractions, which we refer to as cognitive “kick-outs.”

Here’s some good news: These PICK concepts have nothing to do with abandoning core principles of clear, accurate, ethical journalism and, in fact, have everything to do with strengthening them. Like news told in print, multimedia stories also must be organized, coherent and easy to understand. To make these stories engaging and informative, however, will require that additional skills be identified, learned and consistently practiced by the journalists of the future.

Also, the PICK model does not consider “multimedia” to be just taking video or a slideshow on a Web page. Neither does it pertain to long-form journalism for which an audience has the motivation and time to focus on an issue of interest. PICK defines multimedia as an environment (i.e. a full page or entire Web site) where



multiple elements—hypertext, video, slideshows, blogs, forums, graphics and animation—are presented with text and personalized to the user.

### Personalizing the News

In general, personalization is about the extent to which a user can choose content congruent with his or her interests. Researchers at Pennsylvania State University confirm that personalization generates more positive attitudes—especially from more experienced users—than generic pages of content. And positive attitudes enhance the audience’s perceived relevance and

novelty of the content. Interestingly, merely manipulating the level of choice, however, does not generate positive attitudes if the content is judged to be only “mediocre.”

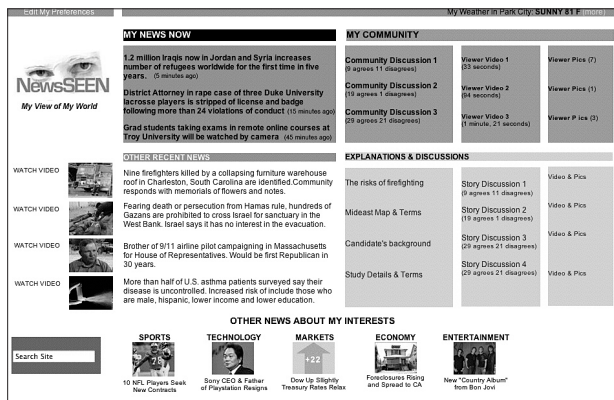
Today, Google News allows users to customize their own news page. And DailyMe.com e-mails a summary of news from preferred categories that link to the original stories. On Poynter’s E-Media Tidbits, Northwestern Professor Rich Gordon recently wrote about the start-up company e-Me Ventures, which is developing technology to store all of the content collected by journalists or submitted by a community. This could help producers of news to assemble content most likely to be relevant to individual users.

But how much personalization will future audiences expect?

PICK’s concept of personalization takes us farther through a prototype called “NewsSEEN.” The prototype not only provides news of interest, but it prioritizes news by level of interest.<sup>2</sup> It also presents news with informative “explanatory headlines” and marries preferred news with online communities that have shared interests. Then members of these communities engage in focused discussions about the issues. In this way, NewsSEEN tests how professionally produced, personalized content (or PPP) can be combined with, yet differentiated from, citizen-produced content.

NewsSEEN is receiving stellar reviews from our study’s students, because the format addresses many of their interests in more personalized and interactive ways than anything else available.

There are also opportunities for more personalized graphics.



<sup>2</sup> News in categories that the user rates as “secondary” in interest appear lower on the page, with the national and international stories sandwiched in between. Less familiar news and complex topics, such as those about health, science and the economy, are supported by more “explanatory” video, graphics and focused discussion.



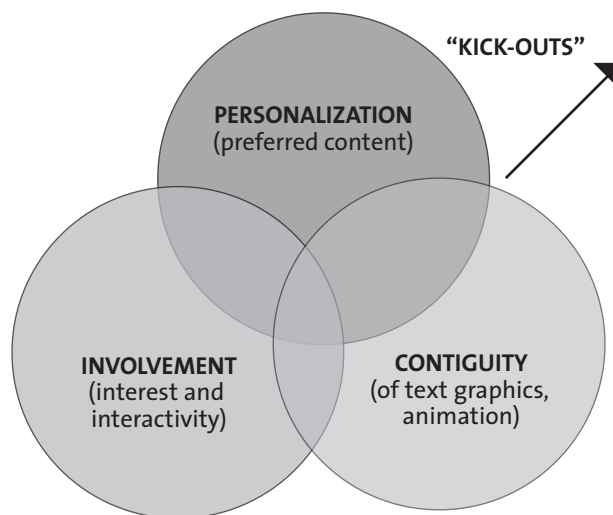
At the International Symposium on Online Journalism, Professor Alberto Cairo from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill presented examples of how databases linked to interactive Flash graphics—ones that users can manipulate—significantly enhance user involvement and engagement with the story. Designing the right interactive graphic, therefore, can be an art in itself.

## Involvement

By involvement, we mean the degree to which users input choices and/or content. Education research tells us that more interactivity breeds more involvement. And more involvement means greater attention paid to content. But the level of involvement varies. Clicking a “play” button for a one-minute video represents much less involvement than reading a few sentences, choosing steps in a related animation, selecting a 10-second video, and then posting comments about the story. The problem is that too much involvement inhibits comprehension when interactivity overwhelms a user’s cognition, a complaint we hear often from the current online audience. More research will identify the point at which too much interactivity becomes counterproductive.

## Contiguity

A Web page might look appealing, but research in the United Kingdom tells us that users take approximately 50 milliseconds to form an opinion about a page. Contiguity in multimedia is how the elements of hypertext, photos, animation, slides, links, blogs, video and audio, all combine to communicate one coherent message. Our published studies show that even subtle variations in the structures of news text and links produce significant differences in audience interest ratings and their understanding of stories. Researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara found that users generate



nearly 50 percent more creative solutions to problems when different forms of explanations are fully integrated. Without coherence in multimedia content, users do what most content producers hope to avoid—they terminate their engagement. The PICK model calls this terminated engagement a “kick-out.”

## Kick-Outs

The goal is nothing new. Grab the audience with effective headlines, photos, video and formats. The PICK model argues that the attention-deficit digital world—with its overwhelming amount of information—requires communicators to now be more aware of things that frequently terminate audience attention. These are controllable “kick-outs.” The most obvious kick-out is a broken link, but others include too much text, lengthy video, pop-up windows, unfamiliar terms, confusing graphics, or interactive animation that’s too complex. Of course, it’s impossible to eliminate every potential kick-out but, as the grazing digital audience continues to grow, so will the need for critical assessment of how news is presented online and ways to eliminate avoidable kick-outs.

## Where Does This Path Lead?

Ultimately, the challenge is how to simultaneously combine effective techniques of personalization, involve-

ment, contiguity and minimal kick-outs with clear, accurate, ethical journalism. Addressing this complexity when producing and delivering news will actually simplify how the audience will then engage with the content. But to do this well will require that news reporters, editors and videographers join with producers, educators and students to more clearly understand how digital natives process information differently than any previous audience has. Does a slideshow or video need to be that long? What is too long? Is the video or graphic redundant with information already in the accompanying text? How does one person’s interest lead to engagement with a community that shares that interest?

These questions—and so many more—frame the mission of our exploration.

It might be reasonable to conclude that the PICK model is still too abstract for immediate application. To some extent, the technology needed to support NewsSEEN has yet to be developed. In the interim, indications are that those avoiding exploration of the new territory risk being abandoned by a restless audience of digital natives—an audience that appears to already know the territory into which all of us are headed. ■

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# Serendipity, Echo Chambers, and the Front Page

As readers on the Web, we may filter out ‘perspectives that might challenge our assumptions and preconceptions about what’s important and newsworthy.’

BY ETHAN ZUCKERMAN

In “The Paradox of Choice,” psychologist Barry Schwartz warned of one of the more counterintuitive problems of modern life: the paralysis that can come from too much choice. While “the stress of choice” might pale in comparison to other stresses of modern life, it’s a useful concept in understanding the stresses that newspapers—and their readers—are facing in a digital age. The number of choices an engaged citizen has for reading or watching news has exploded in recent years, and this increase may, paradoxically, mean we encounter less challenging news, and fewer foreign viewpoints, than we used to.

As exciting and challenging as blogging has been as an addition to the media environment, the millions of bloggers writing about current events have probably had less effect on mainstream newspapers than the simple fact that nearly every newspaper is now available online. Alexa, which estimates traffic to Web sites, lists superblog The Huffington Post as the 20th most popular news Web site, the most popular blog in their news rankings. Significantly more popular are the BBC’s site (4th), The New York Times (5th), The Washington Post (13th), The Guardian (17th), Los Angeles Times (18th), The Wall Street Journal (19th), and The Times of India (22nd). The audiences suggested by the Alexa rankings vastly outpace the circulation of these newspapers. The move of newspapers online means that engaged readers can subscribe to a local newspaper and complement local coverage with high-quality national and international news available online.

This could be a golden moment for the fans of high-quality journalism—if only someone can figure out how to continue to pay to produce high-

quality journalism at these national and international newspapers.

Discerning readers can triangulate between local newspapers—which have every incentive to focus coverage on local news (sacrificing local perspectives on national and international news)—and world-class newspapers for coverage of the broader world. This is a recent, and important, development. Ten years ago, if you lived in a rural town, as I do, The New York Times was available only at the local library, The Guardian not at all. Broadening your perspective by reading a range of local, national and international newspapers required an investment of time and money that few readers can make. Those investments are now trivial—at least for readers.

Are most readers triangulating in this way, reading broadly and widely, taking advantage of the plethora of choices online? Probably not. Most major newspapers offer information on their Web sites about what stories are most read, most e-mailed, and most blogged. These lists suggest that readers of these papers are obsessed with U.S. presidential politics, stories that involve celebrities, and stories about terrorism.

There’s little to indicate that readers are reading broadly, taking advantage of the comprehensive—and expensive—international coverage these newspapers offer. There’s also little to indicate that readers are paying attention to coverage of national stories not already embedded in news agendas. Instead, these lists suggest that some readers are highly selective in their consumption, seeking and sharing stories as a form of ammunition in ongoing political battles, digging more deeply into issues they already believe to be important.

## Making Choices

When newspapers create online editions, they give readers more choices. That’s a subtle but important change. The front page of The New York Times offers “links” to roughly 20 stories. Most of these links include 200-400 words and occasionally a picture or graphic. There’s significant information to draw a reader’s interest in a story. By contrast, the front page of nytimes.com offers more than 300 links, none of which feature more than 30 words of text. By one measure, the online version offers readers far more choice, with roughly 12 times as many stories to select.

The paper edition is a persuasive technology; it is an embodiment of the editor’s argument that certain stories are worth the reader’s attention. The online edition trusts the reader to make up her own mind.

This may not be a wise decision. Homophily—the tendency of “birds of a feather to flock together”—is a basic human trait and not always a desirable one. Sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton documented the tendency of people living in mixed-race neighborhoods to have more friendships with people of the same race (and with those who have similar educational and financial backgrounds). These relationships affect how humans receive and process information; we are more likely to be receptive to a message delivered by someone who shares our demographic makeup.

In a world of widespread media choice, we rely heavily on cues from peers as to what media are worth paying attention to and what we can safely ignore. We follow links from friends’ blogs to discover stories, read stories e-mailed by friends, or visit sites like

reddit or Digg where “communities” vote on which stories should be most popular. In all these cases, we open the possibility that our news will be filtered by people who view the world much as we do, filtering out perspectives that might challenge our assumptions and preconceptions about what’s important and newsworthy.

Harvard law professor Cass Sunstein has studied these issues closely.<sup>1</sup> He warns of the dangers of isolating ourselves in ideological echo chambers. In his research, people who deliberate with like-minded citizens tend to emerge more partisan than before their deliberations. Sunstein worries that we may polarize ourselves simply by reading media that reinforces our existing points of view.

In reaction to Sunstein, there’s a great deal of academic debate about whether political bloggers are more or less likely to read opponents’ views than the average voter. Some studies see clear evidence that bloggers with a strong ideological stance are far more likely to link to bloggers with similar stances. Others see evidence that readers of political blogs are better informed in general than average voters and are informed about arguments across the political spectrum.

If we see evidence that liberals or conservatives choose media that reinforce existing preconceptions and avoid challenging views, it’s likely that we have other biases that govern our consumption of media, including too much of a focus on our nation at the expense of others. If our peers place too much focus on U.S. politics and terrorism at the expense of other important stories, do we end up with less diverse and complex knowledge of the world? Sunstein argues that we tend to surround ourselves with media that reinforce our political prejudices. It should come as no surprise that we also seek out media that focus nearly exclusively on our nation, language and culture at the expense of others

around the world. Intensely focusing on our home country and its perspectives might be at least as dangerous as surrounding ourselves with comfortable political opinions.

## The Allure of Serendipity

There’s a strong temptation to give readers what they want. The Huffington Post has increased its traffic nearly five-fold in the past year. Some of this traffic growth is surely due to an endless and contentious election. Betsy Morgan, CEO of The Huffington Post and former head of CBSNews.com, suggests another reason for growth—a

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**For years, one of the best sources of serendipity has been the front page of daily newspapers.**

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relentless focus on metrics. On taking the post, she immediately asked staff to provide her with daily traffic statistics, showing which stories generated the most interest. Those stories are heavily promoted on the site’s heavily trafficked front page. It’s a smart business strategy, signaling to the site’s employees and unpaid contributors what stories are most likely to be celebrated and amplified by editors and appreciated by the site’s readers.

This strategy has a downside. Too much reliance on viewer metrics by newspapers could have an important unintended consequence—a decrease in a publication’s ability to provide serendipity. Serendipity is the wonderful experience of stumbling upon something you didn’t know you wanted to know. It’s a surprisingly powerful tool for helping people break out of echo chambers of all sorts. If you

stumble upon a story that appeals to your interest in rugby, model railroads or rainbows, even if it’s from a part of the world you have no explicit interest in, it may capture your attention and broaden your worldview.

Serendipity is tricky to engineer. It’s difficult to provide information that’s both surprising and relates to a reader’s unstated interests. Librarians engineer serendipity in open stacks by organizing books by topic, allowing eyes to stray from the requested volume to related ones. Retailers hope to increase purchasing by making it easy to stumble upon items you were surprised to remember you “needed”—the beer display at the end of the diaper aisle is an attempt to create a serendipity for the father sent to the store for baby supplies.

For years, one of the best sources of serendipity has been the front page of daily newspapers. Many front page editors reserve a space, often below the fold, for a story from deep within the paper that isn’t directly related to the day’s headlines. This may be a way of featuring the rich storytelling within a newspaper that a reader might otherwise miss, but it frequently leads readers to make unexpected connections between issues and communities. This ability to guide readers to stories they didn’t know they needed to read is one of the key functions of printed newspapers and one we shouldn’t engineer away as we move to the Web. Instead, we need to take on the challenge of creating serendipity in digital media, recognizing the problems associated with the paradox of choice and building media that help us find the information we need, not just the information we think we need. ■

*Ethan Zuckerman is cofounder of the global citizen media Web site, Global Voices (globalvoicesonline.org) and a research fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.*

<sup>1</sup> Sunstein’s article, “Enclave Extremism and Journalism’s Brave New World,” was published in the Summer 2008 issue of Nieman Reports, at [www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100021](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100021).

## Net Geners Relate to News in New Ways

'Is it any surprise that they remember less from the traditional newscasts—told from beginning to end—than from interactive versions that allow them to click to hear the news or learn more details?'

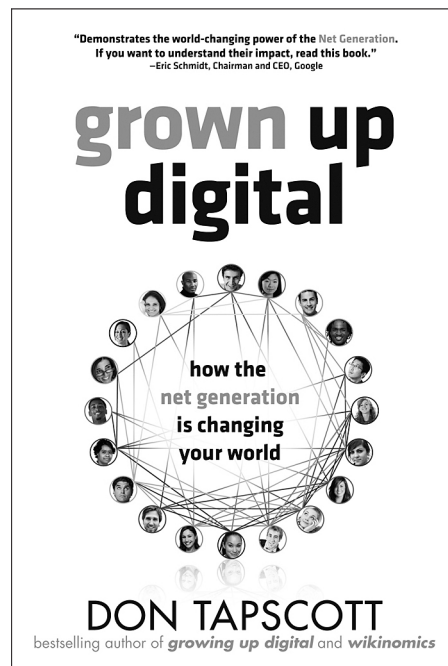
BY DON TAPSCOTT

When my son Alex was in his senior year, I visited him at Amherst College. He was sitting with four friends, each with a laptop, in the common room. They were watching three television sets, all closed-captioned—one airing a sports show, another the news, and another a sitcom. Needless to say, they weren't just watching, but each of them was talking and playing a game together that they'd just dreamed up. When someone on one of the TV shows said something like, "The Mafia is the number one employer in Italy!" the boys would shout "No way" and check it out online. Or maybe Jerry Seinfeld would offer some obscure Shakespearean reference. "No way!" they'd say, and then tap, tap, tap. From time to time, they'd call or text a friend via mobile phone.

I was amazed they could manage all these media at once. They weren't even stressed out by it. It looked like fun—if you had grown up digital.

Neither Alex nor his friends are unusual within their generation. Young Americans under 30 are the first to grow up at a time when cell phones, the Internet, texting and Facebook are as normal as the refrigerator. They've grown up digital, and it's changed the way their minds work.

The technology they grew up with is significantly different than what we, as boomers, knew at their age. When my generation watched TV as teenagers, we just watched; we didn't talk back



(or if we did, no one responded). But when Net Geners watch TV, they treat it like background Muzak as they hunt for information and chat with friends via Facebook, Skype, Google Talk, or plain old text messaging. Multitasking is what this generation does, in the same way talking back—and expecting an answer—is a natural part of their interactive experience.

### Digital Minds

As I describe in my book, "Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World," we can already see the early signs of how this

interactive, multitasking digital world is affecting young minds. Playing a lot of action video games, for example, can result in them noticing more in their field of vision and speeding up their processing of visual information, according to a widely quoted study reported in *Nature*.<sup>1</sup> This study built on other research showing that video-game playing can also improve spatial skills, the ability to mentally manipulate a 3-D object (helpful for architects, sculptors and engineers), and might be associated with improved results in some fields of mathematics. Other studies suggest that video game playing enhances abilities for dividing one's attention and encourages players to discover rules through observation, trial and error, and hypothesis testing.

The interactive nature of the digital world influences how Net Geners absorb information, too. They want a two-way conversation, not a lecture—from a teacher, a politician, or a journalist. They like to contribute to the conversation. Most young people visit blogs, and 40 percent of them have their own; even more contribute some form of content to the Internet. They have a limited tolerance for long lectures or 700-page tomes (especially when they can find information far more quickly on Wikipedia). The result of this was highlighted in a 2006 study that compared what Net Geners remember from radio newscasts vs. interactive newscasts. Is it any surprise that they

<sup>1</sup> This article, "Action Video Games Modify Visual Selective Attention," by C. Shawn Green and Daphne Bavelier, appeared in *Nature* in 2003 (Vol. 423).

remember less from the traditional newscasts—told from beginning to end—than from interactive versions that allow them to click to hear the news or learn more details?<sup>2</sup>

Consider how Alex and his friends were consuming media in the common room at college with their own interactive multimedia experience rather than watching TV. Our research shows that the Net Generation likes to customize everything from their iPods to news feeds. So when I asked Rahaf Harfoush, a Net Gen collaborator, why she doesn't read newspapers, she told me: "Why would I? They come out once a day, they don't have hot links, and they're not multimedia. Besides, who needs that black gunk all over your fingers?" Instead, Rahaf creates her own digital newspaper using a sophisticated, personalized set of information-gathering tools, which provide her with real-time, on-demand access to dozens of information sources.

"The news is no longer a one-stop trip," she told me. "I think the changing nature of the story, and the constant updating of the Internet, make it possible to sample a wide variety of opinions and perspectives. I rely on all these different pieces to triangulate the issues I care about and kind of get to the heart of things."

Growing up digital has encouraged this generation to be active and demanding inquirers—not passive consumers of media created for a mass audience. Rather than waiting for a trusted anchor to tell them what's going on, they find out on their own—often via Google or Wikipedia. Some writers, of course, think that Google makes you stupid; it's so hard to concentrate and think deeply amid the overwhelming amounts of bits of information online, they contend. Yet I think that growing up digital has helped Net Geners to handle this information overload.

Several research studies suggest that young people are no better than older people at multitasking, but I

see a different story when I observe hundreds of young people in their natural habitat. Young people are better and faster at handling the amazing amount of information online than are older people, who have not grown up digital. It helps to be a good scanner. We've found that Net Geners often won't read a whole Web page from left to right and top to bottom, as older people tend to do. Having grown up digital, they are more sensitive to visual symbols and use those to guide their scanning.

### Google Learning

The Internet has shaped Net Geners' mental habits, but does it make them stupid? I don't think so. Last year I met Joe O'Shea, then the 22-year-old student body president of Florida State University. He and I were participating in a panel discussion with the deans about the future of education. When it was O'Shea's turn to speak, what he said shocked some in his audience: "I don't read books per se," he told them. "I go to Google, where I can absorb relevant information quickly." The deans were flabbergasted. "It's not a good use of my time, as I can get all the information I need faster through the Web," he continued. "You need to know how to do it—to be a skilled hunter."

O'Shea, it turns out, has used his hunting acumen to make a real difference. He founded the Lower 9th Ward Health Clinic in post-Katrina New Orleans, which provides preventive and primary care to about 10,000 patients annually, and cofounded the Global Peace Exchange, an international service-based exchange program for students modeled after the U.S. Peace Corps. His style of Google learning might have shocked academics at Florida State, but it hasn't slowed down his academic career. This year, O'Shea is at Oxford, studying philosophy as a Rhodes scholar.

Though he might not read books cover-to-cover, O'Shea finds knowledge contained in books in various ways. Using Google Book Search, he can read a chapter in any one of millions of books stored in its online archive. And he's gotten proficient at figuring out the right chapter to choose. (In part, because of his online searching, he's also an effective browser of actual books.) But he—and others in his generation—know that much contemporary knowledge is not contained in documents but exists in people's minds, and his digital skills—and collaborative mindset—help him learn from experts online.

As O'Shea's example shows, digital immersion can be good for the brain. To Google effectively, a person has to ask a good question, construct a search, and weed out stuff that's irrelevant. The next step is to evaluate what's been found, synthesize it, and form a view. All of this entails constructing one's own story rather than following the line of thought drawn by someone else. This doesn't replace conventional book reading, nor should it. But neither should Googling be dismissed as an intellectual slacker's answer to real thinking. Some literacy scholars believe that finding information in this way can be just as intellectually challenging as reading a book.

Growing up digital might make this the smartest generation ever. And given what we know about the way they think, they're not likely to be a new audience for old-style journalism. ■

*Don Tapscott, author of "Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World," is founder and chairman of nGenera Insight. He has authored or coauthored 13 books, including "Wikinomics," "Paradigm Shift: The New Promise of Information Technology," "The Digital Economy," and "Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation."*

<sup>2</sup> This study, "The Impact of Linear Versus Nonlinear Listening to Radio News on Recall and Comprehension," by Hesham M. Mesbah, was published in the *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* in December 2006 (Vol. 13, No. 2).

# Passion Replaces the Dullness of an Overused Journalistic Formula

‘... mainstream journalism that my students abhor has become too formulaic, too cynical, and too concerned with internal standards over external truth.’

BY ROBERT NILES

Anyone who has taught a morning class at a university likely is familiar with the glazed, blasé look that so many students wear to an early class. But one morning last spring, I watched my students’ faces awaken and their eyes catch fire. For half an hour, they leaned forward in their chairs, talking over one another, each eager to say what they had evidently been holding back for so long.

What was on their minds? They wanted me to know that they really, really hated TV news. And what these journalism majors disliked the most was feeling as though they had to follow the formula drafted by local and network television news. Give ’em The Onion online, or Jon Stewart on cable. When my students were given free reign to produce their own video news stories, they gleefully churned out YouTube videos filled with sharp, snarky comment.

Did such a heartfelt rejection of professional news depress me, as their journalism instructor? Heck, no! Their eagerness for something fresh gives hope that tomorrow’s citizens might be better informed about their communities than are today’s.

## Rejecting the Formula

How, some might ask, can I feel so optimistic in the face of my students’ disdain for their craft? It’s because the mainstream journalism that my students abhor has become too formulaic, too cynical, and too concerned with internal standards over external truth. My students are eager to avoid simplistic “he said, she said” stories, hyperventilated telling of crime news, and gimmicky in-studio banter that fills

so many TV newscasts. Those who are majoring in print journalism also expressed frustration with third-person, institutional writing voices that they said suck the life from what could be more compelling narratives.

When I asked them what they liked about “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart,” and others like it, several said its “honesty.” They admired its fearlessness in calling out newsmakers as liars and hypocrites. The heart of a muckraker beats strongly in my students and, freed from what one of them called the “mind-numbing slickness” of mainstream news reporting, their passion for journalism could again re-emerge.

After I wrote about my students’ criticism on ojr.org in June, many bloggers, readers, reporters and media critics commented that they, too, shared these feelings. But this does not mean that everyone is eager to move to a postmainstream media world, however. What will the alternative look like? This morning at breakfast, my wife asked, “What will life be like without daily newspapers?”

Well, you’ve been seeing the view for the past few years, I told her. With our local Los Angeles Times employing just half the number of editorial staffers it did in 2001 (from more than 1,200 to a little more than 600), today’s newspaper is very different—less complete, thorough and insightful on so many beats. The same situation exists at many newspapers across the country. Yet even as circulation falls and newsrooms lay off staff at many papers, people remain engaged in their democracy. Look at the record number of people contributing and volunteering in this year’s presidential

election. Pollsters and other experts predicted the largest Election Day turnout ever.

As newspapers cut staff and lose market share, readers have more news sources available to them than ever. Partisan-driven online publications, such as DailyKos and RedState, are engaging a new generation of voters, while professionally staffed Web sites such as TalkingPointsMemo and Politico provide solid reporting not only about the candidates but the coverage of them.

## The Power of Passion

I’ve been working in online publishing for 12 years now. I’ve edited Web sites for major metro dailies and launched my own start-ups. I’ve seen bosses, publications and corporations fail, while young professionals working outside the media mainstream became millionaires. The ones who succeeded brought passion to their work, the same passion that I saw in my students’ faces when they were given the green light to speak honestly about their field. Theirs was a passion that I rarely saw in the faces of executives dryly mulling spreadsheets and PowerPoints while planning their companies’ online efforts.

Passion makes people work harder. It drives bloggers to post 20 times a day, seven days a week, answering e-mails and IM’ing readers throughout the day and night. Passion drives online community members to read through hundreds of online documents, to interview sources, and to organize rallies to investigate and report issues important to their personal lives and local communities. Passion breeds

expertise.

This passion and expertise is what too many news organizations exorcised from their companies as they grew fat off local monopolies and their 20- and 40-percent profit margins over the last quarter of the 20th century. That left them ill-prepared to compete with the passionate competition that the Internet introduced in the 1990's. During this same time, the public grew bored, then disgusted with journalism that gradually slouched toward "he said, she said, you-figure-it-out" stenography.

Passion connects with audiences. When people see a writer with personal knowledge, training and experience on a beat, who shows their caring and commitment for it, they read and listen. And when that passion is paired with expertise, the audience returns. The Internet has enabled people to blog about their professions and their passions with an honesty and expertise missing from too many newspapers and TV newscasts, where increasingly overworked generalists file superficial reports on issues that they know too little about.

"The more compelling it is, the more drama you provide, the more exciting the payoff, the more people will arrive and stick around day after day," DailyKos founder Markos Moulitsas e-mailed me this week. "You need to build it organically over time by crafting those villains and heroes and getting people invested not just in the story line but in the outcome."

Sure, many TV news reports try to craft dramatic story lines (with villains and heroes). But my students saw these reports as cynical, shallow, formulaic attempts at storytelling crafted to capture an audience rather than to faithfully tell a story. What they embrace is genuine storytelling, even when such stories are told with less than perfect production values. Indeed, slick production has become so closely associated in their minds with cynical storytelling that they now prefer video reports with a more amateur feel. And something similar is happening in print media; there, readers fear they aren't getting the "real" story from professional reporters who aren't allowed to draw conclusions and "tell them the truth." Instead, they prefer bloggers and

those who join in discussions online who are not constrained by "fairness" from calling a liar just that, especially when those writers follow their passion to develop the expertise necessary to make such calls.

We can train a new generation of journalists who will develop the necessary expertise in their fields to call out frauds and crooks, to tell stories faithfully, and to craft narratives in multiple media that connect with readers in an emotionally honest way. But to do this we have to start by admitting, as I did, that sometimes our students are right. Journalists have developed some bad habits that we need to break. Fortunately, we've got a slew of passionate readers and writers online who are working to do just that. ■

*Robert Niles is the editor of ThemeParkInsider.com and producer of Violinist.com. He is a former staff writer and Web editor for the Los Angeles Times and Rocky Mountain News.*

## Accepting the Challenge: Using the Web to Help Newspapers Survive

'Meeting us where we are—with a great Web site, content that works well in digital media, told in ways we can absorb and share—is a step in the right direction.'

BY LUKE MORRIS

**W**ith newsroom layoffs happening everywhere, it must really stink to be graduating and starting a job search in May, right? Wrong. It doesn't feel too bad for those who, like me, are in this position. The newspaper optimists know recent grads are the best equipped to save newspapers, and they'll be willing to hire those who show the potential to keep newspapers afloat.

Many newsrooms continue to adjust to the Internet and all of its new newsroom duties. Those doing the adjusting right now might have reservations about taking on all of these added duties, but journalists about to enter the job market don't know how things were before the Web changed everything. To them, working for print and Web is all part of the daily life of any journalist.

I'm not suggesting that the newsroom should be run with a Spanish Inquisition attitude of "convert or die" (or to say it a different way, if you can't handle the Web, get lost). The veterans in the newsroom still have important roles to play in keeping the focus on what journalists do best—no matter what media their work appears on. But there needs to be room for younger journalists who can help continue the

newspaper's evolution—or, some might say, energize its revolution—into an online news organization.

As those of us who've grown up with the Internet begin to enter newsrooms, we bring with us our visceral understanding of how the Internet works. We were, after all, among the early adopters of some of the more popular ways of the Web, like Facebook, which started as a college-only networking site. Nor are we shy of putting ourselves online, as we demonstrated by signing up quickly for MySpace accounts. Ditto for Twitter and lots of other social media sites that people older than us tend to avoid. And we'll likely be the ones to stampede toward the next great online breakthroughs.

By being on the Web so much, and observing how others use it, when we get into the newsroom we'll bring with us a good sense of possible ways to integrate the newspaper into the vast territory of digital media. Perhaps, with this kind of input, newspapers will only be a half step behind the Internet instead of feeling like they are miles behind.

A big challenge newspapers face right now is figuring out how to get us to even read the paper. In his book, "Is Voting for Young People?," Martin Wattenberg writes that we do not connect with the news because we've grown up in a time when watching the evening news isn't the only option on TV, not to mention the Internet. Cable gave us the ability to watch other programming during the traditional time slot when many older Americans watched the news each night as a family. Nor is dad usually found reading the newspaper at the breakfast table anymore.

Even if we don't relate to getting our news in the way that our parents—and their parents—did, I don't think it's time to abandon the idea of getting newspapers into the hands of our children. From where I sit as a journalism student about to graduate

**Breaking Into Journalism**  
The story of a college senior finding his way into the newspaper job market

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2008

**Any papers adopting Adobe CS4 early?**

I know that newspapers don't have the best budgets to work with, but I was curious if anyone knew of any papers who already have plan to make the move to Adobe CS4.

I've fallen in love with InDesign and InCopy in my time at the Kansan. I remember I was first intimidated by Hermes and CCI design in Philly, but adapted with a sense of humor along the way.

If things go through, I'll be at the KC Star designing some pages in CCI over winter break. It looks harder than InDesign, but easy enough to learn in a day or two.

**About Me**  
Luke Morris

I'm a senior journalism major at the University of Kansas. As I try to grab a degree, I'm also trying to land my first job in the newspaper industry.

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and look for a job in newspapers, I'm really hoping that newspapers find some way to permeate our culture. Meeting us where we are—with a great Web site, content that works well in digital media, told in ways we can absorb and share—is a step in the right direction.

## Content and Community

Host of the video blog Wine Library TV and business and social media mogul Gary Vaynerchuk often tells people that every successful Web site excels in what he calls the two "Cs"—content and community. For him, content comes in the form of his video blog about wines. Vaynerchuk capitalizes on the community side by including his followers in a lot of his operation; in fact, he makes his Web site completely open to his viewers.

Vaynerchuk live streams tapings of his shows on Ustream.tv. He also puts himself on Ustream to talk with his fans, pulling as many as a few hundred followers each time in sessions that happen during the workday. He Tweets often and is adroit at using many similar social media tools. Added to all of this, he answers every e-mail sent to him, and some days they number in the thousands. Newspapers looking for ways to be dominant in the era of digital media have a lot to learn from Vaynerchuk.

News organizations already have plenty of good content, even if many of them are lacking in the digital

community department. Sure they have readers or viewers located in their market area, but that's not how Internet community works or is measured. To be a successful Web site means having a community whose members feel a strong desire to participate. They're the people watching Vaynerchuk on Ustream and sending messages on Twitter wishing him a better day after his beloved New York Jets lose.

It's hard to imagine journalists having the time and energy for this very high level of interaction. If they did, then when would they find time and energy to do their reporting? But newspaper reporters and editors can—and many already do—hop into a chat room hosted by the paper or get on Ustream for 20 minutes once a week and keep in touch with readers. And when the newspaper sets up its Web site in a welcoming way (with good social media tools), then readers will use it to engage with one another.

Leo Laporte, who is host of TWiT.tv (www.thisweekintech.com), a Web site cranking out many podcasts a week, set up a microblogging program similar to Twitter on TWiT's site through Laconica; it's called TWiT Army. Join TWiT Army, and you can post links or reflections on an article in a mini post, as you would for Twitter. Wiredjournalists.com also does this, but through Ning.com, a Web site that provides a customizable template for creating your own social media program.

Having content and community isn't going to solve all the problems that newspapers confront today. They must still work very hard to get their entire product out to wherever potential consumers can be found. Creating an iPhone application is a great step to push content to consumers, but the next challenge is to move the community part of the equation onto the mobile devices as well and not only the devices with famous names. When a newspaper decides to get its content



onto one kind of phone, it should immediately expand its goal to aim toward getting the newspaper's content onto every phone made after a certain year. As new products—hardware and online programs—emerge, those in the newsroom who are their early adopters will be the ones well suited to lead the brainstorming of how to get the newspaper onto these new technologies.

I don't shudder at newspapers'

Internet-induced downfall. Instead, I see it as a challenge. Every time someone tells me that wanting to get a job in a newspaper is a dumb idea, it motivates me even more to prove them wrong. And I believe there are plenty of young people like me who want to be part of the reason that newspapers will survive. We're ready to take what we know from our use of the Internet and apply it to whatever we can do to keep newspapers afloat.

When I toss my mortarboard into the air on May 17th, consider it my way of saying, "challenge accepted." ■

*Luke Morris is a senior at the University of Kansas and copy chief of The University Daily Kansan. He blogs about his rookie view of the newspaper industry at <http://breakingintojournalism.blogspot.com>.*

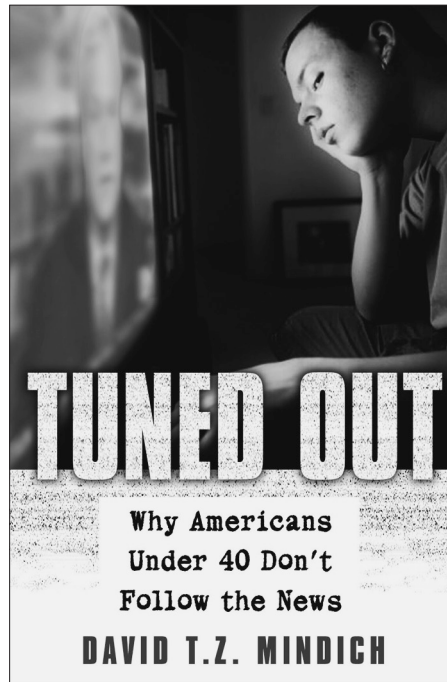
## Journalism and Citizenship: Making the Connection

'Not only do citizens benefit from good journalism, but also journalism gets a boost from having engaged, news-hungry citizens.'

BY DAVID T.Z. MINDICH

**M**y book, "Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News," published in 2004, opened with a depressing fact: More people watched the 2003 finale of "American Idol" (38 million) than the second Bush vs. Gore presidential debate (37.6 million). Among young viewers, these numbers were even more lopsided. In all, 24 million votes were cast, mainly by young people, for "American Idol" contestants Ruben Studdard and Clay Aiken. Even though we know that some of these votes were by minors (and they were allowed to vote multiple times), it is sobering to remember that fewer than six million (22 percent) of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in the 2006 midterm elections; this means that for every one of these young people who voted, four of their peers stayed home.

Fast forward to the 2008 elections, in which 66 million watched the second presidential debate, and even more watched the vice presidential one. Millions of young people participated in the primaries and caucuses—in a greater percentage than seen in decades. In the general election, 18 to



29-year-olds increased their share of the electorate from 17 percent in the past two elections to 18 percent this year. Still, little more than half of all eligible voters under 30 cast ballots in the general election, according to

an early estimate by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

But does this modest upsurge in voting among young people mean that the 30-year widening knowledge gap between them and their elders is being narrowed? Some long-term trends are discouraging:

- Only around 20 percent of today's 20-somethings and 30 percent of 30-somethings read a newspaper every day, way down from decades past. Why should we care? Because studies show that the news habit needs to be cultivated early. The 30-something non-news reader is likely to one day become a 50-something non-news reader.
- Television news viewership is no better: The median viewer age of TV news has risen from 50 to around 60 in the past decade. Although CNN, "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," and "The Colbert Report" have seen recent upticks in young viewers, long-term trends for television news watching are down.
- An August 2008 report<sup>1</sup> by the Pew

<sup>1</sup> <http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media>

Research Center for the People & the Press, found that an engaged minority of Americans are “integrators,” people who use both the Internet and traditional sources to get a lot of their news. But while more and more people are logging onto news Web sites—and sharing what they find with one another—until very recently none of this activity had closed the political knowledge gap. There is, of course, a minority of young people—always was and always will be—who use whatever the current medium is to gain a deep knowledge of news and politics. But for too many, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and other digital media seem to serve as more of a distraction from civic and political news than as a way to inform.

- In “The Age of Indifference,” an important study from the summer of 1990, it was revealed that young Americans from the 1940’s to the 1970’s were nearly as informed as their elders about current events; this knowledge gap began widening in the 1970’s.<sup>2</sup> A decade later, Pew asked Americans if they happen to know the presidential candidate who sponsored campaign finance reform. Only about nine percent of 18-34 year olds knew it was John McCain, far fewer than their elders. A question about Wesley Clark in 2004 showed that young Americans were far less likely than their elders to know that he was a general.

The one exception to these dire numbers is a recent Pew poll published in July that asked respondents to identify McCain and Obama’s stances on abortion and withdrawal from Iraq. For the first time in years, 18-to-29

year olds seemed to know slightly more than their elders about the candidates and these issues. But a closer examination must give us pause. The poll asked whether the candidates are “pro-choice” or “pro-life,” a yes or no question. If respondents were totally devoid of knowledge, we could expect a 50 percent accuracy rate. In the poll, only 52 percent and 45 percent of Americans of all ages knew that, respectively, Obama is pro-choice and McCain is pro-life. A flipped coin

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**There is, of course, a minority of young people—always was and always will be—who use whatever the current medium is to gain a deep knowledge of news and politics. But for too many, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and other digital media seem to serve as more of a distraction from civic and political news than as a way to inform.**

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would do basically as well as the poll respondents. That young people in one poll marginally beat a flipped coin, and the rest of us didn’t, is no cause for celebration.

Two recent books, Mark Bauerlein’s “The Dumbest Generation” and Rick Shenkman’s “Just How Stupid Are We?,” seek to plumb the depths of our dumbness. We do, after all, live in a nation in which many of us believed that Saddam Hussein had a role in the 9/11 attacks years after the Bush administration had to pull back from that claim. Still, after conducting research during the past five years—studies that involved speaking with hundreds of young people about their news habits (and lack thereof)—I don’t find that today’s young people are “stupid” or “dumb.” Quite the contrary: I find them to be just as idealistic, thoughtful

and intelligent as their parents and grandparents were (and are). And while they’re not dumb, most Americans, particularly those under 40, do have what Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter once called a “thin” citizenship; this means they only follow the outlines of democracy and, in many cases, don’t bother to engage at all. Most young people I talked with during my research couldn’t name even one Supreme Court justice or any of the countries in Bush’s “Axis of Evil.”

### The News Habit

A thin citizenship is good for no one. When we don’t pay attention, we fall for slogans and get swayed by lofty rhetoric with little regard for policy differences and voting records. Deep citizenship lets us hold leaders accountable by engaging in a deliberative process that goes deeper.

“The role of the press,” said the late James W. Carey, a journalism professor, when he addressed a journalism educators’ conference in 1978, “is simply to make sure that in the short run we don’t get screwed, and it does this best not by treating us as consumers of news, but by encouraging the conditions of public discourse and life.” Carey argued that cultivating a deep citizenship is part of a journalist’s responsibility. If Carey was indicating that the business part of this equation should not be considered as paramount, it’s important for us to recognize that muscular citizens are good for business, too. Not only do citizens benefit from good journalism, but also journalism gets a boost from having engaged, news-hungry citizens.

There are plenty of things that we, as a society, can do to reverse

<sup>2</sup> <http://people-press.org/report/19900628/the-age-of-indifference>

the 30-year trend. I met with poor, black, middle-school students in New Orleans in 2001 who were all reading *The New York Times* online. Why? Because their sixth grade teacher made them. As eighth graders, these kids were still getting the e-mail alerts from the Times. After speaking with them, I concluded that if you assign it, they will read it. In other words, kids who are asked to follow the news often keep up the habit on their own.

This experience—and others like it—have convinced me of the value there would be in news organizations and media companies connecting more actively with schools and with students. While many of us worry about journalists who take on such a public role, there is nothing partisan or unseemly, and certainly no conflict of interest, when journalists try to get kids to follow the news.

Colleges can do their part, too. Imagine what a news and civics portion of the SAT would do to engage college-bound students. Or the effect of a single question on the Common Application: “What have you done to effect political change in your community?” There is a group—the Student Voices Project, sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School—in which educators, politicians and journalists work together to help students change their communities, and it appears to be effective.

## Rebuilding Trust

News organizations can do a lot to improve their product, too, yet most are doing nearly everything wrong. At my former employer, CNN, “Nancy Grace” and “Showbiz Tonight” have been added to the Headline News lineup during the past few years—with a concomitant loss of hard news. When I met CNN President Jonathan Klein at a conference a couple of years ago, I shared with him my view that this kind of programming is a mistake.

I used this example: What if I decided to pander to my students by bringing mixed drinks to class? Most students would object for two reasons: they’d rightly be suspicious

of my ability to mix drinks well and, although some would enjoy the party atmosphere, most, I believe, regard my class as a refuge from dorm parties. Similarly, CNN is not a good place for entertainment; for starters, its entertainment isn’t as much fun as “Fear Factor” and “Desperate Housewives” but, more importantly, CNN should be a refuge, a place we turn to for elevated conversation, to become politically informed, and to engage in a process that holds the powerful accountable.

Some find *The Daily Show* to be an example of how entertainment debases news. But watch it and immediately its flashes of intelligence, its analysis, and its ability and willingness to hold leaders accountable are apparent. It’s no coincidence, then, that some of the more serious and politically engaged news junkies watch *The Daily Show*; it shares many, though certainly not all, of the best values and practices of journalism.

What I’ve come to understand is that part of why young people don’t follow the news is that many of them no longer trust those bringing the news to them, especially commercial outlets. My research shows this is due to four factors, which conspire to make many young people deeply suspicious of corporate media.

1. Young people are deeply—and rightly—suspicious of the rising sensationalism in the media.
2. Attacks from the right have labeled, unfairly, I believe, the mainstream press as being left wing.
3. Because many on the left criticize the press for its failure to ask tough questions in the months leading up to the Iraq War, a lot of young people don’t realize there were a number of hard-hitting reports and editorials.
4. Well meaning “media literacy” educators have sought to make young people aware of the dangers of media, in general, without helping them to see the benefits of journalism, in particular.

What is the best antidote to their mistrust?

Perhaps it is coverage like that which happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when journalists pushed back against power. Not surprisingly, they also saw their credibility (and ratings) shoot up. After Anderson Cooper’s role in that coverage, CNN tried to make him more touchy-feely, but then wisely abandoned that tack to push the idea that Cooper and CNN are “holding them accountable” and “keeping them honest.” In my journalism and mass communication classes, I assign hard-hitting journalism—Seymour Hersh’s Abu Ghraib story, Dana Priest and Anne Hull’s Walter Reed investigation, and James Risen and Eric Lichtblau’s reporting on domestic spying—and I find my students often are shocked by how important journalism can be.

Despite our present economic difficulties, we live in a hopeful time, with the national zeitgeist certainly more political than it has been in years. Some of my students tell me that their lunchtime conversations are becoming more political, and conversation is certainly part of the solution to lack of civic and political engagement. My research and that of others show that young adults—even schoolchildren—seek out political news when they know that their elders and their peers care about politics. With the blossoming of this youthful interest, now is a perfect time for those who see a need to strengthen the connection between journalism and citizenship to act. ■

*David T.Z. Mindich, a former assignment editor for CNN, is a professor of journalism and mass communication at Saint Michael’s College. Mindich is the author, most recently, of “Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don’t Follow the News,” published by Oxford University Press in 2004. His articles have appeared in a wide range of publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York* magazine, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *the Wilson Quarterly*.*

# Distracted: The New News World and the Fate of Attention

‘As a term, “multitasking” doesn’t quite do justice to all the ways in which we fragment our attention.’

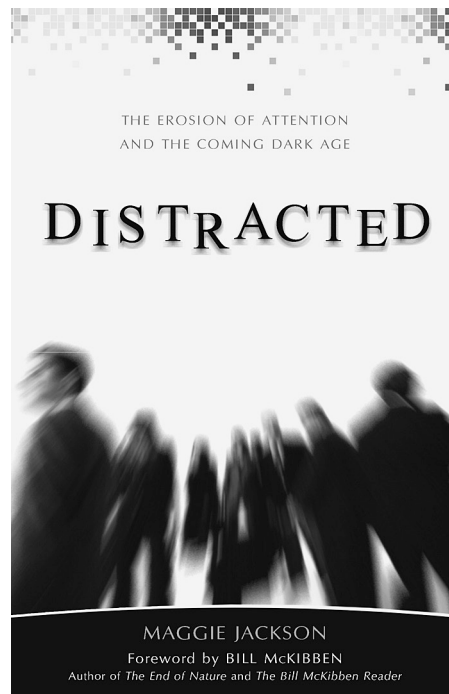
BY MAGGIE JACKSON

Last summer, I was a passenger in a car barreling down a Detroit highway when I noticed a driver speeding past us, a magazine propped up beside his steering wheel. Perhaps most amazingly, I was the only person in my group who was surprised by this high-speed feat of multitasking.

Today, it’s rare to give anything our full attention. Our focus is fragmented and diffused, whether we’re conversing, eating, working, minding our kids—or imbibing the news. A new hypermobile, cybercentric and split-focused world has radically changed the context of news consumption—and shifted the environment for newsgathering as well. Attention is the bedrock of deep learning, critical thinking, and creativity—all skills that we need to foster, not undercut, more than ever on both sides of the newsmaking fence. And as we become more culturally attention-deficient, I worry about whether we as a nation can nurture both an informed citizenry—and an informative press.

It’s easy to point first to rising data floods as a culprit for our distraction. More than 100 million blogs and a like number of Web sites, not to mention 1.8 million books in print, spawn so much information that, as Daniel Boorstin observes, data begin to outstrip the making of meaning. “We are captives of information,” writes the cultural historian Walter Ong, “for uninterrupted information can create an information chaos and, indeed, has done so, and quite clearly will always do so.”

Yet sense-making in today’s information-rich world is not just a matter of how much we have to contend with but, more importantly, how we



approach the 24/7 newsfeed that is life today. Consider the Detroit driver; where was he consuming media, and how much focus was he allotting to the task?

Increasingly, Americans are on the go, whatever they’re doing. Just 14 percent of us move each year, yet the average number of miles that we drive annually has risen 80 percent during the past two decades. The car-as-moving-den, the popularity of power bars and other portable cuisine, the rise of injuries related to “textwalking,” all of these—and more—attest to our collective hyperactivity. And as we relentlessly hurry through our days toting hand-held foods and portable gadgets, at the same time we keep one ear or eye on multiple streams of news-bytes.

## Fragmented Attention

As a term, “multitasking” doesn’t quite do justice to all the ways in which we fragment our attention. Split-focus is sometimes simply the result of living in a highly mediated world. More than half of children ages eight to 18 live in homes where a television is on most of the time, an environment linked to attention difficulties and lowered parent-child interaction. In public spaces from elevators to taxis, screens packed with flickering words and images are increasingly hard to avoid. Despite reconnaissance forays up and down airports, I usually have to succumb to an inescapable TV blare while waiting to fly. Former Microsoft executive Linda Stone deems ours a landscape of “continuous partial attention.” Tuning in and out is a way of life.

But split focus also occurs when we hopscotch from one task or person to another, as most famously exemplified by the lethal crash of a California commuter train, apparently because the rail engineer at the helm was texting. Our veneration of multitasking can be traced in part to the influential efficiency guru Frederick W. Taylor, who counseled that factory work could be speeded up if broken down into interchangeable parts. As well, we live in an era where we seem to believe that we can shape time at will. We ignore age-old rhythms of sun and season, strain to surpass our biological limitations, and now seek to break the fetters of mechanized time by trying to do two or more things at once. Multitasking is born of a post-clock era.

The result on the job is “work fragmentation,” according to Gloria

Mark, an informatics professor at the University of California, Irvine and a leader in the field of “interruption science.” In studies across a range of industries, she and other researchers have found that office workers change tasks on average every three minutes throughout the day. An e-mail, instant message, phone call, colleague’s question, or a new thought prompts an interruption. Once interrupted, it takes nearly 25 minutes to return to an original task. Half of the time, people are interrupting themselves.

The risks are clear. “If you’re continually interrupted and switching thoughts, it’s hard to think deeply about anything,” Mark once observed to me. “How can you engage with something?”

In our rapid-fire, split-focus era, are we able to process, filter and reflect well on the tsunamis of information barraging us daily? Are we hearing, but not listening? If this continues to be the way we work, learn and report, could we be collectively nurturing new forms of ignorance, born not from a dearth of information as in the past, but from an inability or an unwillingness to do the difficult work of forging knowledge from the data flooding our world?

I see worrisome signs that our climate of distraction undermines our ability to think deeply. Consider that nearly a third of workers are so busy or interrupted that they often feel they do not have time to reflect on the work that they do, according to the Families and Work Institute. David M. Levy, a professor at the University of Washington, has even held a high-level MacArthur Foundation-funded conference tellingly called, “No Time to Think.” And for all their tech-fluency, younger generations often have trouble evaluating and assessing information drawn from the Web, studies show. For example, a new national exam of information literacy, the Educational Testing Service’s “iSkills” assessment test, found that just half of college students could judge the objectivity of a Web site, and just over a third could correctly narrow an overly broad online search.

## Multitasking and the News

News consumption fares no better, according to a small but in-depth recent study of 18- to 34-year-olds commissioned by The Associated Press. The 18 participants, who were tracked by ethnographers for days, consumed a “steady diet of bite-size pieces of news,” almost always while multitasking. Their news consumption was often “shallow and erratic,”

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**In our rapid-fire, split-focus era, are we able to process, filter and reflect well on the tsunamis of information barraging us daily? Are we hearing, but not listening?**

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even as they yearned to go beyond the brief and often repetitive headlines and updates that barraged them daily. Participants “appeared debilitated by information overload and unsatisfying news experiences,” researchers observed. Moreover, “when the news wore them down, participants in the study showed a tendency to passively receive versus actively seek news.” [See related article by the AP’s Jim Kennedy on page 68.]

This is a disturbing portrait: multitasking consumers uneasily “snacking” on headlines, stuck on the surface of the news, unable to turn information into knowledge.

Are consumers lazy? Are the media to blame? Or is Google making us stupid, as a recent Atlantic magazine cover story asked? It’s far too simplistic to look for a single culprit, a clear-cut driver of such changes. Rather, helped by influential tools that are seedbeds of societal change, we’ve built a culture over generations that prizes frenetic movement, frag-

mented work, and instant answers. Just today, my morning paper carried a front-page story about efforts “in a new age of impatience” to create a quick-boot computer. Explained one tech executive, “It’s ridiculous to ask people to wait a couple of minutes” to start up their computer. The first hand up in the classroom, the hyper-businessman who can’t sit still, much less listen—these are markers of success in American society.

Of course, the news business has always been quick, fast and fueled by multitasking. Reporters work in one of the most distracting of milieus—and yet draw on reserves of just-in-time focus to meet deadlines. Still, perhaps today we need to consider how much we can shrink editorial attention spans, with our growing emphasis on “4D” newsgathering, Twitter-style reporting, and newsfeeds from citizen bloggers whose influence far outstrips any hard-won knowledge of the difficult craft of journalism. It’s not just news consumers who are succumbing to a dangerous dependence on what’s first up on Google for making sense of their world.

Ultimately, our new world does more than speed life up and pare the news down. Most importantly, our current climate undermines the trio of skills—focus, awareness and planning/judgment—that make up the crucial human faculty of attention. When we split our focus, curb our awareness, and undercut our ability to gain perspective, we diminish our ability to think critically, carry out deep learning, or be creative. Can we afford to create an attention-deficient economy or press, or build a healthy democracy from a culture of distraction? Absolutely not. ■

*Maggie Jackson is the author of “Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age,” published by Prometheus Books in June 2008. She writes the “Balancing Acts” column in The Boston Globe, and her work has appeared in The New York Times, BusinessWeek and on NPR, among other national publications.*

# Tracking Behavior Changes on the Web

Evidence accumulated in a major study reveals significant shifts in how people deal with knowledge and information—shifts that affect young people the most.

BY DAVID NICHOLAS

It is generally acknowledged that the digital transition is gathering pace as we fast forward to a future in which most of our leisure, cultural, economic and educational activities will be conducted in a virtual environment. What is not so well understood is that, as a result of this transition, we seem to have changed centuries-old ways of dealing with knowledge and information, and this is likely to have a huge impact on every aspect of society and our lives.

For some time now those on the information frontline—academics, teachers, journalists and parents—have suspected that something has changed in how people seek and use information on the Web and especially with Google. The suspicion is that there has been a significant “dumbing down” and, as a consequence, a drop in performance across a whole range of important knowledge-based activities. It is thought that the behavior of young people has dumbed down the most, and this has given rise to worries about the future of many of our treasured institutions, such as libraries and books, and values, such as trust, authority and peer review.

If these suspicions prove correct, then this is truly worrying since it means that many of the benefits that should accrue from being part of a global information society are being squandered. Can it really be the case that, having created a world in which unimaginable information resources are made accessible 24/7, we have failed to take full advantage of this by exhibiting a lazy, cavalier and crude approach to locating, evaluating and

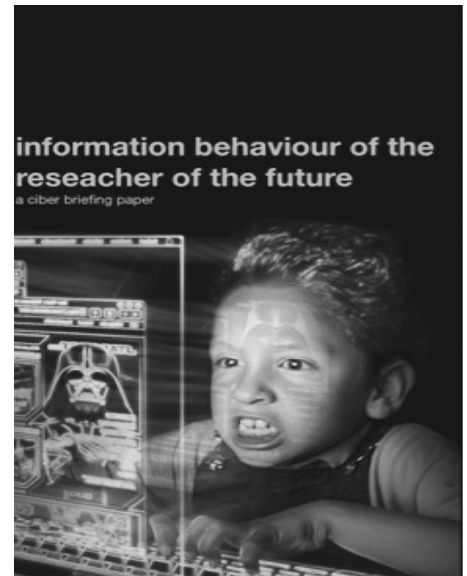
consuming this bounty? Have we become too occupied with easy access and failed miserably to address the big question—to what does this access lead?

It is not just scholarly outcomes we should be concerned about, because the Web is an encyclopedic, multipurpose environment where people go to meet all kinds of needs—health, financial, housing, etc. Success in meeting these essential needs also rests on exercising effective information strategies and methods of seeking.

For journalists, the big question might be posed differently: If in this time when people use the Web to find sources of news and information—posted by bloggers and news organizations, “citizen” journalists and governments officials—how will what is produced through journalistic rigor remain visible amid the clamor of so many other possibilities?

## Evidence of Change

Lots of suspicion and many anecdotes, but is there any robust evidence of change? Turns out there is plenty. The Centre for Information and Behaviour and Evaluation of Research (CIBER) at University College London has dedicated its efforts to describing, visualizing and evaluating environments in which digital information is sought and used. And it has done so in great detail using a method called deep log analysis.<sup>1</sup> As part of our research, the “digital footprints” of millions of people visiting Web sites in a wide range of strategic information environments (health, media, publishing, academe



and charities) have been captured and evaluated, creating an evidence base of unparalleled size. It is not only the study's size that should make us take note but also its robustness, since findings are based on how people actually behaved and not how they thought they behaved, or might behave in the future. (There are already far too many of these studies.)

In broad terms, what CIBER research has found is that behavior in the virtual space can be described as being active, promiscuous, bouncing, flicking and viewing. These are not adjectives we'd normally associate with an activity that most people would have thought to be staid, academic even.

There is massive “activity” associated with most Web sites. Indeed, a typical site attracts millions of visits and views and the numbers are growing

<sup>1</sup> The CIBER report, “Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future,” can be found at [www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf](http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf).

astronomically. This is, in part, because existing users can access services whenever they like and wherever they are and because the digital environment draws in lots of new people to its scholarly net.

In essence, we are all scholars now. However, in practice, things are not that rosy. The tremendous activity actually masks real problems many people are experiencing in the cavernous, disintermediated information environment. It is a mistake to associate activity with satisfaction or positive outcomes, as we shall learn. Furthermore, as a sign of how much things have changed, much of the activity is, in fact, generated by robots. Half of all visitors to a Web site (a far higher proportion in the case of more esoteric sites) are robots, sent, for instance, by search engines to index content.

The virtual user is promiscuous. About half of all people visiting a site do not come back. This form of behavior can be ascribed to the following reasons:

- Massive digital choice, which means that people shop around.
- Use of search engines, which are constantly refreshing the information window.
- Poor retrieval skills, which means people arrive at a site they did not want to go to.
- The habit we have of leaving memories behind in cyberspace. It turns out that few people remember what they did online the hour or day before, and they pick up their memories (ineffectively) from the search engine.

Young people are the most promiscuous.

The virtual user “bounces.” Half of all visitors view one to three pages from the thousands available to them on a site. They bounce in and then soon bounce out again, and they do so because of several things inherent to the Web experience:

- They bounce because search engines take them to the wrong place, something that has led to a widespread and worrying acceptance of failure in the digital space.
- They bounce because of the wide choice of offerings and a shortage of time, which engenders a highly pragmatic and focused approach to information acquisition.
- They bounce because of the sheer pleasure of bouncing.

Young people bounce the most.

Some bouncing can be attributed to flicking, a kind of channel hopping and crosschecking form of behavior that is essential to surviving in a crowded and anonymous digital information environment. I always use my teenager daughter as an example to explain flicking. She’s sitting on the sofa with a remote in her hand “watching” the TV and flicking from channel to channel and, getting rather annoyed at this, I ask her, “Victoria, can’t you make up your mind what you are watching?” She replies, “Dad, I’m watching it all.”

In a virtual world, all of us end up watching it all—hence bouncing and promiscuity. In information-seeking terms, however, this form of behavior represents the triumph of the horizontal over the vertical and probably represents the greatest challenge to information providers of all kinds.

Bouncing and flicking means that people spend very little time on a Web page or site. On average most people spend fewer than 15 minutes on a visit to a Web site, insufficient time it would seem to do much reading or obtain much understanding. People want quick wins. They spend more time reading short articles online than long ones; if it is long they will ignore it, read the abstract, or squirrel it away to a day when they will not read it.

In fact, there is a sense that people go online to avoid reading. Instead, what they appear to be doing is

“power browsing.” They race through titles, contents pages, and abstracts at a huge rate of knots. Speed is the essence. Abstracts, contents and menu pages are made for speed; they are the motorways by which users find content. This is leading to a new form of scholarship, perhaps best described as digital osmosis. As one person whom we interviewed explained, “I can update my knowledge very quickly. You see the sheer number of books is overwhelming. I can look at them very quickly—you know, within 15 minutes, I can look at three or four books—and get some very superficial knowledge of what is in them. Nevertheless it improves my scholarship, because in the back of my mind, these books already exist.”

## Connection to Journalism

What, then, is the significance of this behavior, especially for journalists? Perhaps best to let a journalist explain. John Naughton, writing in *The Observer*, got it right when he wrote in a January 2008 column about the findings of our study. “The study confirms what many people are beginning to suspect: that the Web is having a profound impact on how we conceptualise, seek, evaluate and use information. What Marshall McLuhan called ‘the Gutenberg galaxy’—that universe of linear exposition, quiet contemplation, disciplined reading, and study—is imploding, and we don’t know if what will replace it will be better or worse,” Naughton concluded. “But at least you can find the Wikipedia entry for ‘Gutenberg galaxy’ in 0.34 seconds.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, to complicate matters, it is possible that the change has not been as radical as it first seems. There is always the possibility that it was always so, and it is just that in the virtual environment we are able to observe things we could never see in the hard copy, bricks and mortar world. Even so, we cannot escape

<sup>2</sup> John Naughton’s column, “Thanks, Gutenberg—but we’re too pressed for time to read,” can be found at [www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/jan/27/internet.pressandpublishing](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/jan/27/internet.pressandpublishing).

from the fact that most information providers are working with the wrong form of behavior—the Gutenberg one, with which they just feel more comfortable. Too readily they attribute the contemporary model as being simply the way kids do it, or how information will be processed in the future, when in fact nearly all of us behave like that now.

All of these changes in behavior pose many challenges for journalists. However, amid the massive choices of

information and the patchwork quilt way in which it is provided and the speed at which consumers browse to find it, there is a gaping need for judgment calls made with the foundational strength of trust. Right now consumers of information on the Web tend to make up their own minds about the reliability of information, often through methods of personal crosschecking, and they tend to ignore the established symbols of authority. If this pattern continues, then there

is a real danger that journalists will follow the path of librarians to a place where the knowledge they can offer gets swallowed up in a sea of self-discovery. ■

*David Nicholas is director of the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies, the University College London Centre for Publishing and the research group CIBER. More information about his work can be found at [www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/david-nicholas/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/david-nicholas/).*

## What Young People Don't Like About the Web—And News On It

‘... news organizations need to pay attention to what young people say about what makes them tune out on news sites.’

BY VIVIAN VAHLBERG

There were many surprises when my colleagues at Northwestern University's Media Management Center (MMC) and I spent hours earlier this year observing and listening to a diverse group of 89 young people talk about their experiences getting election news online. We expected that these 17- to 22-year-olds would distrust “mainstream media,” be drawn to content produced by other young people, love opinionated commentary, and tilt toward sites rich with video and flashy graphics.

Instead, as we reported in “From ‘Too Much’ to ‘Just Right:’ Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web,” we found they:

- Trusted news about the election more from well-known news organizations than from other sources.
- Valued the expertise and reporting of journalists more than opinions or comments, even from other young people.
- Valued many of the traditional roles of journalists, including separating the wheat from the chaff, selecting

what's important and what people will want to talk about, displaying things in attractive ways that indicate their relative importance, providing up-to-date information, and striving for the facts and the truth, not the spin.

- Often avoided news video as being too time-consuming.
- Often downgraded sites with lively graphics as not seeming serious enough.

Things they like in other contexts on the Internet—from humor to user-generated content to social networking to participation—they didn't like in the context of news. To them, news is different—and serious.

But the biggest surprise of all was how often these young people used the same words to describe their reaction to a variety of Web sites. Most frequently heard was the phrase “too much”:

I feel like it's too much sometimes, too much unnecessary material. (Justin, 19)



It was just ... too much stuff. ... By the time you get down here ... I don't even want to finish it. ... It was all thrown at you at once. It was just kind of overwhelming. ... There's so much going on in a younger person's life already. ... They are stressed at school and with work and those different



things, and they don't want to just sit there and have to filter through all this extra information. (*Rebecca, 20*)

It looked like too much information. [It] just kept going and going and going. (*Susie, 20*)

It's kind of like brain overload. ... At first I liked it, but ... then as I scrolled down, it's like, "When does it end?" (*George, 21*)

When I opened CNN, a lot of the stuff on it kind of seemed a little bit overwhelming. ... You had to really get into it and really focus on it. (*Amanda, 17*)

Importantly, it wasn't just the younger or less educated who had this response; even the older college students did. It wasn't just jam-packed all-news sites that triggered the response, either; it happened on youth-oriented sites too.

## Reacting to Web Sites

We heard these similar sentiments expressed so often about so many different sites that we became convinced that remedying this feeling is essential if news organizations are going to attract and engage young people in serious news. Fortunately, our interviews shed considerable light on why these young people feel this way and what news organizations can do about it.

We conducted these interviews because we felt the 2008 presidential election provided an entrée for news organizations to cultivate the interest of young people in serious news online. We sought to identify and test techniques and strategies that might first catch the eye of young people and then deepen their engagement. (A previous MMC study last year had shown that while young people aren't particularly interested in news, they will read it "if it catches my eye.") We reasoned that lessons learned from election coverage might well apply to other types of serious news.

To do our study, we showed them eight Web sites that represent a variety of approaches, features and attributes. They explored these sites and then we listened and watched as they talked about and showed us things on them. The Web sites we chose ranged from mainstream media sites (USAToday.com, CNN.com, and detroitnews.com) to youth oriented sites (Campus Politico and think.mtv.com) to video-heavy sites (election.tv) to nonprofit sites (novotenovoice.com and votegopher.com). We were looking for patterns, not seeking to "grade" the Web sites.

Interestingly, it didn't matter whether we showed them a well-designed mainstream news site like USAToday.com or an innovative, youth-oriented site like think.mtv.com. The reaction was often the same: "too much," at times expressed as "too many." Different things triggered this feeling:

- Too many things competing for attention, without signals about which was most important. They wanted someone (or something) to make choices. They wanted design to clearly signal priority.
- Too many details and words. They wanted things distilled so they could understand them better without spending lots of time, but they also wanted additional resources available if they're interested.
- Too much text or too high a percentage of text to graphics. They valued information shortcuts.
- A site feature that's not immediately understood. If a feature has to be explained, they don't look at it.
- Pages or stories going on and on. Interest waned with scrolling.

Notably, it wasn't usually the subject of the news that triggered the "too much" reflex, unless they thought the media had flogged the subject to death. It was more a question of presentation, quantity and level of information.

## Finding Remedies

So what do we make of what we heard? A Web site compatible with their

needs would address the components that follow:

**1. There's a large unmet need for a different kind of news site**—one that is designed not for news junkies but for inexperienced news consumers.

Seen through the eyes of young people, most news sites look to be made for news junkies—people who are already familiar with the people and the issues. But young people don't have a lifetime of information about candidates and issues that they can use to make sense of the news; most everything is new to them. Often, looking at news sites feels like coming into a calculus class midterm; it feels impossible to keep up because they don't yet know the basics. So they tune out. Interestingly, young people are not the only ones who would be interested in a different kind of site; in separate MMC research with adults, we heard the same "too much" refrain from adults who are light or inexperienced news consumers.

**2. Such a Web site would provide fast, brief and prioritized news updates.**

Most news sites give them far more updates on far too many stories than they want. They don't want to keep up with daily developments with a long list of ongoing stories; they just want to be aware of what's most important or what people will talk about. To understand or care about all those updates requires more knowledge and interest than they have. To please them, a new kind of site would make it quicker and easier to frequently check what's new. It would prominently display a quick-to-scan, constantly updated, very prioritized and selective news digest. For this audience, it's far better to be selective than comprehensive. News organizations shouldn't try to get them to spend more time following daily developments; they should make it attractive to come back frequently.

**3. It would help young people enjoy getting and feeling informed.** They want to become informed—to understand, for example, the issues, the candidates, and who stands where. But they find

this hard to do on news sites. Most stories assume they know more than they do. For example, they don't necessarily know what a red state is or how conventions work or what supply-side economics and trickle-down politics are. Most stories are too detailed; few distill things down, like Wikipedia does, so they can clearly understand the basics. They loved it when shown Web sites with issues and candidate comparisons, definitions of key terms, and explanations of the electoral process. But such resources are hard to find amidst the clutter; these young people would have long clicked away before finding them.

**4. It would have significantly better, clearer and more immediately understandable organization and site design.** Young people want the site design to signal what's important and to guide their eyes. They don't want to choose among a bewildering array of choices.

They frequently said, "I don't know where to look." They want headlines that quickly and concisely telegraph what a story is about. They want information to unfold in manageable, bite-sized chunks and layers—so they're not overwhelmed with too much at once but so they can go as deep as they choose.

They haven't yet seen a Web site design that measures up.

In short, news organizations need to pay attention to what young people say about what makes them tune out on news sites: too much information, too many details, too many choices coming at them all at once without enough guidance as to which are more important; too much unrelieved text; stories that go on and on; endless coverage of trivial stories, and features that aren't immediately and intuitively understandable.

Journalists need to listen to what

young people say about wanting more information that explains things and fewer (or less prominently featured) incremental updates. Then news organizations should design something specifically for Millennials and other "light" news consumers that will make the job of getting informed manageable and perhaps even enjoyable. ■

*Vivian Vahlberg is managing director of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University, where she directs the center's digital media programs and many of the center's educational and research projects. She is the lead author on two studies on young people and the Internet: "From 'Too Much' to 'Just Right: Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web," and "If It Catches My Eye: An Exploration of Online News Experiences of Teenagers." They can be read at [www.mediamanagementcenter.org](http://www.mediamanagementcenter.org).*

## Adding Young Voices to the Mix of Newsroom Advisors

'Start with a blank sheet of paper, I instructed them. On it, put down ways we can reinvent our newsroom.'

BY STEVEN A. SMITH

“Here we go again.” That was the first thought that came to my mind when Managing Editor Gary Graham and I decided last summer that it was again time to reorganize The Spokesman-Review newsroom. In the six years plus that I had been Spokesman editor, I had already led three reorganizations, each following a forced staff reduction. This was to be the fourth.

As the staff had shrunk from about 140 full-time journalists when I arrived in mid-2002 to 104 by the end of 2007, so, too, had the nature of the newsroom's work changed. During those five years, we'd moved from a

print-centric culture to one supporting a strong multiplatform strategy. With fewer people to support more platforms—each with new challenges and opportunities in distributing our reporters' work—it was clear to all of us that substantive reorganizations were necessary.

For two of our earlier efforts, we'd created newsroom task forces designed as working groups to make recommendations to the managing editor and me. Carla Savalli, first as city editor and later as senior editor for local news, led those two groups. "If I hear the term 'zero basing' one more time I'll run screaming from the

room," she once told me.

The third reorganization, coming after the publisher ordered layoffs at the end of 2007, was top-down. Certainly, this wasn't the best way to manage a depressed and angry newsroom, but it was deemed necessary given the time constraints Graham and I were facing. At the time, we decided we'd take another run at it—using a different approach—in mid-2008.

But no zero basing, this time around. Old-think was not helping us to staff our various platforms. Bold new ideas were required, and to get them we'd need to tap the energy and smarts of staffers traditionally left on the

## Engaging Young Staffers in Newsroom Activities and Change

A newsroom's younger staffers can play a significant role in charting the organization's future. What follows are some ideas about how to engage them in this process:

- By opening news meetings, editors can bring a newsroom's younger staff members to the table where they can participate as fully as the most senior editor.
- If responsibility for daily critiques rotates, make sure the younger staff members have their chance.
- Assign a younger reporter to write summaries of daily meetings to be distributed to staff and posted online. See The Spokesman-Review's "Daily Briefing" blog for an example, at [www.spokesmanreview.com/blogs/briefing/](http://www.spokesmanreview.com/blogs/briefing/).
- Schedule meetings among all newsroom staff under 30 on a regular basis. The meetings should be off the record and no-fault. Ask participants what is working in the room and what problems need to be addressed. If older staffers complain they are being left out, meet with them, too. But expect the bolder, most honest interaction to occur with the young staff members.
- Make sure young staff members are involved in all study groups, staff

committees, and task forces. Make sure they hold leadership positions in such groups.

- When developing a new product or new platform, put one of the best, brightest and youngest in charge. Give them the support necessary to develop a plan and implement it.

It's important to remember that the future of our industry, absolutely unseeable for most of us, will one day be the present for our young employees. They need to be involved in developing plans for the next 40 years—their next 40 years, not ours. ■—SAS

sidelines. What little hiring we'd been able to do in the past few years had brought into the newsroom some of the brightest young staff members with whom I'd ever worked. Although our open news meetings and open-door office policies had given these staff members some sense of having a voice within the newsroom, we wanted now to involve them even more.

They have a familiarity with new media that we, as older news people, don't. They are more accustomed than most of us newsroom veterans to seeking out digital news, using mobile devices to read their news and search the Internet, participating in social networks, and producing and using multimedia. Print is just a piece of their media experience and, for many of them, it is a diminishing one. Certainly, our medium's future will be left to them to shape as my generation of editors and reporters moves to the sidelines.

This awareness pointed us toward a recognition that this reorganization needed to be as much about their future as our present. With this in mind, in early July, I appointed a task force of eight young journalists—nearly all under the age of 30 who'd been hired within the past two years. They offered representation from nearly every

newsroom department.

Start with a blank sheet of paper, I instructed them. On it, put down ways we can reinvent our newsroom. They had 10 days to produce a report for the managing editor and me, later to be shared with the staff and public. To do this, we took them off their regular assignments, provided them with a meeting room, and promised overtime (and food) if their work extended beyond business hours. They had "subpoena" power to call anyone in the newsroom to the table to answer questions about how things work or, more importantly, how they should work. Lack of imagination led me to call this group "the reorganization task force." In the newsroom, they quickly became the "Gang of Eight."

And all of them knew that the gang would not be making any final decisions. Those were to be left to the managing editor and me. Further, I let them know that I'd be asking other groups to participate before the process ended.

### Ideas Emerge

After working around the clock for those 10 days, the Gang of Eight finished its report on July 10, 2008. They'd talked with dozens in the

newsroom and others in the company. They'd studied newsroom structures other newspapers use, examined deadline schedules and production limitations. The report's first sentence set the tone.

To efficiently run a newsroom that is dedicated to publishing content online, the deadline model for a traditional morning newspaper must be abandoned ... the newsroom should operate as an afternoon paper would, though The Spokesman-Review will remain a morning newspaper.

We had talked about a new deadline structure before, of course. But veteran newsroom editors, many with experience at P.M. newspapers, hadn't considered such a radical shift.

In their 12-page report, the Gang of Eight presented a new content strategy, deadline structure, organizational charts, shifts in editing and beat assignments, and new departments responsible for supervising not just what goes on our Web site but also on our new AM radio operation as well. Of course, some of their ideas were tried and true, if not in Spokane then elsewhere. Others were unsophisticated and unfinished.

## The Gang of Eight's Recommendations: An Excerpt

*The Gang of Eight didn't hesitate to recommend significant changes in structure and cuts in the editing staff. Here is an excerpt from their report.*  
—SAS

To address concerns that reporters are not getting enough time with editors, that copy gets jammed during the editing process, that there are not enough reporters available and that writers are duplicating work on stories, editors will work together on a universal assignments desk.

- The new Local Department will encompass the former City, Busi-

ness, Features, 7 (the entertainment section) and Voices (zoned sections) desks. The head of this desk will be a “strong” city editor—addressing another staff concern that the city editor has less power than in past years—who will oversee selection and assignment of stories for all of the sections, read as many stories as possible, and report to the managing editor.

- Line editing and supervision of reporters will lie with seven non-SES (nonunion) assistant local editors: breaking, life, culture, watchdog, money and Washington hyperlocal and Idaho hyperlocal. To increase

communication, these editors will sit in a central editors' pod in the newsroom, with the exception of one editor in Idaho; the pod also will include representatives of all other departments.

This structure noticeably removes assistant managing editors across the board, placing greater authority in the hands of the local editor. The editor in chief and managing editor will continue their present duties.

Flexibility is key to this organization. ■

They offered some surprises. In reorganizing local news reporting, our young staffers did not stray from the content that traditionalists typically value—watchdog and investigative reporting. And they recommended strengthening the copyediting system, particularly for online content. We'd been moving in the opposite direction.

At a general newsroom meeting, I presented the report to staffers. I also posted it on my blog. At the same time, I announced the formation of a second study group—consisting of a mix of staff, mostly veterans—to focus on content. By the end of July, this group issued its report. As might have been expected, they argued vigorously in favor of traditional news coverage, suggesting a reduction in the number of editors and an increase in the number of reporters on the ground. Most significant was a recommendation to cut the editorial page staff to two people, moving two into reporting slots and a third to the copy desk.

In August, we handed over both reports to five groups of six people. We gave each group a four-hour block of time to synthesize all of these ideas into a list of five or six basic recommendations. Meanwhile, I met

one-on-one with as many newsroom staffers as I could, about 50 meetings of 30 to 60 minutes each.

With all of this information, Graham and I developed the reorganization plan, announced shortly after Labor Day and scheduled to go into effect at the end of September. By adjusting staff, downsizing the editorial page staff, and cutting a bit into features, we were able to add five reporters to the local news team, which was one of the leading goals of this effort. A breaking news desk was established to work early morning hours and produce content for online, mobile and radio. The editing structure was to be flattened and rearranged.

### Ready for Change

This plan looked like it would work. For one reason, there appeared to be more buy-in from the staff. Reaction to it on my blog was mostly positive, and I was enthusiastic about giving it a try.

But we never had a chance to do so. In late September, the publisher mandated additional layoffs—as many as 25 to 30 positions. The reorganization plan blew up as if the newsroom had hit a land mine. I resigned on

October 1st, protesting the scope of the layoffs. Among those let go, all on the basis of union-mandated seniority, were six members of the Gang of Eight and three of the nine members of the content study group. As many as three managers in addition to Savalli, who also resigned, and me, were set to leave. The online staff was eviscerated. The radio operation gutted.

It's impossible to say if the youth-conceived reorganization would have worked. My view is that it would have held us in a good place until the time came when the newsroom could grow again. Instead, Graham, who is now editor, was faced with starting over. His will be the fifth reorganization effort in six years. He has a newsroom staff of about 80 serving four or more platforms.

Making this work—retaining quality and range of coverage that our readers expect from our news organization—will require not a task force, but a miracle. ■

*Steven A. Smith was until October 1st editor of The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Washington. His blog is [www.stillanewspaperman.com](http://www.stillanewspaperman.com). Another article by Smith is on page 5.*

# Using E-Readers to Explore Some New Media Myths

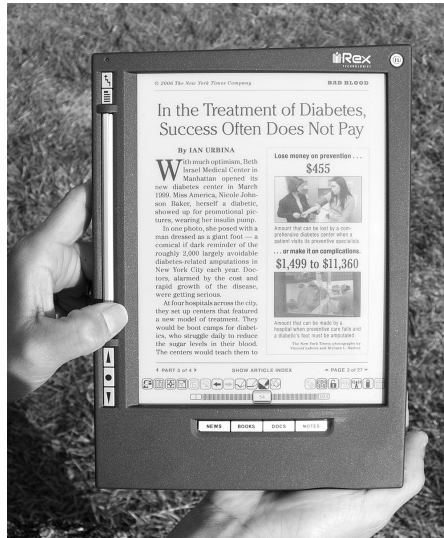
An experiment with digital media sets out to see what similarities might be found in how young and old adapt to new technologies.

BY ROGER FIDLER

First I must confess that I am a 65-year-old, gray-haired American white guy who worked in the newspaper business for 34 years before joining the academic community as a journalism professor and researcher. If you believe that identifies me as a technophobic curmudgeon who is stuck in the past and incapable of comprehending the minds of young people today, well—let's just say for the sake of argument that you might be partially correct.

It's true there are times when new technologies do frustrate and anger me, especially when they make me feel stupid. And I am occasionally perplexed by the mindsets of some journalism students, often in regard to newspapers and online news. But pigeonholing me, along with everyone else, based on age, gender, skin color, nationality and career, doesn't define me. Generalities about groups of people may simplify marketing strategies and help some politicians get elected, but they don't tell you much about individuals—or our behavior—especially in the expansive realm of new media.

To make my point, I've been actively involved in the digitization of newspapers and the development of online media and digital editions since the 1970's. In my present role as program director for digital publishing at the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute, I work with students, journalists and media practitioners to exploit the potential of e-readers and other emerging digital publishing technologies. I make extensive use of computers, know my way around the Internet and Web, own an Apple iPhone, read books on an Amazon Kindle, and occasionally participate in blogs. I also enjoy reading the newsprint editions of The New



A digital newsbook page displayed on an iLiad e-reader. *Photo courtesy of Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute.*

York Times and Columbia Missourian every morning with breakfast and prefer interacting with friends and colleagues face-to-face or by phone rather than through Facebook or other online social networks.

## Exploring New Media Habits

Enough about me. Better to share with you a few personal observations about how people deal with new media technologies. Some of those come from usability research and focus groups, but most come from my experiences working on digital publishing projects with people who have ranged in age from 18 to 80.

Perhaps the most frequently repeated myth is that all young people (teens and 20-somethings) eagerly and quickly embrace new media technologies and are adept using them, while all old people (age 40 and older) reluctantly and slowly adopt new me-

dia technologies and are inept using them. As with all myths, there is some truth in this one. But in my career I've usually found wide variances and no absolute delineators within and between age groups.

This was demonstrated when, at Missouri, we began conducting focus groups last spring to assess receptiveness to reading newspapers and books on e-readers—the recently introduced mobile devices that employ a new media technology called electronic paper displays (EPDs). E-readers are envisioned as “green” alternatives to paper and function more like iPods than PCs or intelligent phones.

Our first sessions, held during our spring semester, involved a total of 43 students from the Missouri School of Journalism. None of them had used or even seen e-readers prior to the sessions. All were asked to read a few pages of a digital newsbook—a special report from a newspaper that has been repackaged in an e-book-like format—on a notebook computer, a small pen-based tablet PC, and an e-reader. (We used iLiad readers, which have eight-inch high-resolution EPDs and more advanced features than the smaller Amazon Kindles.) After reading on each device, they were instructed to complete a brief questionnaire. At the conclusion of their sessions, they completed final questionnaires and participated in open discussions about their reading experiences.

Data compiled from the questionnaires seemed to suggest that a majority of students would embrace e-readers. Here's how they ranked the three devices as a display medium for reading:

- Nearly two out of three ranked the e-reader as their first choice.

- One out of four ranked their notebook computer as their first choice.
- Only one out of eight selected the tablet PC first.

When asked about their comfort with these devices for reading, 60 percent indicated they were very comfortable or somewhat comfortable with the e-reader compared with 63 percent saying this about their notebook computer. The students' relatively high level of comfort with the e-reader was more striking in contrast to the tablet PC. Only 33 percent indicated they were very comfortable or somewhat comfortable with this device.

These same students routinely use Macintosh computers, so the tablet PC (built upon Microsoft Windows technology) was almost as new and unfamiliar to them as the e-reader. Both devices were about the same size and used a stylus for input instead of a keyboard and mouse. So we wondered why the students rated these two new media technologies so differently.

From their comments on the questionnaire and in the open discussions, the difference that clearly gave the e-reader its greatest advantage was its simplicity and ease of use. This is not a particularly surprising revelation. In all of the usability studies I conducted in the 1990's at the Knight Ridder Information Design Laboratory and Kent State University, simplicity and ease of use were always identified as the most important qualities of any new electronic device or digital publication by a majority of participants in all age groups.

With this experiment, however, what I found more interesting—and a bit surprising, in light of the typical description of how this age group is reacting to new media technologies—were the comments students made about switching from reading on paper to reading on e-readers. Though quite a few described the e-reader as “awesome,” “pretty cool,” and “sweet,”

a significant number said they were not ready to give up paper. Their comments ranged from “I'd still prefer to use paper textbooks” to “I don't like reading on computers” and “I'll never not read a paper-based product for newspapers, magazines or books.”

Another interesting finding was the relative importance students at-

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**Though quite a few described the e-reader as 'awesome,' 'pretty cool,' and 'sweet,' a significant number said they were not ready to give up paper.**

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tached to eight attributes that could influence their reading experience on mobile electronic displays unrelated to any specific device.<sup>1</sup> We had assumed that students would rank full-color and video-capable displays at the top of their lists. They didn't. Only one student ranked color second; three students ranked it third. None ranked it first. Of the eight choices, 16 students (37 percent) ranked color seventh or eighth. Video was ranked last or next to last by 88 percent of the students. Only one student ranked it third; none ranked it first or second.

For companies now manufacturing and selling e-readers this could be encouraging because all EPDs today are black-and-white and not capable of displaying videos. Full color EPDs with a capacity to display videos are expected in three to five years. The attributes students ranked highest were portability, ease of use, and readability, which is what e-readers are all about.

We plan to do several dozen focus group sessions in Missouri this year and early next that will include students and faculty from schools other than journalism as well as local residents who are not affiliated with the university. It's possible that we will repeat this study in subsequent years to see how attitudes about reading digital publications on e-readers change over time.

Our findings should be of more than academic interest to publishers and journalists. In the past 40 years digital technologies have been the salvation of newspapers and magazines. They have transformed publishing from a labor-intensive manufacturing and distribution industry into an efficient information processing and dissemination business. Today, the last vestiges of industrial age technologies are the printing presses and delivery trucks.

In theory, the development and widespread adoption of e-readers—with a capacity to wirelessly access and display digital editions of newspapers and magazines—would allow publishers to eliminate the production and distribution costs associated with their printed editions, which now account for more than half of most publishers' operating expenses. All of this depends, however, on the capacity of e-readers to provide a reading experience comparable to ink printed on paper at a competitive price and on the willingness of readers and advertisers to adopt this new media technology for reading. ■

*Roger Fidler is program director for digital publishing at the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism. By March, a complete report about this study is expected to be available on the Reynolds Journalism Institute Web site, [www.rjionline.org](http://www.rjionline.org).*

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<sup>1</sup> The eight attributes include ease of use (simplicity, short learning curve), full color, portability (thin and lightweight), paper-like readability (readable anywhere), video capability, markup (ability to take notes and highlight text), content presentation (layout, design and typography), and long battery duty cycle.

# Mapping the Blogosphere: Offering a Guide to Journalism's Future

'... what we find is that legacy media holds the center, while online-only media are frayed at the edges.'

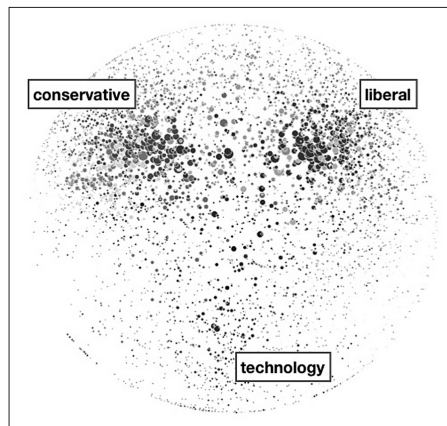
BY JOHN KELLY

Mapping the patterns of how people share information in the blogosphere makes visible and understandable what otherwise can seem unruly and complex. Using social network analysis and advanced statistical techniques, we can analyze the exchanges in cyberspace to create maps of community and attention among many thousands of bloggers. Mapping these online networks tells us a lot about how community is formed around kinds of information that bloggers seek and share with one another. And these findings provide clues that can give journalists a clearer sense of how what they do will be utilized in the age of digital media.

What our mapping analyses have shown us is how the emergent clusters of similarly interested bloggers shape the flow of information by focusing the attention of thematically related authors, and their readers, on particular sources of information. These social networks include new actors alongside old ones, knit together by hyperlinked multimedia into a common fabric of public discourse. Of great interest—and perhaps surprising news—to journalists is our finding that legacy media, journalistic institutions in particular, are star players in this environment.

While blogs are promiscuously available representations of what a person or organization would like the world to know, in practice the world at large is not likely to care about the content of any given blog. However, a community of specifically interested others will often arise around a blog in ways similar to real-life social configurations

with which we are quite familiar. As the number of blogs increases exponentially, this “citizen generated” network is quickly becoming the Internet’s most important connective tissue. In fact, the combination of text and hyperlinks (and, increasingly, hypermedia) makes



This social network diagram of the English language blogosphere shows major clusters around politics and technology.

the blogosphere arguably as much like a single extended text as it acts like an online newsstand.

To the extent that readers’ patterns of browsing tend to follow the direction of links available in this hypertext network, the structure of the blogosphere suggests a kind of “flow map” of how the Internet channels attention to online resources. And this is what we are able to map—the extraordinary number of blogs authored by emergent collectives: public, persistent, universally interlinked, yet locally clustered and representative of myriad social actors at all levels of scale.

## Peering Within the Patterns

What we find is not “media,” in the familiar sense of packets of “content” consumed by “audiences,” but a new form of communication. We write. We link. We know. In this networked public sphere, online clusters form around issues of shared concern, information is collected and collated, dots are connected, attitudes are discussed and revised, local expertise is recognized, and in general a network of “social knowing” is knit together, comprised of both people and the hyperlinked texts they co-create.

As David Weinberger observed in his 2007 book, “Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder,” “as people communicate online, that conversation becomes part of a lively, significant, public digital knowledge—rather than chatting for one moment with a small group of friends or colleagues, every person potentially has access to a global audience. Taken together, that conversation also creates a mode of knowing we’ve never had before .... Now we can see for ourselves that knowledge isn’t in our heads: It is between us.”

The links represent the conscious choices of bloggers and fall into two main categories: static and dynamic. Static links are those that do not change very often and are typically found in the “blogroll,” a set of links a blogger chooses to place in a sidebar. Blogroll links are created for different reasons, but the network formed by them is relatively stable and represents a collective picture of every blogger’s perceptions of the blogosphere and

his or her own position within it. Dynamic links change frequently and typically represent links embedded in blog posts, a hard measure of a blogger's attention.

When the interests of many bloggers intersect, something we call "attentive clusters" typically form: groups of densely connected bloggers who share common interests and preferred sources of information. We analyze the behavior of these clusters to discover how the community drives traffic to particular online resources. By doing so, we can provide an important key to understanding the online information ecosystem. And here is some of what we've learned:

- The blogosphere channels the most attention to things besides blogs. Of the top 10,000 outlinks, only 40.5 percent are blogs, and these account for only 28.5 percent of dynamic links.
- The Web sites of legacy media firms are the strongest performers. The top 10 mainstream media sites, led by nytimes.com, washingtonpost.com, and BBC.com, account for 10.9 percent of all dynamic links.
- By contrast, the top 10 blogs account for only 3.2 percent of dynamic outlinks.
- Though the top 10 Web-native sites (blogs, Web 2.0, and online-only news and information sites combined) account for 10.8 percent of dynamic links, two-thirds of these (7.2 percent of total) are due to Wikipedia and YouTube alone.

Legacy media institutions are clearly champion players in the blogosphere. Given that online-only sites are the most skewed—in terms of political leanings, advocacy positions, and tone of information—of all forms of news and information Web sites, what we find is that legacy media holds the center, while online-only media are frayed at the edges.

## Future Direction

Are blogs and Web-native media making old-style institutional journalism

obsolete? Of course, this question has several dimensions. At the commercial level, institutional journalism is threatened by the Internet, both in the form of "citizen media" taking its advertising-earning eyeballs and online classifieds taking its rent on informal markets. At the tonal level, the integrity and validity of "objective" journalism and responsible expert opinion is contrasted to the more slippery and uncertified forms of online content found in blogs, YouTube, and other user-generated content.

In discussions about their varying practices, journalists and bloggers argue over values of professionalism, independence, legal protection, and legitimacy as vessels of the public trust. But the picture is more complicated. Most links from blogs are not to other blogs but to a range of online sites among which mainstream media (MSM) outlets are the most prominent. And journalists are keenly attentive to blogs, often mining them for story leads and background research. Furthermore, the blogosphere is becoming as important as the front page of the paper for landing eyeballs on a journalist's story. There is a cycle of attention between blogs and the MSM, in which the MSM uses the blogosphere as a type of grist for the mill, and the blogosphere channels attention back to the MSM.

What is becoming clear is how the blogosphere and MSM are complementary players in an emerging system of public communications.

Yochai Benkler, the author of "The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom," proposes a model in which the "networked public sphere," supplementing the older "hub and spoke" industrial model represented by the mass media, will alter the dynamics of key social communications processes. The mass media model, in which the ability to communicate publicly requires access to vast capital or state authority, has resulted in elite control over the power to frame issues and set the public agenda.

What ends up in the newspaper often starts with a government source

or professional media advocate in the employ of one or another interested organization. In Benkler's view, a new, vastly distributed network of public discourse will supplement or supplant this elite-driven process. The networked public sphere will allow any point of view to be expressed (universal intake), and to the extent it is interesting to others, it will be carried upward (or engaged more widely) via a process of collective filtration. The extended network will contain its specialty subnets (analogous to interest publics) and its general-interest brokers (analogous to the attentive public) among others. This neural network-like system might potentially provide a much more stable and effective foundation for democratic social action than the established commercial media system it challenges.

What we already can observe is how the blogosphere acts as a multifocal lens of collective attention. Interest among bloggers creates network neighborhoods that channel attention to relevant online content. Discovery and analysis of these provides the promise of empirical exploration of new and critical ideas about the dynamics of the networked public sphere.

But what should not be overlooked is the central role that legacy news media entities still play throughout the blogosphere. And if journalists want to continue to fulfill the role they have aspired to in the past—to be general interest intermediaries at the crossroads of public discourse—nothing in the actual behavior of bloggers suggests their role would diminish on account of lack of demand for this social function.

The news media's business model problems are, of course, another matter entirely, but at this stage it looks safe to say that blogs do not make commercial journalism obsolete, least of all in the eyes of bloggers (regardless of what some of them say about this). If anything, the central role of professional journalism in the expanded economy of political discourse makes it valuable in new ways. To the extent its near-monopoly on agenda setting and public representation is



broken, its role as an honest broker of verified information becomes even more important.

## Change Is Everywhere

The growing networked public sphere is not just changing the relationship among actors in the political landscape, but it is changing the kinds of actors found there and changing what “media” are actually doing. Some of this is easy to see. Ten years ago there were almost no bloggers; now, they are considered a formidable force in public affairs. And the legacy media are changing as well. Newspapers and other online publishers have added blogs to their offerings and transformed the way general articles are published to seem more and more bloglike (e.g. hyperlinks, reader comments, embedded video). Bloggers on legacy media Web sites have quickly gained prominence, and some media companies have found great success via blogging. For example, most people outside think of The Politico as a Web site, not a Capitol Hill newspaper.

As blogging and online media genres evolve, blog vs. MSM becomes purely a cultural, or perhaps commercial, distinction and not one of format. If in blogs we find more information about more issues and with more diversity of voices than ever heard in the MSM, why should we mourn the closing of newspapers and the dwindling of broadcast news audiences?

One argument is that the MSM form a locus of collective attention, where citizens are exposed to differing views on a common index of issues, and that the danger of losing this mainstream arena is that individuals will retract into irreconcilable redoubts of the like-minded, and the central

## Political Video Barometer

As a visual demonstration of how ideas move through social networks, Morningside Analytics created a user-friendly online tool called the “Political Video Barometer.” The barometer features an interactive graph showing recent YouTube videos popular with liberal and conservative bloggers. The horizontal axis shows the proportion of liberal vs. conservative bloggers linking to a video, and the vertical axis shows how many bloggers overall have linked to it. Click on a dot and the video plays—instantaneously. This map is available at [www.shiftingthedebate.com/shifting/videoarometer.html](http://www.shiftingthedebate.com/shifting/videoarometer.html). ■—J.K.



marketplace of ideas fade away. There is some evidence to support this fear. In our mapping, we clearly see the strong tendency of bloggers to link to other bloggers with similar interests and beliefs, particularly around politics. And other research buttresses what we can now see on our social networking maps:

- Most people’s offline social networks are relatively homogenous with respect to political beliefs and attitudes.
- To the extent that people are exposed to opposing viewpoints, it is primarily through MSM.

It is, therefore, not unreasonable to fear that the centrifugal force exerted by hundreds of thousands of bloggers will sunder a public sphere long held together by journalistic institutions. But let us also bear in mind that the way we envision this problem reveals just how thoroughly the mass media model of society—featuring atomized consumers feeding at common troughs—grounds our imagination.

I’d argue that the question of how blogs are impacting the public sphere is not a straightforward matter of whether they undermine the MSM’s

ability to provide a platform for public agenda-setting and exposure to crosscutting political views. The full story is deeper and more nuanced. While the Internet, vivified by blogs, fractures the landscape of public discourse across a great many new actors, a core activity of bloggers is to focus attention back to the MSM, particularly to institutional journalism. The structured tissue of bloggers—each not a voice in the woods but a member of crosscutting communities—creates a new medium of social knowing, one that so far appears favorable to the presence of the kinds of high visibility, central platforms represented by legacy media institutions. ■

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# The End of Journalism as Usual

‘To maximize a news organization’s social capital and marketability, its journalism today must be transparent, authentic and collaborative.’

BY MARK BRIGGS

**T**here’s the philosophical riddle about the tree falling in a forest when no one is around. Does it make a sound? Now try this twist: If a journalist has a story, but there is no market for the news, is it worth doing?

The business model for journalism is crumbling. So an informed discussion of journalism today must include an awareness of new business models and marketability.

Can marketing save journalism? It’s a heretical question for some to consider, I’m sure, since journalists have long valued their practice as more “pure” than marketing and public relations. But these seemingly disparate forms of communication are melding together, and journalism can benefit from integrating new marketing strategies and tactics.

This type of marketing is not advertising, or slogans, or logos. As it has evolved in the digital age, it has become more transparent, authentic and collaborative, which I will argue are all traits that describe good journalism today, too. “The Cluetrain Manifesto” outlined this shift nearly 10 years ago with 95 theses on “the end of business as usual.” The first line on its original cover read, “Markets are conversations.”

A few years later, the concept that “news is a conversation” invaded mainstream journalism and is now universally embraced, at least in concept. So it stands to reason that if both markets and news are conversations, the practice of journalism today requires an awareness and capacity for the marketability of that journalism.

What follows is one thesis from Cluetrain. In reading it, see if you can identify the mainstream news industry in it:

Corporations do not speak in the same voice as these new networked conversations. To their intended online audiences, companies sound hollow, flat, literally unhuman.

Match that assessment with the most recent Pew research on the public’s perception of journalism, in which credibility has hit an all-time low. See how journalism’s disconnect with its community is helping play out the dire predictions from Cluetrain, including:

The community of discourse is the market. Companies that do not belong to a community of discourse will die.

## Think Social Capital

Ironically, this situation cannot be addressed by the marketing department at a news organization. Instead, it’s about creating “social capital” by becoming the “trusted center” within a structure of relationships through digital communication. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggested social capital can be developed through purposeful actions and then transformed into conventional economic gains. This concept very closely aligns to the traditional business model for news of generating revenue based largely on a public service.

For several years now, journalists have taken positive steps into the digital age by adding blogs and multimedia to their craft while increasing interactivity and immediacy. Simultaneously, news organizations have shed jobs, and their stocks have taken a pounding on Wall Street.

So why isn’t this strategy work-

ing? Because journalism’s brand is broken.

News organizations struggle not only with public perception of journalism but also with brand value in their local community. As I travel and talk with news professionals looking for ways to add Web 2.0 elements—comments, forums and user-generated content—to their online operations, I’m no longer surprised to hear an editor or reporter say, “Readers won’t do that on a news site.”

But this type of response is an admission of failure, especially when we find start-up companies like Flickr and Craigslist gaining more brand cache in a local community than a business that has been serving a community for decades. Even worse is when a local, independent blog generates relevant and constructive discussion based to a large extent on the news reported by the local news organization and the original news Web site’s conversation is either dormant or misguided and destructive.

Building targeted communities of discourse with a layer of journalism on top can help. The Bakersfield Californian, for example, has been a leader in creating and cultivating such communities with projects like Bakotopia. And the beat blogging movement started by Jay Rosen’s NewAssignment.net is about doing this kind of journalism by convening a community of discourse in the form of an online social network.

To maximize a news organization’s social capital and marketability, its journalism today must be transparent, authentic and collaborative. This is why blogs and Twitter work for news organizations. Neither will replace traditional journalism, and that shouldn’t be the objective. These new

digital tools bring journalists closer to readers and readers closer to journalism by removing barriers to a more networked conversation.

They help journalists avoid sounding “hollow, flat, literally unhuman” as Cluetrain warned against. And they build influence for the journalists, which Philip Meyer argued in “The Vanishing Newspaper” leads to economic success.

## Judgment and Strategy

Recently I was part of a strategic content planning session for a traditional newsroom. I suggested that one priority should be content that is “marketable.” Some translated this to mean running celebrity gossip on Page One. Not so, I tried to explain. Marketable content means that the target audience is desirable to advertisers, either because of its size or quality. TechCrunch, for example, succeeded in doing this, and in fewer than two years has become the leading source for technology business news, eclipsing such coverage by The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and local Bay Area newspapers.

News operations are struggling to find the right balance between quality and quantity. Local news sites are organized based on the print sectioning—local, sports, business, lifestyle—that was invented because of press configurations. Advertisers can’t put their finger on the demographic they might reach with this kind of mass-appeal formatting. It’s not nearly targeted enough for today’s digital world. So smart news operations launch niche sites, targeting moms, dads, pets, shopping, home and garden, and more traditional categories such as arts and entertainment. If not topical sites, then they go hyperlocal.

These are definable markets, ones that a sales representative can use to easily explain to a prospective advertiser exactly who will be reached by positioning an ad in a particular

section.

What about the news organization’s cornerstones of reporting responsibilities—breaking news and watchdog journalism? These are a news operation’s loss leaders, and they don’t form a specific market. But they can draw a transient audience because of their popularity online. Once visitors arrive, they are introduced to the rest of the site’s content, which then might attract a more loyal following. This reporting also improves social capital by keeping a reader informed and protecting his or her interests.

News operations need markets, and markets are conversations. Shoveling content into separate categories isn’t enough. It’s time to end business—and journalism—as usual.

## A Holistic Approach

Can journalism be pursued with a blind eye toward the market realities of the business models that have supported journalism? Not if journalism is to have a future.

This is why college journalism programs should be teaching the basics of business and marketing as part of journalism training, as Jeff Jarvis is doing at the City University of New York and Dan Gillmor at Arizona State. The reality is this: With fewer traditional jobs in journalism available today—and probably fewer tomorrow—there is a greater need for the study and practice of entrepreneurial journalism for students and for out-of-work journalists who still want to serve a community.

This holistic approach—blending business strategy with journalism—is already guiding independent, hyperlocal start-up news efforts around the United States. Self-sustaining operations will proliferate as traditional news organizations continue to shrink and digital tools evolve and lower the barrier to entry even further.

Digital entrepreneur Elizabeth Osder visited the University of Southern

California last fall and spoke frankly to journalism students about this new environment, according to a summary posted by Online Journalism Review.<sup>1</sup> She presented the following recipe for entrepreneurial journalism:

Start with the impact you want to have. Figure out what audience you need to assemble to have that impact and what kind of content is needed to do that. Then price it out: How much money do you need to do it?

After one student complained that this felt too much like business school, Osder defended the new approach as bringing to them a necessary discipline. “It forces you to be relevant and useful versus arrogant and entitled,” Osder replied.

For me, this isn’t just a concept; it’s my new reality. I resigned my position at The News Tribune in Tacoma, Washington in October to pursue entrepreneurial journalism with a start-up company founded to serve local news publishers with technology and strategy. We will succeed if we can help publishers connect to the networked conversation in their markets. The technology is irrelevant, but critical to sustaining journalism are these new traits: an entrepreneurial mindset, measureable success tied to establishing social capital, and a recognition that authentic, transparent and collaborative work is the foundation for viability and sustainability in the marketplace. ■

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<sup>1</sup> To read about Osder’s presentation, go to [www.ojr.org/ojr/people/Geneva/200810/1542/](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/people/Geneva/200810/1542/).

# The Wikification of Knowledge

A neuroscientist explores the shared challenges of medicine and journalism when it comes to gathering information and reaching conclusions in the era of social media.

BY KENNETH S. KOSIK

**H**ow do we know what we think we know? To narrow this long-standing epistemological question, let me ask this about the world I generally inhabit—medicine, where I work as a neuroscientist. For questions about medical conditions, two sources of knowledge exist. There is expert knowledge—the kind acquired by those who read the primary scientific papers, examine findings from controlled studies, and who, by virtue of their training and their advanced degrees, carry the weight of authority. The second is what today would be called “wiki” knowledge, the kind that arises from collective experience. Today, the knowledge of the designated expert is increasingly challenged by the collective experience of ever-expanding cybercommunities. In the battle of the blogosphere vs. the expert, the expert seems to be losing ground. This contemporary dialectic represents a challenge for many disciplines, including the journalist, who must decide how to balance expert views with those of the cybercommunity.

## Knowledge: Expert Vs. Wiki

When medical findings are announced, whether a new therapy, a new preventive measure, or a new research finding, neither the journalist nor the physician should assume that an expert opinion is definitive. The expert may be “as good as it gets,” but the limitations of the expert approach need to be clear. For example, let’s take treatment decisions with a newly approved medication for Alzheimer’s disease. To get approved by the FDA,

the pharmaceutical company had to prove safety and efficacy. But how frequently does the drug fail to work, and do other health-related factors such as lifestyle or coexisting disease or genetic risk affect the likelihood the drug will work? These are difficult

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**Within the potential of social networks lies untapped wiki knowledge poised to challenge the experts by opening wide the collective knowledge gate.**

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questions for the expert. In the case of the most commonly used drug in Alzheimer’s disease—donepezil—the physician has no idea about enhanced or diminished benefit in association with other health factors and usually does not mention to the family that many users show no benefit at all.

Perhaps the power of the wiki could provide more depth when one is making a decision about a drug treatment. Certainly, the choice of a medication becomes even more acute for some of the stratospherically priced drugs used in cancer treatment today. So how can we create a wiki-based knowledge environment for medical information? In times past, collective knowledge derived from folk medicine, old wives tales, and anecdotal reports. The number of contributors to collective knowledge in any one community was small and, therefore, the conclusions clinically suspect.

The modern-day version of folk medicine is no longer confined to a

small circle of happenstance encounters within the limits of our physical geography. With the disappearance of these boundaries, our links to medical conditions like our own can reach across the globe. Large numbers of people—well beyond the numbers found in most medical studies—can build disease-oriented social networks with layers of added information and with an ease of follow-up to create a living, dynamic wiki. From the network one can cluster individuals in any way desired—by geographic location, by occupation, by response to a medication—and begin to extract patterns and correlations. We can organize and reorganize data and perform statistics based on any parameter we chose and create hypotheses that can then be verified prospectively.

Within the potential of social networks lies untapped wiki knowledge poised to challenge the experts by opening wide the collective knowledge gate. In November, Google announced its new Web tool—Google Flu Trends—which uses people’s search clues (entering phrases such as “flu symptoms”) to create graphs and maps to predict and show regional outbreaks of the flu.

Can social networks rival what is learned from expert approaches such as controlled studies and disease registries? Sound conclusions in the medical field are based upon statistical significance. The statistical power of a population, i.e. the ability to distinguish between an experimental and control group, when posed a research question often depends on having a sufficiently large study group. The best way to

increase the number of participating individuals is tapping into the Internet. However, saddled with a freewheeling Wild West style, the Internet cannot easily provide pure well-controlled study populations. But the vast potential for touching enormous numbers of people could negate the noise of the Web. Experts use “meta-analysis” to increase the size of their experimental sample. Wiki knowledge derived from a social network offers a fluid, open source, ongoing meta-analysis—a virtual collection of experiences that can be constantly updated as users enter more individual data.

## Benefits and Challenges of Collective Information

Social networks empower the “expert,” be it a doctor or a journalist, because access to this community-generated knowledge is shared by all. For example, illness and a significant story intersected at Love Canal, where 21,000 tons of chemical waste lay buried beneath the community unbeknownst to the residents. Back in 1978, a time long before social media existed, Lois Gibbs, a local mother and president of the Love Canal Homeowners’ Association, first associated exposure to the leaking chemical waste with the epilepsy, asthma and urinary tract infections that were recurring in her children. Although flagrant and clear cut, Love Canal is not unique. Now, the ability of Web-based medical networks to cluster data geographically has the potential to reveal other dangerous living conditions. Similarly, occupational risks for disease are well recognized, and organizing medical data in this way will likely serve as an early warning system for on-the-job risks—and for investigative stories that can be done about them.

Figuring out what constitutes a healthy lifestyle is something that consumes the time of both doctors and journalists, whose job it is to report reliably on the barrage of evidence emerging from many different studies—much of it contradictory or, at least, confusing. New information surfaces almost daily about dietary

measures or fitness programs that will increase or decrease our risk for cancer, heart attacks, Alzheimer’s disease, and more, and some of it is potentially contaminated by the bias of financial involvement.

How can one possibly capture all these simultaneous variables when computing risk? Did a study that found something new about coffee drinkers control for the number of hours those people spent in the gym? When a new drug is tested, the control group may not be identical to the experimental group in caloric intake, number of portions of vegetables eaten, or their amount of daily exercise. At best, the study is controlled for age and gender. But if those taking the drug are eating poorly and under stress and those on placebo are dining on salads and jogging on the beach, the wrong conclusion could be reached. And if one adds in genetic variation found in human populations—certain types of genes can increase or diminish the risk for disease—the variables mount further. Controlled studies are just not powered to capture multiple variables, and medical conditions are brimming with variables. The only way to increase the statistical power of a conclusion is to increase the sample size, exactly what social networks are designed to do.

Because wiki knowledge in the social network arena is obtained in an unconventional manner, it might not provide conclusive evidence. Therefore, a preferable way of thinking about wiki knowledge is as a guidepost for the design of hypotheses (for scientists to test) or generating story ideas (for journalists to report). For each of us, the pitfalls are evident, and a few of them are highlighted below:

- **Selection bias is a problem.** Those on a social network tend to be younger and not economically disadvantaged. When groups of people are excluded due to entry barriers, the information generated from the community will be biased, and other knowledge will be lost or skewed. In time, the increasing penetration of the Internet to all segments of the society will

resolve this issue as has happened for telephones and TV.

- **The privacy question.** No network is totally secure—and medical information is not immune to the problem. This summer, staff at a hospital near Los Angeles was discovered snooping through records of Hollywood celebrities. And this case is not unique. Beyond the security of servers, networks allow levels of access; therefore, on a site where people share medical information, they can limit the information that others can see. Some individuals may want to remain completely anonymous. Others may be willing to share all their information within a small subnetwork of people they know well and keep anonymous their data to the larger network.
- **Entry of false data is a potentially serious issue—for doctors and journalists alike.** For example, take reporting on the performance of surgeons, an area in which data are sorely needed. Suppose a disgruntled patient wants to smear a surgeon and fabricates multiple entries with bad outcomes. Tools are needed for verification. Suppose a person is part of social network related to weight control or hypertension and enters false data. If just a few people are guilty of false entries the overall conclusions will not vary much. But large numbers of people may have a tendency to lie or distort their personnel information even if their identity is concealed.

Neither doctors nor journalists will have been the first to venture into the realm of figuring out how to utilize wiki knowledge. In “Wikinomics,” by Don Tapscott [see his article on page 18] and Anthony Williams, many positive examples are presented that bring collective Web-based knowledge to the business model. Yet there are critics of this approach, too. Andrew Keen, author of “The Cult of the Amateur,” argues that Web-based knowledge is superficial and lacks deep and considered judgment. Indeed, Web content can be boisterous, unfiltered and amateur. Yet if conventional knowl-

edge is only what experts know, then should everything else be considered “amateur” knowledge? While Web users may be a raucous bunch, they can be as easily airbrushed into a statistic through a social network as they can be in an expert study.

### **An External Hard Drive for the Brain**

As a neuroscientist who spends time thinking about how people’s brains process information, this technology—and the information overflow it brings—are without a doubt changing the way human beings make decisions. Neuroscientists have increasingly come to understand memory as a function not intended to recreate the past, but to guide us into the future. Viewed in this way, memory does not have to be perfectly accurate; instead it has to serve us for outcome simulation and correct decision-making based on the memory of an experience that reassembled our current circumstances.

Stores of information downloaded from hand-held devices will help close the gap between successful and unsuccessful outcomes when making decisions because we can draw upon a deep base of information and experience. We can instantly tap into a living source of collective experience about our condition while sitting with the physician. As pointed out by Daniel L. Schacter and Donna Rose Addis in a recent essay in *Nature* (2007), “information about the past is useful only to the extent that it allows us to anticipate what may happen in the future.” Our ability to anticipate the future may be enhanced by a richer store of information that includes a Web-based compilation of data.

It is perhaps an irony of our time that with all of these avenues to discover knowledge at our command, we can find ourselves starved for information in a sea churning with nothing but information. The particular knowledge craved, for example, by those given a life-threatening diagnosis, often lies

outside the expertise of physicians—even specialists. While flickers of hope appear on the Web through encounters with others and a shared experience, judging the reliability of this experience—and its fit with our own—can be difficult. But to have the opportunity to find information and test its reliability means that no longer is one person—an expert—expected to know everything and render infallible judgment. That view is the no-longer tenable burden of the expert physician; nor can it any longer be the guiding belief of the trained journalist. ■

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## **Media Re:public: My Year in the Church of the Web**

In studying new and old media, the author feels ‘as though I’ve undergone two religious crises; one feels like a loss of faith, the other like a conversion.’

BY PERSEPHONE MIEL

In November 2007, I was invited to spend a year at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society, leading a research project in partnership with the MacArthur Foundation. Its aim, according to Colin Maclay, the center’s acting executive director, would be to take a “skeptical but constructive look at the state of the blogosphere.” Many well-known folks in the world of blogs had applied for this job, but the Berkman Center decided they needed someone who had not “drunk the blogging Kool-Aid.” This is why they took a chance on me—someone who’d worked with traditional news media in less developed countries, where online

media were still mostly considered irrelevant, who’d never written a blog nor regularly read them.

Our project was named “Media Re:public.” This turned out to be an apt name given our key finding that more journalism in the public interest is essential, whether created by professionals or amateurs, commercial entities or nonprofits, online, on the air or on paper. But in the yearlong process of reaching this conclusion—looking at “new” and “old” media and how they’re blending (and not blending)—I feel as though I’ve undergone two religious crises; one feels like a loss of faith, the other like a conversion.

### **Preaching a False Message**

Before moving to Boston and taking on this project, I’d spent a dozen years with the international media development nonprofit Internews Network ([internews.org](http://internews.org)) working in the former Soviet Union and other countries to promote independent media. The idea that commercial media with advertising coming from many sources equals financial independence, which is the best foundation for robust independent journalism, was central to much of our work. This message seemed especially appropriate in places like Russia, where I lived for many years,

when everyone seemed to agree that converting state-run media to true public media was an impossible task, and commercial news media would be the country's savior.

As I look at what is happening now to this news model in the United States, I believe I was a missionary of a false gospel. Relying on advertising to support independent editorial structures that serve the public interest has always been a remarkably fragile construct resulting from a combination of history, regulation, professional aspirations, and family businesses. It's been eroding for a long time due to deregulation and the shift of many media businesses from privately held companies to shareholder corporations. Couple this with the shift of media consumption to the Internet, where advertising aimed at people looking for the score from last night's game no longer necessarily supports the same enterprise doing reporting on city hall, and it delivers the fatal blow.

In interview after interview I did with those working at newspapers and in TV and radio news, people described a continuing shift in priorities towards anything that helps their bottom line. Usually, this means cheap or free content that brings in large audiences or is advertiser-friendly, including a huge increase in various kinds of sponsored content. The church-state newsroom wall is looking more and more like a low hurdle, crossed without breaking stride.

Even publicly funded broadcasters offered little comfort. When I started this project, I imagined that public radio and TV stations would be the natural homes for the kind of mixing of amateur-professional online media that I'd hoped might address the impending failures of traditional commercial media, especially locally. Though I haven't given up hope, the more I looked inside the system, the less likely this seemed, despite the

## Media Re:public: Conclusions After a Year of Exploration

Media Re:public's final report went to press in November. It is available on the Berkman Center's Web site at [www.cyber.law.harvard.edu](http://www.cyber.law.harvard.edu). Its conclusions include the following:

- The disruption of the scarcity-based business model for traditional media outlets is leading them to reduce and shift the scope of their original reporting.
- Web-native media entities are not addressing all of the reporting gaps left by legacy media, and current structures and mechanisms do not provide sufficient incentives for them to do so.
- In the changing media environment,

news consumers risk relying on news sources that are neither credible nor comprehensive.

- Despite impressive successes, participation in the online media space is not universal; there are populations and ideas that remain underrepresented.
- There are specific kinds of critically important journalism that have not found reliable sustainability models in the online media environment.
- Efforts to understand and address the issues above are limited by a lack of rigorous empirical evidence, instead relying largely on incomplete information, anecdotes and intuition. ■—P.M.

many smart and motivated people who work within these news organizations. There are wonderful initiatives, both nationally and at local stations, but I worry these efforts will not get the financial and political support they need to develop and prove themselves. Some terrific efforts by local stations—part of a steady stream of small-scale innovations—include New Hampshire Public Radio ([nhpr.org](http://nhpr.org)), the Public Insight Network<sup>1</sup> and :Vocalo ([vocalo.org](http://vocalo.org)), a bold and beautiful experiment by Chicago Public Radio, which I regularly listen to at my desk.

### Converting to Participatory Media

It was not my misgivings about the future of newspapers and serious journalism generally but my conversion to a participatory media evangelist that shocked my friends. From their point of view, I am now drunk on the Kool-Aid. When I began this project, we were all curmudgeons,<sup>2</sup>

acknowledging that the Internet was important but believing this whole "citizen journalism" thing was wildly exaggerated. Citizen media guru Dan Gillmor, now one of my favorite Berkman colleagues, had come to speak at Internews, and his message was very convincing. But we took away ideas about how to enhance professional journalism, not replace it. When Berkman explained that my research was meant to answer the question of why online citizen media had not yet created a revolution—in shifting power from the center, where mainstream media resides, to the edges—I laughed out loud. I still have a hard time believing that anyone really thought unpaid, untrained people would take on significant portions of the work of professional news media.

Though my belief in the need for professional journalism remains intact, I have come to believe that "participatory media," the name we gave online citizen media, can, and indeed must, create a more democratic sphere for

<sup>1</sup> <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/publicinsightjournalism>

<sup>2</sup> This is the technical term for traditional media people who maintain that bloggers are irrelevant and/or dangerous. If you are one, as I suspect many Nieman folks are, I urge you to escape. We need you.

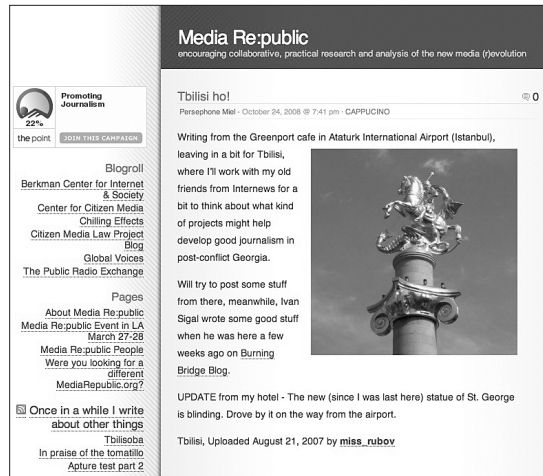
information and a more engaged public. By naming it “participatory media” we moved past defining it as only, or even mostly, being about blogs and acknowledged that not everyone involved is a citizen or a journalist, never mind a citizen journalist. Participatory media is whenever the people formerly known as the audience help shape the media environment, whether by commenting or recommending, sorting or reporting.

One observation to emerge from our research is the increasing amount of participatory media happening within traditional news organizations. The disturbing thing, however, about what is taking place there is that the content is often just as susceptible to the problems of credibility and low-est common denominator quality that professional journalists once condemned as inherent to amateur online media.

As part of my research, I attended many conferences, almost all a mix of old and new media, with some tilting towards journalism and others in the direction of technology and participatory media. The contrast between the two tribes—and they are distinct despite increasing trends towards intermarriage—remains stark. At NewsTools2008, folks from traditional and online media, technology companies, startups and universities spent three extraordinary days in the self-organized sessions of what is known as an “un-conference”: ideas bubbled as we learned about each other’s projects. On the third day, most of that group went home, but some of us stayed to take part in a daylong event with a group of local traditional journalists who, I have to admit, depressed me utterly. As a group, they seemed to have only one question to ask: What’s going to happen to my job?

Meanwhile, despite the image of bloggers and other new media folk as a sort of closed society, I experienced just the opposite. Just about all those I talked with in the new media world were excited to share information and explain their think-

ing and approach. I learned to give up a skill I’d developed during years spent with specialized professionals in the U.S. media of pretending to know what they were talking about long enough to guess. With my new colleagues, I could say, “Excuse me, but what exactly is Twitter?” or substitute



Flickr, RSS, geo-tagging, SEO, or any of dozens of other terms that entered my vocabulary during this past year. Never did I feel that anyone had any less respect for me for not knowing. This refreshing attitude was one of many things I wish traditional media folks would pick up.

### The Work Ahead

Despite being a convert to participatory media, I do not believe it will produce quality journalism by some kind of volunteer crowd-powered magic. “Build it and they will use it to make the media we need” has not proven to be true in the areas that matter. What I see being done online by both Web-native media and traditional media is the easy stuff—the low-hanging fruit, including coverage of politics, consumer news, gossip and technology. Much hard work remains to do to realize its potential; pretending that we’ve figured out everything about how participatory media works is very dangerous. We need a far more sophisticated interpretation of the citizen media scripture before my

conversion will be complete.

As I write this, sitting in my hotel in Tbilisi, Georgia, my Berkman colleagues and I are finalizing our main report and several other documents we’re publishing under the aegis of this project. The one-year MacArthur grant has ended, and I’m looking at ways to act on the conclusions I reached.

Here’s my sense of where we are now in this discussion—and where we need to head:

- More media projects should focus on the needs of specific publics, especially underserved populations.
- They should build on what’s available and bring organizations together rather than trying to create something entirely new.
- Technology is only one tiny part of the picture; the hard work will involve people.

I will continue to think and blog sporadically about these important media issues at [www.mediarepublic.org](http://www.mediarepublic.org). Between consulting jobs, which will likely focus on bringing my new media perspective to the international media development world, I will volunteer my time to develop a local media project with teenagers in my neighborhood, Boston’s South End. This project is tentatively called NeighborChord. Because many people in the neighborhood are not online, it will combine digital and traditional media, and these youngsters will be trained in traditional reporting as well as the multimedia and technology necessary to produce it. Like many experiments, it may fail. But a year of looking at the state of the news media has led me to believe it is critical to try. ■

*Persephone Miel directed the Media Re:public project at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Prior to joining Berkman, she spent more than 12 years with Internews Network, an international NGO supporting independent media around the world.*



# The Wisdom of the Crowd Resides in How the Crowd Is Used

‘... the animating idea—our readers know more than we do—is evolving into something that, if used wisely, will be far more efficient and useful than our first, early attempts at this new form of journalism.’

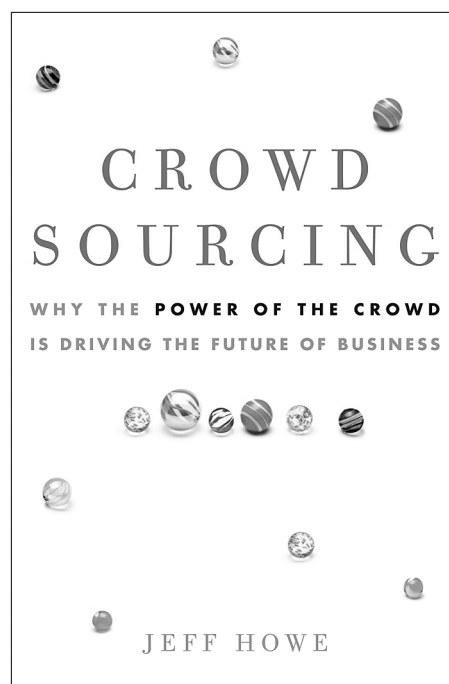
BY JEFF HOWE

Our presidential election was indeed historic, but not just for the reasons emblazoned in headlines throughout the world. It was also the most closely monitored election in U.S. history, as everyone from CNN to The Huffington Post to Harvard University asked people to document their voting experience and provide instant reports on problems at the polls. Thousands responded, sending in text messages, photographs, videos and even voice mails. The resulting data were aggregated and displayed—in real time—on maps, in charts, and over RSS feeds.

All of this activity signaled a small but significant advance in the use of crowdsourcing as a new tool in digital journalism. While crowdsourcing, or citizen journalism, has been widely embraced by all manner of news operations over the past several years, its track record has been decidedly spotty. In theory, crowdsourcing offers outlets like newspapers and newscasts and Web sites an opportunity to improve their reporting, bind their audiences closer to their brands, and reduce newsroom overhead. In reality, relying on readers to produce news content has proved to be a nettlesome—and costly—practice.

I coined the word “crowdsourcing” in a Wired magazine article published in June 2006,<sup>1</sup> though at that time I didn’t focus on its use in journalism. It was—and is—defined as the act of taking a job once performed by em-

ployees and outsourcing it to a large, undefined group of people via an open call, generally over the Internet. Back



then I explored the ways TV networks, photo agencies, and corporate R&D departments were harnessing the efforts of amateurs. I had wanted to include journalism in the piece, but there was a dearth of examples.

That quickly changed. Not long after Wired published this article the term began to seep into the pop cultural lexicon, and news organizations started to experiment with reader-generated

content. Around this time, some of the more memorable moments in journalism had been brought to us not by a handful of intrepid reporters, but by a legion of amateur photographers, bloggers and videographers. When a massive tsunami swept across the resort beaches of Thailand and Indonesia, those “amateurs” who were witness to it sent words and images by any means they could. When homegrown terrorists set off a series of bombs on buses and subways in London, those at the scene used their cell phone cameras to transmit horrifying images. Hurricane Katrina reinforced this trend: As water rose and then receded, journalists—to say nothing of the victims’ families—relied on information and images supplied by those whose journalistic accreditation started and ended with the accident of their geographical location.

With these events, the news media’s primary contribution was to provide the dependable Web forum on which people gathered to distribute information. By late 2006, the stage seemed set for the entrance of “citizen journalism,” in which inspired and thoughtful amateurs would provide a palliative for the perceived abuses of the so-called mainstream media. These were heady times, and a spirit of optimism—what can’t the crowd do?—seemed to pervade newsrooms as well as the culture at large.

At Wired, we were no less susceptible to the zeitgeist. In January 2007, we

<sup>1</sup> Howe’s article, “The Rise of Crowdsourcing,” can be read at [www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html).

teamed up with Jay Rosen's NewAssignment.Net to launch Assignment Zero. We anticipated gathering hundreds of Web-connected volunteers to discuss, report and eventually write 80 feature articles about a specified topic. At about the same time, Gannett was re-engineering its newsrooms with the ambition of putting readers at the center of its new business strategy. I had a close-up view of both efforts. At Assignment Zero, I was trying to help apply the crowdsourcing principles, while in 2006 I broke the news of Gannett's retooling—the most significant change since it launched USA Today in 1982—after spending several months reporting on the sea change at the company for Wired Magazine<sup>2</sup> and for my book, "Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business."

It would be easy to say that the original optimism was simply naiveté, but that wouldn't be exactly correct. As it turns out, there's a lot that the crowd can't do or, at least, isn't interested in doing. Recently I spent time talking to sources at Gannett as well as some of my Assignment Zero alumni<sup>3</sup> to revisit what went right, what didn't, and to pull from them valuable lessons for others to put to good use. What I've learned has reinforced my belief that crowdsourcing has limited applicability to journalism—it's a spice, not a main ingredient in our fourth estate. I've also come to fear that news organizations will rely more and more on reader-generated content at the expense of traditional journalism. But what's also clear is that the animating idea—our readers know more than we do—is evolving into something that, if used wisely, will be far more efficient and useful than our first, early attempts at this new form of journalism. At any rate, crowdsourcing isn't going away, so it behooves all of us to make sure it improves journalism but does not replace it.

## Assignment Zero's Formula

Assignment Zero was intended to demonstrate, as I wrote in a Wired.com piece on the occasion of the project's launch in March 2007, that "... a team of professionals, working with scores of citizen journalists, is capable of completing an investigative project of far greater scope than a team of two or three professionals ever could." In this case, the first topic of investigation by the crowd would be "... the crowd itself—its wisdom, creativity, power and potential." Dozens of "subject pages" were constructed, ranging from open source car design to architecture. Included was even a subject file called "the crowdsourced novel." Within each topic, there were up to 10 assignments, in which contributors could report, brainstorm or "write the feature." It was an ideal format for a newsroom. But then, we weren't soliciting journalists.

We came out of the gate strong. The New York Times published a column devoted to Assignment Zero, and the effort received lots of positive attention from the blogosphere. Within the first week, hundreds of volunteers had signed up. But just as quickly, these enthusiastic volunteers drifted away. Six weeks later, most of our topic pages were ghost towns.

What had we done wrong? Here's a few lessons learned:

1. Using the crowd to study crowdsourcing proved far too wonky and bewildering for most of our would-be citizen journalists.
2. We failed to anticipate that while building a community can be difficult, maintaining it is much harder. We didn't have a tier of organizers ready to answer questions and guide people in the right direction. With their earnest e-mails unanswered, quite naturally most volunteers drifted away.

3. We expected the crowd would fall all over themselves for the opportunity to produce all the artifacts of the journalistic practice—reporter's notes, inverted pyramid articles, and long-form features. It turned out that asking people to write a feature proved about as appealing as asking them to rewrite their college thesis. And so our contributors spoke with their feet.

Six weeks in, we turned things around. We scrapped most of the feature stories; instead people were asked to conduct Q&As. Critically, we shifted our tone. Instead of dictating assignments to people, we let the crowd select whom they wanted to interview or suggest new subjects entirely. In the end, about 80 interviews made it to the Web site as published pieces, and the majority were insightful and provocative. What their interviews made clear is these volunteer contributors tackled topics about which they were passionate and knowledgeable, giving their content a considerable advantage over that of professional journalists, who often must conduct interviews on short notice, without time for preparation or passion for the subject.

## Gannett's Newsroom Reinvention

Gannett, too, found itself experimenting with crowdsourcing in some of its newsrooms but did so for different reasons and in different ways than Assignment Zero. Conceived as a wholesale reinvention of the newsroom—rechristened the "information center"—Gannett's readers were now to reside at the heart of the two planks in its strategy.

After a successful initial foray into crowdsourced reporting—at The (Fort Myers) News-Press, in which a citizen-engaged investigation unearthed cor-

<sup>2</sup> Howe's July 2007 story in Wired, entitled "To Save Themselves, US Newspapers Put Readers to Work," can be read at [www.wired.com/techbiz/media/magazine/15-08/ff\\_gannett?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/magazine/15-08/ff_gannett?currentPage=all).

<sup>3</sup> David Cohn, an Assignment Zero alumnus, has an article about Spot.Us on page 64.

ruption in a sewage utility in a town in Florida—Gannett decided to export this model to its other newspapers.<sup>4</sup> Readers (a.k.a. community members) would also play a significant newsroom role in the renamed “community desk,” which would oversee everything from blogs to news articles written by readers.

In reporting on Gannett’s strategy, I chose to focus on how the changes were being implemented at one paper, The Cincinnati Enquirer. One indication of how the newsroom was changing was the shift in job responsibilities. A longtime metro reporter, Linda Parker, had recently been reassigned as “online communities editor.” Every Enquirer Web page prominently featured the words “Get Published” as a way of eliciting stories, comments and anything else Cincinnatians might feel compelled to submit. It all landed in Parker’s queue; perhaps not surprisingly, these words and videos never have resembled anything commonly considered journalism.

Even figuring out how best to prompt contributors has revealed valuable lessons to those at the Enquirer—ones that other news organizations can learn from. “It used to read, ‘Be a Citizen Journalist,’” Parker told me. “And no one ever clicked on it. Then we said, ‘Tell Us Your Story,’ and still nothing. For some reason, ‘Get Published’ were the magic words.”

Now, nearly two years into the experiment, the Enquirer considers this feature to be an unequivocal success. I sat with Parker, a cheerful woman in her mid-50’s, in April of last year as she pored over several dozen submissions she had received that day. There was one written by a local custom car builder trumpeting his upcoming appearance on a BET show, and another, expressing with the intensity of emotional passion befitting the circumstance, is a notice for a play being held to raise funds for a

fifth-grader’s bone marrow transplant. Parker almost never rejects anything she receives, though she scans each one for “the F-word,” and then posts it to the site. “A few years ago these would have come across the transom as press releases and been ignored,” she says.

This observation points to a central problem with Gannett’s strategy—indeed, with both the hyperlocal and crowdsourcing movements in general. Readers are content to leave the gritty aspects of reporting to journalists; they prefer to focus on content and storytelling that Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, once characterized in *The New Yorker* as being the equivalent of the contents of a church newsletter.

As it turns out, Tom Callinan, the Enquirer’s editor, observed a while into the project “even ‘Get Published’ was too newspaperlike in its sound. People don’t want to get published. They want to ‘share.’” And so this is what the Web site’s button now encourages its readers to do. The results continue, as Callinan says, to tend toward “pretty fluffy stuff.”

## Lessons Learned

So what are we to take away from these experiments? Readers are very interested in playing a role in the creation of their local media. They don’t necessarily want to write the news; what they want is to engage in a conversation. This doesn’t mean, however, that they don’t have valuable contributions to make. This fall, Callinan told me, readers shared with others on the Enquirer Web site news

The screenshot shows the Cincinnati.com website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for Jobs, Cars, Real Estate, Apartments, Shopping, Classifieds, and a search bar. Below that is a main navigation menu with categories like HOME, NEWS, SPORTS, ENTERTAINMENT, LIVING, BUSINESS, COMMUNITIES, OPINION, PHOTOS & VIDEOS, ORBITS, WEATHER, BLOGS & FORUMS. A prominent 'Share' button is visible, with a sub-header 'Share' and a brief description: 'It's still easy to share news, photos and events with others on your community Web site or in your local paper. And now you can share even more online — start a blog, post photos, interact with others in our forums, comment on stories and more. Who knows, you may even become a local celebrity! (Need help? Try the FAQs and Get Help links.)' Below the button are two columns of text. The left column, 'WITH YOUR COMMUNITY', lists 'Share news', 'Share photos', and 'Share events'. The right column, 'INTERACT ONLINE', lists 'Create your personal page', 'Start your own blog', 'Show off your photos', 'Join the conversation', and 'Talk with moms'. At the bottom, there is a 'GET HELP' section with links for 'Video Tutorials', 'Contact Us', and 'Where is my Stuff?'.

about a stabbing at a local strip club and a photograph of a theater fire. “We were able to confirm the stabbing,” he said. “We would have never known about it without the tip.” It might not be grist for a Pulitzer, but it fills the copy hole.

Nor were these key lessons lost on those of us involved in Assignment Zero. In fact, Assignment Zero’s community manager, Amanda Michel, employed the lessons of what didn’t work adeptly at her next venture, directing *The Huffington Post*’s effort, *Off the Bus*, with its citizen-generated coverage of the presidential campaign. Rather than duplicate what journalists were doing, *Off the Bus* leveraged its strength—namely, the size of its network of 12,000 “reporters.” With citizen correspondents spread across the nation and ready to attend smaller rallies, fundraisers and get-out-the-vote events that the national press ignored, *Off the Bus* found its niche.

*Off the Bus* became arguably the first truly successful example of crowdsourced journalism with some of its citizen reporters breaking national stories. Perhaps its most significant story was about the moment when Barack Obama, at a nonpress event fundraiser in San Francisco, made his famous comment about how rural

<sup>4</sup> Betty Wells, special projects editor at *The News-Press*, wrote about the newspaper’s use of crowdsourcing for the Spring 2008 issue of *Nieman Reports* in an article entitled, “Using Expertise From Outside the Newsroom,” which can be read at [www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100085](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100085).

Americans “cling to guns or religion” as an expression of their frustration. However, this reporting by Mayhill Fowler, the citizen journalist who broke this story, actually drew attention away from Off the Bus’s broader achievement. Toward the end of the campaign, Off the Bus was publishing some 50 stories a day, and Michel—with the help of her crowd—was able to write profiles of every superdelegate, perform investigations into dubious financial contributions to the campaigns, and publish compelling firsthand reports from the frontlines in the battleground states. The national press took note—and sent its kudos—but more importantly, readers noticed. Off the Bus drew 3.5 million unique visitors to its site in the month of September.

Michel achieved this because she took away valuable information from the failures of the experimentation at Assignment Zero. Rather than dictate to her contributors, she forged a new kind of journalism based on playing to their strengths. The result: Some contributors wrote op-eds, while others provided reporting that journalists at the Web site then used in weaving together investigative features, including

one that explored an increase in the prescribing of hypertension medicine to African-American women during the campaign. They also contributed “distributed reporting,” in which the network of contributors performed

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tasks such as analyzing how local affiliates summed up the vice presidential debate. “We received reports from more than 100 media markets,” Michel said. “We really got to see how the debate was perceived in different regions.”

Is Off the Bus the future of journalism? Hardly, Michel contends, and I agree wholeheartedly. She regards Off the Bus as complimentary, not competitive, with the work done by traditional news organizations. “We didn’t want to be the AP. We think the AP does a good job. The question was what information and perspective can citizens, not reporters on the trail, offer to the public?” Nor does she claim the

Off the Bus method would work with all stories. It’s easy to build such a massive network of volunteer reporters when the story is so compelling. But what happens when the topic generates far less passion, even if it is no

less important—say, for example, the nutritional content in public school lunches?

The take-away message for journalists should be this: Adapt to these changes and do so quickly. “The future of content is conversation,” says Michael Maness, the Gannett executive who helped craft the com-

pany’s recent newsroom overhaul. Worth noting is that one of Gannett’s unqualified successes are the so-called “mom sites,” launched in some 80 markets. Each is overseen and operated online by a single journalist with the assignment of facilitating conversation while also providing information. “We’re moving away from mass media and moving to mass experience,” says Maness. “How we do that? We don’t know.” ■

*Jeff Howe writes for Wired magazine and is the author of “Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business,” published by Crown Business in 2008.*

## When Journalists Blog: How It Changes What They Do

‘I was surprised at just how much these journalists felt their work had been changed by the simple act of blogging.’

BY PAUL BRADSHAW

From journalistic pariah to savior of the news industry, blogs have undergone an enormous transformation in recent years. As a journalist and a blogger, I was curious to see how this transformation from blogophobia to blogophilia was

affecting journalism. Was the hype surrounding the potential of blogs to transform our craft being realized—or were journalists simply treating their blogs as another “channel” into which to plough content?

Earlier this year I distributed an

online survey to blogging journalists to get a feel for the lie of the land. The response was incredible—coming from 200 journalists from 30 countries, representing newspapers and magazines, television and radio, online-only and freelancers. United States and United

Kingdom respondents dominated, but every continent (except Antarctica) was represented.<sup>1</sup>

As I pored over the results, I was surprised at just how much these journalists felt their work had been changed by the simple act of blogging. I had expected some effect on their relationship with the “former audience,” but what surprised me most was when more than half of the blogging journalists said this relationship had been “enormously” or “completely” transformed. At the same time, when I might have anticipated that some aspects of the journalistic process to be affected, I found, instead, consistency in responses I received. This included in areas ranging from how journalists generated story ideas and leads to newsgathering and news production and even what happens after publication or broadcast. In each instance, the majority of journalists told stories of change.

So the headline is: Blogging is changing journalism—at least for those journalists who blog. But alongside this conclusion resides a collection of more interesting findings.

### Cutting Out the Middlemen

In generating story ideas, blogging journalists don’t need someone to tell them who the readers are and what they want: They already know, because the readers are on their blogs, telling them who they are and what they’re curious about. In this new blogging relationship, editors are the middlemen being cut out.

The role of official sources—such as public relations spokespeople and firms—were also being diminished, as sources for stories broadened. Story leads now come through the comments or through private communication initiated via the blog. And once they are pursuing a story, some journalists use the blog to “put the call out” for information and sources—and rely

on the transparency of their reporting process to push official sources to reply. One respondent wrote:

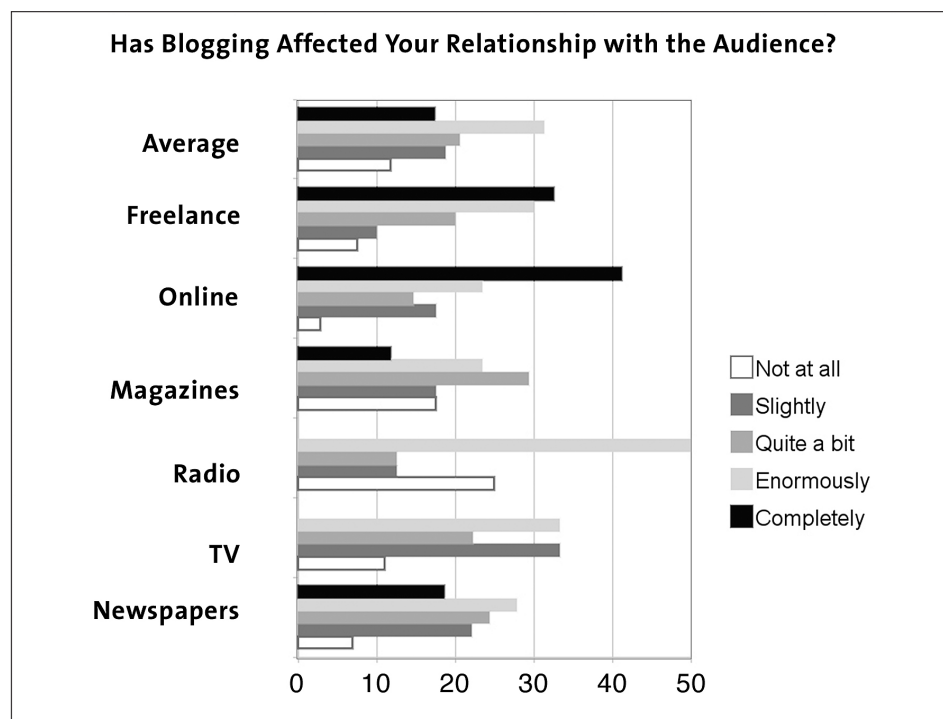
On hot-button stories where our readers are asking a lot of questions, we post updates every time we make a phone call. For example, [a company] declared bankruptcy, and the new owner wouldn’t take the previous owner’s gift cards. Our readers were peeved and hounding us to do something. The corporate folks weren’t saying anything, so we didn’t have any new information to report. Because we didn’t have any new info, we didn’t write anything in the paper. But on our blog, we would post updates at least daily to tell people when we left a message and if we had heard back yet. We eventually scored an interview with the new CEO and posted it in its entirety on our site. Another reporter saw it

and called us. We swapped info. Our readers also post links to other stories on the topic from other news orgs.

In some examples, this collaboration becomes a form of crowdsourcing. But for others the pressure to publish meant more reliance on rumors and less rigorous research, with the onus placed on blog readers to clarify and fact check.

### Swifter, Deeper, Stronger

In production, blogging journalists felt they worked more quickly, breaking stories on their blogs before following up online and in print or broadcast. They also write shorter, more tightly edited pieces, not just for blogs but also for print and broadcast. Reporters said they write more informally than before, while using the blog as a space to publish material that didn’t “fit” the formats of print and broadcast. And journalists link to other stories when



<sup>1</sup> More information about the findings of this online survey is available on the author’s blog at <http://onlinejournalismblog.com/2008/10/14/blogging-journalists-survey-results-pt1-context-and-methodology/>.

time or space constraints mean they are unable to report in full—what Jeff Jarvis called on his blog, BuzzMachine, “Covering what you do best and linking to the rest.”

After publication or broadcast, blogging journalists are less inclined to discard a story completely; stories had “more legs.” Errors and updates get highlighted by readers and fixed. The permanence of the Web means stories are always “live.” In the words of two journalist bloggers:

The audience remains able to comment on the content and regularly provides information which updates it. The reporter then has the opportunity to revisit the subject, creating a great “off diary” print story (loved by news editors everywhere).

Well, you never finish, do you? You write something that may or may not spark a conversation, and you’ve got to be ready for that conversation even if it happens

months later.

This importance of distribution emerged as a significant change, as journalists spoke of forwarding links, posting updates on Twitter, and using RSS.

Interactivity and “conversation” were frequently mentioned. As one journalist blogger let me know:

I cover more than 30 countries. The reaction of people who live in a place tells me a lot about the issues I am writing about. My blog seems to generate arguments, which at least help me understand a story more.

### An Uneven Picture

Despite these similar trends, the picture was not the same everywhere. Freelance or online-only journalists were more likely to say that their work had been transformed “enormously” or “completely.” In contrast, no journalist employed by the television or

radio industries felt that blogging had “completely” changed any aspect of their work.

Similarly, sport journalists reported less change in their work than any other journalists. Media, technology, finance and arts and culture journalists were more likely than others to say that blogging had changed their processes “enormously” or “completely.”

A third of the respondents only started to blog in the past year, so my suspicion is that there remains room for more change. Clearly, we are only at the beginning, as the news industry faces one of the most significant transformations in its history. ■

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## Digging Into Social Media to Build a Newspaper Audience

‘We weren’t even sure whether a mainstream news site could become part of the cybercommunities that evolve from social media sites.’

BY BILL ADEE

**M**eet “The Colonel.” He’s a pretty dapper guy. In his early 50’s, he has worked for the Chicago Tribune and lived in the city his whole life—well, except for that stint in the Army Reserves. That’s how he earned his nickname. He started out as a copy boy in the newsroom, worked his way up, and now he’s Web ambassador for [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com).

Because he spends so much time at the Tribune, he lives in the South Loop, close to Soldier Field and his beloved Bears. The Colonel is adventurous, and he makes his way around the city

to try all sorts of different foods. He loves eating steak at Gibson’s outdoor cafe and is not above heading over to Jim’s Original for a Polish.

While he’s a Web guy, the Colonel starts his day off with a cup of Stewart’s coffee and the papers. He’ll check out [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com) and [suntimes.com](http://suntimes.com) for local news, then he’ll scan [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com) and [latimes.com](http://latimes.com). After his daily news fix, he watches the latest viral videos on YouTube.

The Colonel is very interested in local politics, and he’s a take-things-one-issue-at-a-time moderate. His

news tastes are reflected in what he shares with his friends. He makes a point to interact with Tribune readers individually, but he’ll do this, too, on Facebook, Twitter, Digg and other social media sites and blogs.

“I’m here to make the most of your time,” he says. “My goal is never to send out a link that’s lame.”

The Colonel doesn’t exist. Or does he?

Roughly 40 percent of the traffic arrives at [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com) when a user types our URL into a browser or goes to a bookmarked page.

The other 60 percent? That traffic comes via search engines, Web sites, and blogs. On a typical day in early 2008, Google was our No. 1 source of outside traffic, followed by Yahoo! (#2), CareerBuilder (#3), Fark (#10), The New York Times (#20), and Facebook (#47). In all, more than 4,000 sites sent users our way—with 350,000 different clicks.

At [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com), a lot of our time is spent focused on our content, as it should be. But given those percentages, we needed to be asking whether another very important job we have is to make sure our content finds an audience and connects with people in other areas of the Web.

That question led to our “Project O.” The “O” was for search-engine and social media optimization and for Owen—as in Owen Youngman, the Chicago Tribune vice president who championed and funded the group tasked with spreading our content to the rest of the Web.

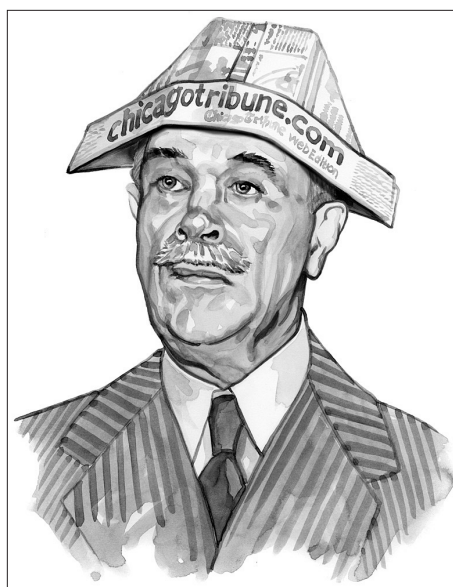
## Social Media’s Viral Power

For me, Project O’s genesis occurred in March 2007. Back then, I was the former sports editor at the Tribune who’d been working as associate editor for innovation for just a few months. Tribune national correspondent Howard Witt wrote a piece about Paris, Texas, a small town with a troubled history.<sup>1</sup> Published on March 12th—and available online that same day—Witt’s story attracted 16,000 page views. The next day, the count dropped to 1,300. But on March 21st, nine days after it appeared on the newspaper’s front page, this story about a tiny place far from Chicago generated 43,300 page views. By the end of March, this story was our site’s most popular story, with more than 126,000 people coming to [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com) to read it.

What happened? Turns out that more than 300 blogs had linked to the story, and it became popular on Digg, where stories are submitted by users and then promoted to the home

page based on the rankings of users. Roughly 35,000 page views of the total came from people who went directly from Digg to our Web site to take a look at this story.

That was my first experience with Digg and the viral power of social media. And it made a lasting impression. It forced me to think about how the Tribune and other newspapers produce so many great stories—a lot of them with remarkable images—and yet, in the typhoon of information, I wondered how people can find ones they might not know exist but will be drawn to read once they do. And



how might we be able to help make this happen. Clearly this question went beyond searching online, since I doubt many people set out in March to pop the words “Paris, Texas” into their search engine.

I knew then that there was an active role for us to play in doing a better job of bringing what Tribune reporters work hard to produce to the attention of new and appreciative audiences. And we had to take the material to these audiences, wherever they are finding and learning from each other on the Internet. Then we had to somehow connect the material we had with people who might be interested

in taking a look. To do this, our job would be to construct cyberconnections that, when acted on, would mirror the serendipitous reading experience familiar to so many as they thumb through pages of a newspaper. What made this a bit different, however, is that we needed to figure out how to do this systematically, rather than relying on luck and happenstance.

## Colonel Tribune Goes Social

It was Saint Patrick’s Day, 2008, and Daniel Honigman and I were sitting in my office. Honigman was the first of the four 20-somethings I hired for Project O. He quit a full-time job and signed on to this project for \$500 a week, no benefits, and no guarantees beyond the 12 weeks that the Tribune had approved to fund this project.

We had no handbook to follow, nor anyone inside the company to whom we could turn for advice. We weren’t even sure whether a mainstream news site could become part of the cybercommunities that evolve from social media sites. But Honigman had impressed me several months earlier with a story he’d written about the importance of influencers to corporations and his abiding interest in social media and search-engine optimization.

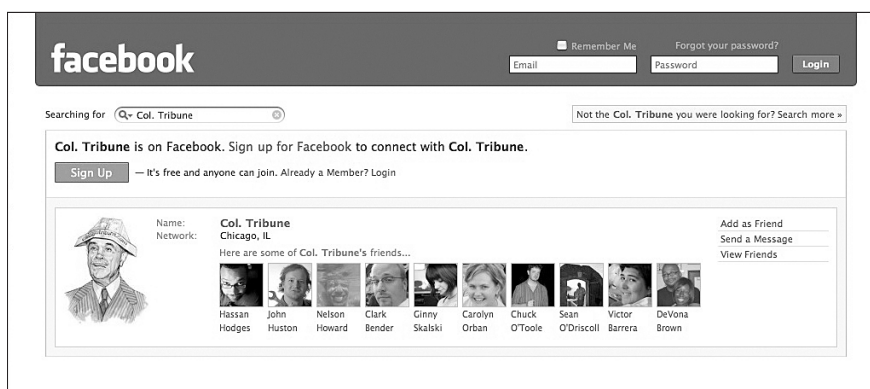
In addition to using Google Trends, which tracks and reflects what keywords people are searching for on a daily basis, we decided to start by focusing on a few social media sites—Facebook, Twitter, Fark, Reddit and Digg. I was concerned about having Daniel and the three others I hired—Amanda Maurer, Erin Osmon, and Christina Antonopoulos—use their own Facebook profiles to represent the Tribune. Daniel suggested we create an online avatar, and that’s how “Colonel Tribune,” a nod to the newspaper’s legendary figure, Col. Robert McCormick, was born.

I know what you are thinking. How could you pick an old white guy with a military title to be the Tribune’s ambassador in the world of new media?

<sup>1</sup> [www.chicagotribune.com/paris](http://www.chicagotribune.com/paris)

Believe it. The Colonel has taken on a life of his own though Twitter and other social media sites where he can be found. He routinely gets news tips from some readers, hears from others about corrections and typos in stories, and he is offered story ideas. One example: The Colonel was notified via Twitter about a bomb threat and building evacuation downtown. The tip was checked out by a reporter, and the story was posted on [chicagotribune.com](http://chicagotribune.com).

Through Twitter and Facebook, we've invited people to meet-ups at a local bar. They showed up in num-



bers that surprised us—and even paid homage to the Colonel by wearing his trademark hat.

The goal for Project O was one million page views a month. By June, at its peak, it was doing more than six times that number. And so our project continues with permanent funding.

Can a mainstream news site become

part of the social media scene? Absolutely, yes. But be warned. To do this requires having the same kind of great team I had: Facebook-savvy youth, an innovative Web staff, and an extremely supportive newsroom. Even then, it will be essential to become immersed in the various communities and to reach out in ways that create interactive relationships. Like friendships, these are ones that come only with time, trust and hard work.

For us, we had a Colonel to help.

*Bill Adee is editor of digital media for the Chicago Tribune.*

## Web v. Journalism: Court Cases Challenge Long-Held Principles

‘... courts and legislatures, reluctant to apply different rules to the “old” and “new” media, are rethinking the basic constitutional principles that have protected a free press for generations.’

BY JANE KIRTLEY

In late September 2008, a California state appeals court struck down a gag order that forbade The Orange County Register to report by “all means and manner of communication, whether in person, electronic, through audio or video recording, or print medium” testimony by any witness appearing in a class action wage-and-hour suit brought by its newspaper carriers.

The trial judge—whose ruling was overturned—had concluded that the injunction was necessary to prevent future witnesses from being influenced by others’ testimony. But this gag order violated just about every precedent establishing the strong presumption against prior restraints going all the

way back to 1931’s *Near v. Minnesota* and 1971’s *Pentagon Papers* case, *New York Times v. United States*. As the appellate panel ruled, there was no way that the risk that witnesses in this civil case might be influenced by news reports was sufficient to justify this kind of censorship. Other, less restrictive alternatives—such as simply admonishing the witnesses not to read the paper—would accomplish the same goal.

Was this appeals court’s ruling a great victory for freedom of the press? Well, yes and no. Yes, because the appeals court got it right. But no, because the trial judge thought his order was the right thing to do, despite nearly 70 years of unbroken precedent to

the contrary.

Unfortunately, that trial judge is not alone in seeming to be First Amendment-challenged. It’s not that they hate the press, exactly. But they don’t really understand the unique role the news media play in a democratic society. They reject the idea that “the press” should enjoy any special privileges. Nor do they seem to know what to do about those legions of unidentified and ungovernable bloggers and other online journalists out there who, in their eyes, do little except spread false rumors, violate copyright laws, and identify rape victims with impunity, all the time hiding behind the anonymity that the Web permits. As a consequence, courts and legis-



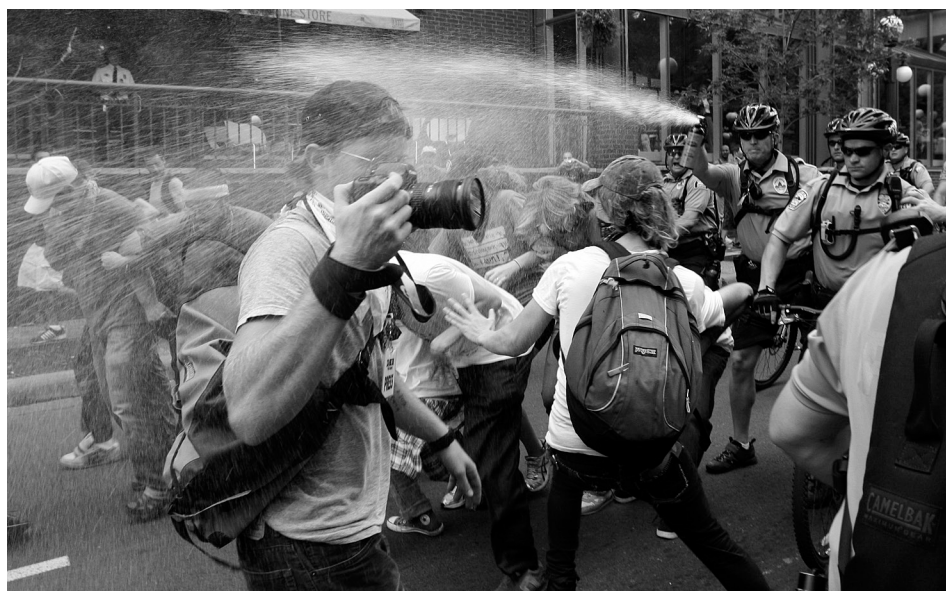
latures, reluctant to apply different rules to the “old” and “new” media, are rethinking the basic constitutional principles that have protected a free press for generations.

## Web Restrictions

The Orange County Register case is similar to recent examples of judges issuing gag or “take down” orders against Web site operators who have had the temerity to report details about Paris Hilton’s personal life or the names and statistics of Major League Baseball players without authorization from the league. The difference is that some of these orders have actually been upheld. Although in the past it was accepted law in the United States that the remedy for invasion of privacy was to sue for damages, not enjoin the speech, for many judges the immediacy and ubiquity of publishing on the Internet changes the balance, justifying more draconian measures.

Copyright law presents a slightly different challenge. The owners of intellectual property have always had the legal right to demand that violators “cease and desist” publishing and distributing infringing works. But the advent of the Internet means that copying others’ work without permission is easier than ever before. Congress enacted the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) in 1998 to address this situation without also stifling protected speech. As an incentive to encourage Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to continue to offer untrammelled access to the Web, the DMCA’s “safe harbor” provision protects them from liability when their subscribers upload infringing material, as long as they “act expeditiously” to remove the material once notified that it has been posted.

The problem is that a prudent ISP will be inclined to take down the content and leave the subscriber and the copyright owner to sort out their respective rights later. To facilitate that process, the DMCA permits copyright holders to use “administrative subpoenas” to compel the ISP to disclose the identity of the subscriber. Although the



Police use pepper spray to break up a group of protesters during a rally at the Republican National Convention in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Kentucky Kernel photographer Ed Matthews, left with camera, documented the rally and was later arrested on charges of felony riot according to the Ramsey County Adult Detention Center. Matt Rourke, who took this photograph, was also arrested. *Photo by Matt Rourke/The Associated Press.*

subpoenas are supposed to be strictly limited to curtailing infringing activity, they can also be used to circumvent well-established First Amendment principles protecting the right to engage in anonymous speech.

A similar threat arises in the context of defamatory publications. Many bloggers and other posters engage in vituperative commentary online without identifying themselves. In a provision similar to the DMCA safe harbor, section 230 of the Communications Decency Act grants ISPs immunity from liability for libelous speech posted by their subscribers. But again, the ISP can be compelled to reveal the individual’s identity if a judge concludes that a plaintiff has a valid claim. Those who might be affected by this ruling include newspapers and other media, which could be forced to unmask readers who post anonymous comments on their Web sites, leaving them vulnerable to retaliation or retribution.

## Confidential Sources

The question of whether journalists should have the right to protect their

confidential sources is being affected by the Internet, too. The existence and extent of any reporter’s privilege has been an unsettled and volatile issue in the courts ever since the Supreme Court’s narrow decision in *Branzburg v. Hayes* in 1972 determined that the First Amendment did not create one. Despite that opinion, however, most states and federal circuits recognized some kind of protection, at least in certain circumstances. But after a series of rulings to the contrary in several influential federal appeals courts, most notably in the recent *Judith Miller* case, media groups lobbied Congress to pass a federal shield law. Although attracting bipartisan support, the bill remains stalled in the Senate.

A major point of contention with this legislation is the question of how to determine who would be covered by the law. Attempts to adopt a broad functional definition to include anyone who is “doing journalism,” regardless of medium or platform, was rejected by those who feared the law would be used to protect individuals “linked to terrorists or other criminals,” or who are merely “casual bloggers,” presumably unbound by traditional

ethical standards and accountable to no one.

Whether existing shield laws in the states will cover bloggers and other nonmainstream journalists remains an open question and very much depends on the particular statutory language and the courts' interpretation of it. Although a California court ruled that the state shield law protected the identities of operators of a blog that revealed Apple Computer's trade secrets on the ground that their publications constituted "news," the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals refused to recognize that blogger and self-described anarchist Josh Wolf was a journalist under the same law, because he was not "connected with or employed by" a news organization.

Law enforcement officials at the Republican National Convention in September 2008 collectively threw up their hands and declined to make a distinction, detaining or arresting dozens of journalists, both "mainstream" and "citizen," swept up while attempting to cover and report on the demonstrations and protests in Saint Paul. Of course, the Internet made possible "real-time" and worldwide distribution of reports of the protests.<sup>1</sup>

Digital technology has facilitated newsgathering in many ways. But



A screen shot from a YouTube video of the arrest of "Democracy Now!" radio host Amy Goodman at the protest during the Republican National Convention.

its impact has not been entirely positive. For example, in theory, the digitization of government records, coupled with the ability of anyone with a computer and a modem to gain easy access to them, should have been celebrated as a welcome opportunity for meaningful citizen oversight. But judges and legislators, driven by fear that such access would facilitate illegal conduct ranging from identity theft to employment discrimination, have used the threat of it to justify curtailing access to these electronic files.

It doesn't stop there. Judges also cite their discomfort at the idea that someone logging on from a distant location, having no "legitimate interest" in the local community, will amuse himself by trawling through court or real estate records and publishing them online. They worry that citizen journalists with cell phone cameras will invade courtrooms and post trial footage online, a practice they consider both disruptive and undignified. Although they might support the concept of access to government records and proceedings in the abstract, once it becomes cheap and easy the gatekeepers began to question its wisdom. Information, it seems, is just too valuable—or too dangerous—to entrust to a blogger.

None of these consider-



AP photojournalist Matt Rourke was covering police arresting protesters at the Republican National Convention when he was arrested. One of the last images on his camera's memory card before he was arrested shows a police officer pressing down with his knee on the neck of a protester whom he is handcuffing. *Photo by Matt Rourke/The Associated Press.*

ations should drive legal policy. Rights of access, or freedom of expression, are not, and should not be, conditioned on some government official's idea of what constitutes "responsible" journalism. Judges and legislators should continue to follow the principles that have protected the press, and the public's right to know, for more than 200 years. But at the same time, those who publish in the new media and are always quick to invoke the First Amendment are challenging so many things held sacred.

The question confronting all of us—given the tenor of our times and the judicial decision-making we are seeing—is whether the First Amendment will survive this challenge. ■

*Jane Kirtley has been the Silha Professor of Media Ethics and Law at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota since August 1999. Prior to that, she was executive director of The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press in Arlington, Virginia, for 14 years.*

<sup>1</sup> YouTube video about Amy Goodman's arrest is at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBjcqwQgF7Q&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBjcqwQgF7Q&NR=1).

# Ethical Values and Quality Control in the Digital Era

‘Situations that editors confront in this digital-era maelstrom reflect the vexing ethical challenges and the diminished quality control standards at a time when they are most needed.’

BY BOB STEELE

“Some of us feel like page-view whores, and it’s got to stop.”

With those words, a newspaper editor who e-mailed me in the summer of 2007 said what many of his colleagues have come to believe. It was an expression—an admission, really—of what many editors acknowledge has happened in the full-throttle race on the digital speedway fueled by a feverish fight for financial survival.

In my nearly two decades on the faculty of The Poynter Institute, I have fielded thousands of ethical queries from editors, reporters, producers, photojournalists and a good handful of news corporation executives. I’m generally heartened by the sincerity of the journalists in wanting to do the right thing ethically, and I cheer the remarkable reporting that is still produced in the face of considerable obstacles. Nevertheless, I’m very worried about the significant erosion of ethical standards across our profession and the resulting corrosion of the quality of the journalism. The blogs, Tweets, social networking, citizen-submitted content, and multimedia storytelling that are the tools and techniques of the digital era offer great promise. They also, when misused, present considerable peril.

## Ethical Dilemmas on the Web

Situations that editors confront in this digital-era maelstrom reflect the vexing ethical challenges and the diminished quality control standards at a time when they are most needed. Several examples I’ve been involved with exemplify the importance of renewing a commitment to time-honored ethical values that will build and protect the integrity of the journalism as it

morphs into new forms of reporting, storytelling and delivery.

The editor who penned the “whores” self-description had asked me for input on what he termed “a not-very-good story this morning re: hate crimes.” That news story included information from a community blog, information that ostensibly described what the alleged victim of the hate crime had done to prompt an attack. The editor wanted to know my view about whether putting the news story on the site of a traditional newspaper—with this additional information in it—gives the blog content false credibility.

I read the story and absorbed many of the reader comments attached to the Web site’s version of that story. My response to the editor addressed both the blogs-as-news-content issue and the vile tone and tenor of certain reader posts to the story. Here’s what I wrote in an e-mail to the editor:

I fear that many papers/reporters/editors are so caught up in the “search for eyeballs and page views” that the default position is often “let’s put that blog stuff” in our story because “it’s out there and folks are talking about it.” We’ll then “balance” the piece with concerns expressed by others connected to the story who have a different view than the bloggers.

Too often we give unjustified credibility to bloggers who are, at best, practicing amateur journalism or simplistic punditry. And news organizations provide that false credibility by equating the bloggers’ observations and views with the rigor of news reporting. My point is similar to what Bill

Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel emphasize in “The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect,” when they contrast assertion with verification. The latter is a purposeful process that seeks and reports the truth as best as possible. The former merely declares something based on little or no reliable fact-finding and thin, if any, confirmation.

I also told the editor it’s bad when time-honored journalistic values of accuracy and fairness are eroded in the quest to draw eyeballs to the Web-generated stories. And it’s a bad thing when there are serious negative consequences to those who are caught up in news stories, whether it’s a dead man who can’t defend himself to the blogger’s pejorative descriptions of him or a victim’s family members who are re-victimized by the hate, scorn, mocking and ridicule that are part of the comments posted to a news story.

Some readers’ comments posted to the hate crime story—presumably ones that violated the paper’s posting standards—had been excised. But other posts remaining I believed clearly pushed beyond the paper’s standards against offensive name-calling and racist and bigoted commentary.

The editor, who I believe cares deeply about both the quality of the journalism and the ethics of the profession, responded with the mea culpa I cited above. While I know this editor does not want to be a “page-view whore,” I also recognize that he and his peers are under immense pressure to save the franchise. That means big-time risk taking and, in this era of staff cutbacks, it also means decreased editorial oversight and diminished checks and balances. Quality control

suffers and quality deteriorates.

This ethical pressure cooker is reflected, too, in the thoughts of a managing editor at a metro paper who called me in October 2008. This editor wanted input on how to handle the increasing use of social networking by the paper's news staffers. Indeed, that paper's editors had advocated more blogging and Twittering, including on the personal sites of the newspaper's journalists. The goal: to spur reader interest and potentially more online user connection. The alarm bells started ringing when the managing editor noticed that one staffer's Tweets included what the editor termed "snarky" comments about a political candidate, comments laced with both opinion and obscenities.

Just as that editor recognized that loose oversight had created an ethics problem that necessitated reaffirming some core values, the editor of *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer* knew there was a serious problem when her paper's Web site prematurely reported the death of an Ohio congresswoman. "The speed of information is causing us to make mistakes," Susan Goldberg told a Kent State University forum on online ethics in September 2008.

Goldberg said that error would never have been made in the print version of the story because the facts would have been confirmed. "I don't want us to be wrong. I don't want our newspaper to be wrong," she said. "Mistakes can be damaging to our credibility. We're on a big stage, and we have a loud voice." She also declared that an "experiment is not working" when their political blogger became actively involved in the campaign of a local congressman.

Other editors have called me to seek guidance when they discovered that staff journalists were touting politicians or political causes on their personal Facebook pages. In most cases, the editors had not proactively addressed these conflict of interest issues until after a problem surfaced. Then it was more challenging to respond and in some cases to negotiate new ethics policy language with the guild representing the paper's journalists.

## Tools and Tribulations

Some of the ethics crashes on the digital media highway have generated national attention. The accuracy and fairness concerns can be multiplied by the increasing use of so-called citizen journalists to provide reports that are then disseminated—often without verification—by traditional news organizations. Take the example of an October 2008 story that speaks loudly to the dangers of fast and furious reporting complicated by the minimal sourcing of the information.

For a period of time, CNN had a report on its iReport site (a user-submitted site where the content comes from the community) that claimed Apple CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a major heart attack. The story was not true, but Apple's stock took a quick dive with company shares off by more than 10 percent before the CNN iReport story on Jobs was debunked and removed from the site.

While many editors tout their ability to quickly take down factually wrong information or other egregious content, the damage done can be significant.

Sometimes it's the tools journalists are using or just poor techniques with the tools that are ethically problematic. *The Rocky Mountain News* in Denver was roundly criticized for insensitivity in the funeral coverage of a three-year-old boy. A Rocky reporter used Twitter, a microblogging tool, to live-blog details from the graveside to the paper's Web site.

In the wake of significant backlash, *Rocky Mountain News* Editor John Temple wrote to readers that he accepted responsibility for any failing in the Twitter technique used in that situation, though he felt there was justifiable news value in the event that warranted this kind of unique coverage. "We must learn to use the new tools at our disposal," Temple wrote in his newspaper and on its Web site. "Yes, there are going to be times we make mistakes, just as we do in our newspaper. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try something. It means we need to learn to do it well. That is our mission."

## Strong Standards

Which takes us full circle back to the importance of quality control as editors and other journalists search for that "true north" point on the moral compass. In recent years, many editors across the land learned hard lessons about the necessity of vigorous oversight on staff work. High-profile plagiarism and fabrication cases at papers the likes of *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Sacramento Bee* set off alarms. And in many of those cases the sinners were not the wet-behind-the-ears, youthful journalists but long-in-the-tooth veterans who succumbed to sin.

Editors recognized they needed better systems of quality control to deter liars and sinners. They needed clear, strong standards for attribution and a checks and balances process that prosecuted the work of all reporters and columnists, even those who had earned trust over the years. Those oversight lessons can and should be applied in the digital arena where writers can be tempted to cut corners on attribution as they rapidly source stories across the Internet.

Journalists—from reporters to multimedia producers to editors—are under great pressure to do more with less. The intense financial forces, the thinner staffs, and the risk-taking culture create a mixture where heightened quality control measures are all the more essential. Now is the time to reaffirm essential core values that underpin journalism ethics and journalistic excellence. Accuracy, fairness and honesty are as important now as they have ever been.

We must not let journalism turn horrific. Nor can we allow ourselves to become page-view whores. ■

*Bob Steele is the Eugene S. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Professor of Journalism at DePauw University and the Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values at The Poynter Institute.*

## Engaging the Public in Asking Why We Do What We Do

‘No longer do I enter the newsroom believing that readers have tuned us out. Perhaps it is we who have tuned them out by creating too great a distance between them and us.’

BY NANCY SAN MARTIN

The mood in the newsroom was dire. It was our second round of layoffs in less than a year and the announcement came with even more bitter news: A third round of layoffs will be coming in the first quarter of 2009. Everyone was asking themselves the same question: Why bother? Why bother working 10, 12 and sometimes—many times—14-hour days for a job that seems to be fading in an industry that is said to be dying? Why bother trying to hold together a newsroom that is already thin and getting thinner? Why bother to continue to do more with less? Why bother? After all, haven't readers tuned us out?

As we contemplated our futures, a disaster loomed for a neighboring nation. Haiti would fall prey to four consecutive storms that claimed hundreds of lives, left thousands homeless, and turned a desperate nation into what some described as a virtual hell on earth. Many of the dead were children.

Our reports from that country—thanks to the incredible work from reporter Jacqueline Charles and photographer Patrick Farrell—resulted in an outpouring of donations. Our readers *were* paying

attention. And their response provided an answer to an even bigger question: Why do we do what we do?

Recognizing this intersection of reader response and the reinvigoration of meaning for what we do, The Miami Herald decided to launch a new public outreach campaign: “Why We Do What We Do.” The idea is to bring our “behind the scenes” work

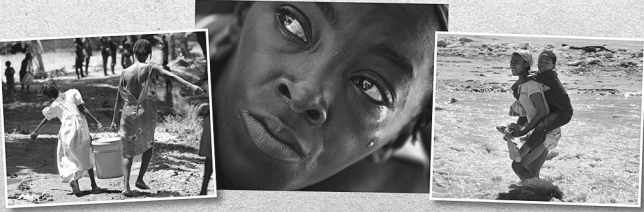
to the public as a way of drawing attention to the journalism we do. By giving readers an opportunity to speak directly with the correspondents who gather information and those who bring us remarkable images—by making them part of a conversation—we hope to explore deeply this question of why we do what we do and perhaps emerge with renewed understanding of and appreciation for the value of what journalism provides.

### Conversations Commence

Our first session took place on October 13th and featured our coverage of the devastation in Haiti. We met at Books & Books, a popular gathering spot in nearby Coral Gables, after our community events staff whipped up a promotional ad. E-mail blasts went out to book club members. Word spread. Our invitation was simple and direct:

“Why We Do What We Do: Haiti After the Storms.” Join us as Miami Herald editors, reporters and photographers share their experiences in the hurricane-ravaged areas of Haiti and exhibit a series of gripping photography.


The Miami Herald Presents:



**Why We Do What We Do:  
Haiti After the Storms**

Join us as Miami Herald editors, reporters and photographers share their experiences in the hurricane-ravaged areas of Haiti and exhibit a series of gripping photography.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 13, 8 P.M. | BOOKS & BOOKS  
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305 442 4408

The Miami Herald  MiamiHerald.com

BOOKS & BOOKS  
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We met on a Monday night, and participants were tightly packed into folded chairs squished between bookshelves. The two speakers from the Herald were the reporter and photographer who'd been in Haiti. I was the moderator. Our time together began with a three-minute presentation of photographs, video and voices. The audio conveyed the words of the storms' victims and our correspondents, who documented the deaths of dozens of children. Their words and images described a scene so grim that even what we showed the audience could not fully capture the devastation. And we included photographs not published in our newspaper because they were deemed too disturbing—of babies torn from their parents' arms, and stripped of their clothes by raging floodwaters, who were lying dead on a sidewalk "looking like porcelain dolls," as the reporter described them.<sup>1</sup>

Stunned silence laced with sighs of dismay greeted the film's end as the audience waited to hear from those who'd conveyed this tragic tale. After introducing the panelists, I briefly explained why we were here. I shared with them how throughout our careers—as we've reported stories about corrupt politicians or infighting at the school board or a neighborhood hero—people have asked us why we do what we do. Now that the industry is hurting, I told them, many of us who do this work find ourselves asking this same question.

We were only together for an hour, but in that time plenty of good questions got asked. "How do you find out where to go to cover the story?" "How do you decide what photos to put on the front page?" "Why didn't you include the photos you showed us tonight?" "What goes through your mind when you see such tragedy?" "Does it affect

you on a personal level?" "How do you cope with your feelings?" "Why risk your own lives to tell someone else's tale?" "When are you going back?"

What I came to realize is how much of what we do remains mysterious to those who read and view our work each day. At the same time, some of what we consider routine about what we do now could be seen by us in different and more meaningful ways.

On November 1st, we held our second public forum. This time our focus was Cuba, soon to mark the 50th anniversary of a revolution that we are still trying to decipher. Held on a Saturday night in the same space, this one proved just as popular, with readers eager to hear about "Why We Do What We Do: Cuba Beneath a 50-Year-Old Cloak."

Our visual opening illuminated The Miami Herald's reporting about Cuba for five decades. This time, we



Audience members raise their hands to ask questions at a Miami Herald "Why We Do What We Do" forum, featuring a reporter and photographer who documented devastation in Haiti caused by four consecutive storms. *Photo by Chuck Fadely/The Miami Herald.*

<sup>1</sup> A video of the first forum can be seen at [www.miamiherald.com/video/index.html?media\\_id=2339079](http://www.miamiherald.com/video/index.html?media_id=2339079).

could not provide as much of an on-the-ground connection to reporters and photographers who document this coverage. The reason: The Cuban government rarely grants Miami Herald correspondents visas required for journalists to gather news there. But we go anyway—getting our people there in various ways—because, in journalistic terms, this is *our* story. What happens there affects us in Miami, and so, as we explained that evening, we continue to cover this story as aggressively and thoroughly as any other one that is important to our community.

At this event, our panelists included the Herald's World Editor John Yearwood, Director of Photography Luis Rios, and Cuba correspondent Frances Robles, who has perhaps the most difficult job in the newsroom: covering a foreign country from Miami and for an audience of readers who have a strong personal connection to the story. I moderated, as questions flew our way. "How hard is it to talk to people there?" "What happens if the government catches your correspondent?" "How do they get the information out once your reporter gets in?" "What changes have you seen since the Miami Herald's last visit?" "When will you go back?"

## What We Are Learning

The idea for the public campaign "Why We Do What We Do" was born out of turmoil, as a way to try to help boost morale in the newsroom and engage the public. Many people at the Herald were involved in bringing it to life—including top editors and community event organizers and, of course, the reporters and photographers who reluctantly agreed to put themselves in the spotlight.

These two public forums have been successful, attracting together more than 300 people. Perhaps the most telling measure of success has come from a question raised by audience members at both gatherings: "When is the next one?" We plan on having more of these community gatherings. They've served not only to enlighten the public but us, too.


While it is perhaps true that newspapers will give way, in time, to a new medium that will rely on fewer professionals to carry out the work, as this transition happens it is critical that journalists find ways to share with the public more about what they do as a way of explaining its value to them. Though I know there will be many more very long days for those of us fortunate enough to still have newsroom jobs, these forums have given me renewed energy. No longer do I enter the newsroom believing that readers have tuned us out. Perhaps it is we who have tuned them out by creating too great a distance between them and us. Whether we use words, pictures, new technology or public forums, what is clear is that connecting to readers is now a matter of survival. Now I feel more confident that we can regain what we've lost, one story at a time.

At The Miami Herald building these days, it is uncomfortably cold in a city known for its warmth. Our old thermostat in our even older building can't seem to be set high enough these days to replace the heat that came from all the bodies that used to sit at now empty desks. With another blast of internal cold air due to sweep through the newsroom at some point in January, just how many more will be forced to leave is not yet known. Maybe a handful. Maybe more. Even one seems too many.


Among those who do stay will be those who contend with what I have come to call the "why bother factor." Why bother working sometimes—many times—14-hour days for a job that seems to be increasingly maligned and fading away? Why bother trying to hold together a newsroom that appears to be dying a slow and painful death? Why pursue that next story?

As I write this piece, more Haitian

THE MIAMI HERALD PRESENTS




**WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO:  
CUBA BENEATH A  
50-YEAR-OLD CLOAK**



From the day Fidel Castro took power to the ailment-induced handover to his brother Raul, The Miami Herald has covered Cuba's complex and emotional issues. Come hear editors and reporters discuss their experiences on one of the newspaper's most important beats.

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children have died as a result of a school collapse from apparent shoddy construction, and more Cubans in central Cuba are now homeless due to a late-season category-3 hurricane with a peaceful name—Paloma (Dove). Our correspondents are there.

I'm hoping I make it through the next round of layoffs. And if I do, I want to remember the answer we've asked the public to help us arrive at to the question many of us seem to be asking: "Why do we do what we do?" We do it because it matters. ■

*Nancy San Martin, a 2006 Nieman Fellow, is assistant world editor/Americas at The Miami Herald.*

## Suggest a Topic—And Content Flows to It

‘... content becomes a roaring campfire that gathers around it a thoughtful and engaged group of people.’

BY JOHN A. BYRNE

I learned about the death of the American newspaper early in my life. I was all of 16, a gawky office boy at The Morning Call in Paterson, New Jersey, when I was caught inside the obituary of an institution: The daily that I had carried on my back as a newspaper boy, the paper where my ambition to be a journalist was born, was being closed. I remember that day in December 1969 as if it were yesterday. Teary-eyed, I walked through the sea of wooden desks and metal filing cabinets and into the chilly night. It was an awakening to see the reporters openly crying and consoling each other.

Newspapers die hard—and the obituaries over the next few years are likely to make us think of massive casualties in a war. Strip out the classified business, and you’ll find that magazines face many of the same problems as newspapers: ever rising paper (and for us even worse postage) costs, the swift migration of advertising from print to Web, the inability of online revenues to offset the decline of print ads, and often declining readership. Yet as bad as the newspaper business has fared to date, some observers say magazines are even further behind the transition.

A recent study by the Bivings Group shockingly discovered that a survey of 50 top magazines were behind newspapers in deploying Web 2.0 technology.<sup>1</sup> Whether it’s blogs, video, RSS feeds, or reader comments on stories, magazines trail newspapers in their adoption. “Newspapers fared better than magazines in nearly every category in 2007,” according to the

study by Bivings, a consulting firm based in Washington, D.C.. “In general, we have found that magazines are slower at adopting Web 2.0 trends than newspapers.”

As the editor in chief of BusinessWeek’s online operations and the now much older kid who walked through a newspaper closing, I’m both perplexed and shocked by the magazine industry’s laggard status. We have every advantage in largely serving existing communities of readers in specific niches, from cooking and wine to sports and entertainment. Of course, I’m fortunate to work at a place that gets it—with 28 staff-written blogs, nearly 5,000 videos, plenty of RSS feeds, and a lively comment section where tens of thousands of readers weigh in with their views every month. It’s why our site now boasts double the readership of our weekly magazine: more than 10 million unique visitors monthly vs. a 4.7 million audience in print.

When we talk about other new ways to compete, most magazines don’t seem to know where to start. Aggregation? Forget it. Few editors want to link to other stories that send people away from their own sites. Curation? Writers don’t “curate” journalism or discussions. They report and file stories and move on. Verticals? Editors want content that appeals to the broadest swath of people and gets massive traffic. User generated content? Most editors still turn up their collective noses at stuff created by their audience. Computer algorithms that replace news judgment for the prominence you give a story? You’ve got to be kidding. And Twitter? What’s that?

As BusinessWeek has morphed from a brand that produces a weekly magazine to one that is pretty much a 24/7 multiplatform organization, the truths of our business have changed as well. Here’s what they are:

- Context is as important today as content. It may, in fact, be the new king on the throne. That’s because the world is evolving into niche communities, organized around individual interests and passions. Keeping your audience deeply engaged in the journalism you do is necessary to induce loyalty to your brand.
- We live in a world in which there are far too many stories chasing far too few eyeballs. What readers need in this environment is often help in organizing, sorting and sifting through all the articles.
- Consumers prefer multiple sources of news and consult 16 to 18 media brands a week. That’s according to a McKinsey & Company study.
- Creating more journalism isn’t necessarily the way you win online. It’s costly, and the gains in audience from putting up more stories are by and large incremental.
- The smart and elegant organization of content through links and editorial curation has as much, if not more, value than simply publishing more of your own articles on the Web.

### Responding to What We Know

How to best take advantage of these trends? In early September,

<sup>1</sup> The September 2007 study, “Analyzing the Websites of American Magazines,” can be read at [www.bivingsreport.com/2007/analyzing-the-websites-of-american-magazines/](http://www.bivingsreport.com/2007/analyzing-the-websites-of-american-magazines/).



we launched one of the most ambitious efforts ever to both stretch the BusinessWeek brand and to reinvent ourselves. We call it the Business Exchange. It allows our readers to create and organize around their own topics of interest, from active investors to youth advertising. The moment a topic is created by any user at [bx.businessweek.com](http://bx.businessweek.com), a Web page pops up with links to stories and blog posts on that subject from all over the Web. No preference is given to BusinessWeek editorials. A story by one of our journalists is treated no differently than one from Forbes, Fortune, or The Economist or, for that matter, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, or The Washington Post. A blog post by a BusinessWeek blogger, moreover, gets the same treatment as one from Henry Blodget at Silicon Alley Insider or John Battelle at Federated Media.

The “front page” or “cover” of each of these topic sites is not determined by an editor but by the community of readers. Whenever a user adds, reads, saves, shares or comments on a story or blog post, that activity is noted by a software algorithm that then places the content on what is essentially the front page. That way, only stories and blogs deemed the most active or useful are shown to the reader, who benefits from the wisdom of the crowd.

All the members of each topic community are recognized—by photo, profile and their contributions to the network. Indeed, if you admire a member of your community, you can peer over his shoulder to see what stories he is reading, saving, adding or commenting on—if he chooses to keep that activity public.

Our reporters and editors do not report, write and edit for the Exchange. But they do help to curate the content, adding relevant stories, blog posts, white papers, academic reports, and other reference materials to each topic. If you cover the stock market and an important story breaks on the New York Stock Exchange, you’re expected to immediately search the Web for the best coverage and add it to our topic on Wall Street. A journalist might

pose a question or make a comment to help fuel a conversation on the latest news and analysis rather than pick up the phone and start calling his or her sources.

Of course, this is no replacement for original explanatory journalism that remains at the core of what we do at BusinessWeek. It follows the dictum by Jeff Jarvis, the CUNY journalism professor and blogger, who advises media to “Do what you do best. Link to the rest.” In a world where time-constrained professionals are trying to keep up with an overabundance of information in their specific fields, the Exchange serves a highly valuable purpose. No less important, it connects like-minded people from every corner of the world in an online community that enriches the journalism at the center.

In this way, content becomes a roaring campfire that gathers around it a thoughtful and engaged group of people. It’s still at the center of the party, sparking compelling insights, opinions and storytelling that make journalism more memorable and meaningful than ever. But the conversation has become as important as the journalism. In other words, the context of journalism has become as important as the content. That’s because the Web is not merely a new distribution platform for information. It entirely changed the game. In this new game, journalism ceases to be a product, like a table that is handed down to an audience. Instead, journalism becomes a process that fully engages its readers—in the beginning, by asking them for story ideas; in the middle, by asking for the community’s help in reporting a story and, in the end, when the published story sparks the larger conversation among readers and journalists who greatly expand on the story.

It’s ceding a level of control and much more influence to your audience and benefiting from giving up total control. The outcome, I believe, is deeper and more meaningful en-

agement with your readers who also become sources who can enrich and improve journalism. This engagement, in turn, leads to new ideas, such as the Business Exchange, where a news organization lets the community tell us what topics it wants us to gather content and expertise around.

Little more than six weeks after our public launch, the Exchange already had a broad and fascinating array of more than 600 topics and thousands of registered users. The imagination shown by our users in creating unusual topics exceeds our wildest expectations. There’s “Conscious Capitalism,” “Bailout,” “Recession Job Search,” “Genetic Testing,” and “Sarbanes-Oxley Compliance.”

In the 18 months during which we were developing and building the Exchange, we called it “the microvertical.” And that’s exactly what it has turned out to be—a series of microcommunities around very vertical topics. Consider the number and variety of “green” topics: “Green Building,” “Green Cars,” “Green Computing,” “Green Investing,” “Green Technology,” and “Green Travel.” And then there’s “Renewable Energy,” “Solar Energy,” “Wind Energy,” “Hybrid Cars,” and “Biofuels.”

## Running Into the Future

Recently I experienced a flashback to that day when I walked out of the Morning Call newsroom with friends 40 years ago. I was in a classroom with some of the smartest people in digital media at the New Business Models

for News Summit at CUNY's Graduate School of Journalism. It was yet another conference dealing with the analog-to-digital transition of journalism, and our group was devoted to the scary subject of "newsroom efficiencies." Our case study? The Philadelphia Enquirer (a make-believe newspaper) had just folded, and we were charged with coming up with a replacement product. The group solution: Do away with print altogether and create an online site with 35 editorial employees to replace a daily newspaper with an edit staff of 200. All of the 20 "content creators" on our staff would have to take photographs, shoot, edit and produce video, do audio overdubs and on-camera video stand-ups, as well as report and write. Based on traffic and revenue projections, the group figured it could afford an editorial budget of \$2.1 million. That translated into an

average salary of just \$60,000 a year for a "content creator," and at least one person in the room argued that salary was too much.

This new Enquirer replacement, incidentally, would heavily rely on citizen journalism and pay-per-click freelancers. There would be no global or national news, sports or entertainment, but rather a linking strategy to third-party content to cover those important subjects. The "content creators" would focus largely on local politics, education, sports and human-interest stories.

The Philadelphia solution is an outcome I never want to see—not anywhere. A strong and vibrant fourth estate is not only essential to a fully functioning democracy but to the efficiency of a society. But the only way we can change that outcome is to embrace and champion change and

innovation in our profession. We need to recognize that this is one of the most creative of times in journalism and, along with that wave of change, one of the most terrifying transitions for many media brands. This period has the opportunity to be our Renaissance. We need to reinvent and transform journalism—and the business model that supports it—to secure a successful future.

For a traditional media company, the Exchange is a revolutionary departure, one of many we and other magazines need to make to succeed in a new and different world. I know one thing: I never again want to be a part of another media obituary. ■

*John A. Byrne is the executive editor of BusinessWeek and editor in chief of BusinessWeek.com.*

## Creating a New Platform to Support Reporting

'My sole and motivating mission is to figure out how reporting can thrive as we witness the death of the institutional model that traditionally supported it.'

BY DAVID COHN

In the midst of my work building Spot.U.S., a nonprofit project to pioneer a platform for community-funded reporting, I often imagine what my career would have been like had I been born a few decades and years earlier.

At this point 40 years ago, I would be a 26-year-old midlevel reporter, finally graduated from my cub police beat. I'd still be an eager overachiever, probably trying to get that next scoop in the hope that it would earn me recognition from my editor and perhaps someday the prestige of an award. If clichés held true, I'd wear a fedora hat and call my friends "buddy" or "mack." At night I'd probably drink too much, but every morning I'd walk into an office with dozens of other reporters running around, shuffling papers, making phone calls, all in the service

of filling tomorrow's news hole.

As luck (yes, luck) would have it, my career is blossoming in a time of uncertainty. I never had the stability of that office job, but I have had the opportunity to define my own career path. The opportunities that abound in the wild west of the Web, still an open space to be tamed, have allowed me to be my own boss. And I believe journalists 40 years from now—yes, there will be journalism then—will experience to an even greater degree circumstances similar to mine. I'm lucky to be part of this first pioneering batch of independent reporters as we figure out the tools and platforms that we need to develop to ensure journalism thrives in the future.

Striking gold in our digital age will happen for those who create platforms upon which acts of journalism can be

performed. While YouTube and WordPress have blazed large trails creating such platforms, there are plenty of unexplored side trails that could lead to much larger areas where journalists could make their mark.

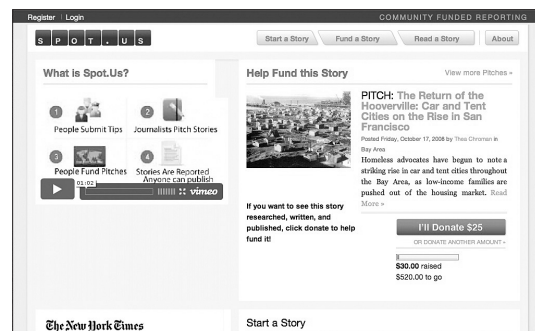
Right now, journalists are fleeing newsrooms—either being pushed out through buyouts or choosing to strike out in new directions—and by doing so creating a diaspora, of sorts, as they search for a new home. The question is whether a viable platform can be found to offer at least a modicum of job security so journalists can get back on track doing what they believe in—keeping the public well informed.

For me, trying to meet this goal means working on Spot.U.S. (www.spot.us). In the late spring of 2008, I received a \$340,000 grant from the Knight News Challenge to test the

## How Spot.U.s Works

Spot.U.s accepts microdonations that are put toward a journalist's proposal for an investigation. Progress toward reaching the goal is charted on the Web site. This means that an individual's donation goes only to the targeted project that spurred the donation. Rules exist to govern the percentage of funding that can be donated by individuals as a way of protecting against advocates becoming the primary funders of any specific enterprise reporting

project. The finished content is licensed under a Creative Commons license, and Spot.U.s will try to get it published in as many places as possible. If any news organization wants exclusive rights to the story, it will need to refund a percentage of the original donations, so the original supporters will get their money back to invest in a new story. ■—D.C.



idea of what I call “community-funded reporting.” To do this, I am working on building a platform that allows freelance journalists to pitch their reporting ideas directly to the public, and in doing so create tools that an individual journalist can use to shape his or her own career in reporting.

The idea for Spot.U.s stems from my work in citizen journalism but can also be attributed to an “aha” moment I had while being a research assistant on the book, “Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business,” written by Jeff Howe. [See Howe’s article on page 47.] When I was working on background research for his chapter on crowdfunding, I learned about Web-based microphilanthropy sites, such as Kiva, DonorsChoose, and others, which have been incredibly successful in targeting contributions to specific projects in their respective fields.

In October, the 1.0 version of Spot.U.s went live. In reaching that point, I spent many hours working with lawyers on the terms of service agreements; I also acted as a project manager between those involved in design and those in development. The payment gateway I constructed had to meet my hosting requirements and build an audience around the concept of community-funded reporting. Even though these tasks—along with the vast majority of the myriad of my other start-up duties—don’t come close to resembling shoe-leather reporting, I never lose

the sense of myself as a journalist. The reason: My sole and motivating mission is to figure out how reporting can thrive as we witness the death of the institutional model that traditionally supported it.

Essential to understand, however, is that Spot.U.s is not a news organization. Nor am I an editor. Spot.U.s is a platform and, along with others who have worked with me on this project, I am its creator. What it will be is a collaborative marketplace that favors public participation in the process of producing journalism.

Until its October launch, by using just a wiki and a blog, Spot.U.s managed to fund three journalists’ investigative reporting projects in the San Francisco Bay Area, the city where our initial effort is taking place. The most successful of these projects was a series of articles that fact-checked political advertising for the November San Francisco election. To support this reporting, 74 people contributed an average of \$33, and the total came to \$2,500—which was the target amount this reporter needed to do this work.

To build Spot.U.s, we’ve used an iterative approach, taking what has worked well in each step along the way and adapting it to the next level based on feedback we receive and the exchanges we observe. In doing this, we look for the path of least resistance, test our ideas, then make the solution a stable element of our

design. Our 1.0 version, for example, was informed by the wiki, which demonstrated moderate success. At first, the 1.0 site, while stable, will be bare, but in time new features will be added to suit the marketplace. This approach relies on constant growth that exists as a response to user feedback. And it is this feedback that informs and fuels our iterative process, constantly seeking the path of least resistance and stabilizing new elements. Rinse and repeat, as long as we can. If Spot.U.s is never “finished,” then I’ll know it’s a complete success.

There are many obstacles in our way, and I don’t ever try to sell Spot.U.s as being a silver bullet. There is no such thing. But Spot.U.s should give us a way to find out whether people are willing to put a direct monetary value on what journalism provides. In some respect, our pitch to potential donors is as simple as this: “Upset that your local news organization isn’t covering an issue you’re passionate about? Donate \$25 to a reporter who will!”

By tracking what happens on Spot.U.s, we might find apathy among the public in their willingness to shrug off any contribution, choosing to wait for “free” reporting, the kind supported by advertisements, donated by citizen journalists, or perhaps paid for by a nonprofit organization. If Spot.U.s reveals this, I will feel that we, at least, will have learned what the marketplace will—and will not—support. If this enterprise fails, then it might

be possible to conclude that direct microphilanthropy is not among the feasible options for enabling journalists to keep doing their work. But it would be a great disservice to journalism to at least not try to find out whether the public is willing to support this approach.

While Spot.Us might not hold these answers, I am confident it will assist in our search for new ways to enable journalism to thrive. With the old

strategy of relying on advertising and classifieds vanishing, I am relieved that most news organizations are exploring this new territory. As one avenue of exploration, I invite them to join with Spot.Us as we try to expand community-funded reporting beyond the San Francisco Bay Area into other regions of the country. ■

*David Cohn is editor in chief at BrooWaha, a citizen journalism*

*network, and has written for Wired, Seed, Columbia Journalism Review, and The New York Times. He served as editor of NewAssignment.Net, focused on citizen journalism and news organizations' exploration of the social Web, and worked on organizing the first Networked Journalism Summit to bring together the best practices of collaborative journalism.*

## A 21st Century Newswire—Curating the Web With Links

News organizations can remain vital daily destinations by supplementing original reporting with links to the best nonlocal content.

BY JOSH KORR

Journalists may feel unmoored these days, but it's not because they've lost their compass. True north will always be an independent press exercising its First Amendment right to inform and entertain fellow citizens, to investigate the powerful, and to provide a forum and voice for the community. The problem is that many newsrooms are using an outdated map, one that doesn't show the modern news ecosystem's infrastructure: the link.

The news media's future is online, and the Web's foundation is the link. The Web is literally a collection of linked pages—and, by extension, of linked people and knowledge. But news organizations have traditionally treated their Web sites as just another place to republish print stories, rather than as nodes in the larger Web media network. They didn't see the value they could create for readers by connecting them to other sources and curating the Web's flood of information.

This mindset is changing as the digital transition accelerates. Most news organizations have staff blogs that link to news and sources on

other sites, and a smaller number are experimenting with dedicated pages of curated links to interesting and important content elsewhere on the Web. But there hasn't been an easy way for news organizations to find and publish links even if they wanted to. What's needed is a way for journalists to easily discover links to relevant content and for newsrooms to integrate links into their editorial workflow.

I've been working on a way of incorporating links into the everyday practice of journalism: It's a wire service based on links rather than licensed content, which would enable newsrooms to develop a new practice of "link journalism."

The Web provides instant access to nearly every credible print publication in the world, not to mention thousands of blogs and Web sites written by experts, academics and journalists. Yet most news organizations' nonlocal coverage draws heavily from a small number of wire services, chiefly The Associated Press.

Basic wire coverage still plays an essential role—the AP is usually the

first to report on major stories, particularly in out-of-the-way places. But it has also contributed to the spread of what, in my work as a wire editor, I came to think of as the AP's house style: voiceless, incrementally updated, process-oriented, one sentence of "news" stretched to 12 paragraphs. Such stories aren't always engaging or interesting, nor are they effective in providing understanding. Without context, they can induce news overload. [See story by Jim Kennedy, director of strategic planning at AP, about the AP's new approach to news reporting on page 68.]

Meanwhile, for any given news story, the more interesting and informative takes often come from sources other than the traditional newswires. On any given day, these days, the stuff that actually makes people smile is found not in newspapers or wire stories, but in viral videos and pop culture blogs. The longer newsrooms ignore the Web's amazing universe of content, the less relevant they become for readers. The longer wire services fail to help newsrooms find this content, the less useful they will be.

But no one entity—be it a wire service or a news organization—can possibly track what’s appearing in all papers, large and small, blogs, magazines and Web sites. Nor could any one news organization acquire the rights to all of this material. The great thing about the Web is that you don’t have to pay anyone to help you bring great stories to readers—just link to ones already there.

Finding all of the good stuff is the challenge, so that’s the real mission of a Web-era wire service. It’s not to provide full-text versions of a handful of sources’ news, but to offer links to the best stuff culled from all sources.

## Curating the Web

My online link-based newswire—called The Wire<sup>1</sup>—is created by using a free Web application called Publish2. Every day I go through a packed RSS reader and save links on all manner of topics from all kinds of sources. Just as newspaper wire editors apply editorial judgment when they select stories off the wires, I apply judgment when selecting links for The Wire. My goal is to provide a thorough, engaging wire for news organizations that want to start moving beyond the AP or are forced to do so for budgetary reasons. Any news organization can publish a feed of links from The Wire on its site or set up a Publish2 account to curate its own links, drawing from The Wire as a starting point.

My experiment is fine for a start, but it’s nothing compared to the potential of a wire service seeded by links from thousands of journalists using their editorial judgment to collaboratively filter and curate the Web.

How would such a collaboration work? It starts in four ways.

1. Journalists save links to interesting

stories in the course of everyday reading and publish those links on their news organization’s site or on a personal blog—effectively acting as link bloggers recommending good stuff to read.

2. Journalists save links—to related stories, documents, interviews—in the course of their reporting, privately first, and then publish the links along with their articles.
3. Journalists link stories specifically for a newswire—either the aggregate newswire or a smaller one based on a Publish2 newsgroup. (Newsgroups are a way for newsrooms to collaborate on creating news aggregation features based on links.)
4. News organizations and freelancers add their own work to the link newswire—not for the sake of flooding the network with self-promoted material, but because they believe their work might interest other

journalists and readers.

Next, this collection of links begins to act as a recommendation service for other journalists. Editors could then start their searches by viewing the most-linked stories for that day and seeing the wisdom of newsrooms that has bubbled to the top. Because the link effort is distributed—whether across or within newsrooms—and saving links is a simple and quick process, linking can fit smoothly into journalists’ daily routines.

This kind of link wire service is useful mostly for nonlocal coverage, but it also offers lessons for newsrooms’ local reporting.<sup>2</sup> For example, just as newsrooms should link to the best explainers of complex stories, such as the financial crisis, routine city council stories should link to explanations of terms like “zoning” that readers might not understand. Linking to source

<sup>1</sup> [www.publish2.com/newsgroups/the-wire](http://www.publish2.com/newsgroups/the-wire)

<sup>2</sup> In our Summer 2008 issue, two articles were about link journalism at the Knoxville News Sentinel on Super Tuesday. Scott Karp, CEO of Publish2, wrote “Linking Newspaper Readers to the Best Political Coverage,” and Jack Lail, managing editor/multimedia at the News Sentinel, wrote “Election Coverage Becomes a Time for ‘Instant Innovation.’” They are at [www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports.aspx?id=100006](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports.aspx?id=100006).

material strengthens local stories by making them more transparent. And newsrooms that link to local bloggers can help their communities find the best of the local blogosphere and get some links sent back in return.

Linking should not be seen as a replacement for original reporting. Indeed, without original reporting there would be nothing to link to. At the same time, links are the way that great reporting gets distributed

and noticed on the Web. And by combining this reporting with links to interesting nonlocal stories, news organizations can remain vital daily news destinations.

Just imagine this scenario: Re-engaged readers flock to news sites. A bigger audience develops for news organizations' original reporting as thousands of networked newsrooms link to one another. Greater transparency fosters a renewed sense of

trust in journalism. And a new business model emerges, in which a link newswire creates a new marketplace for news that advertisers could tap into—transforming the newswire from a cost center into a profit center.

That's a future worth linking for. ■

*Josh Korr is editor of The Wire, an online link journalism project that has been developed through Publish2.*

## No Time Left for Reluctant Transformers

'Digitally based consumption by a fragmented audience requires new and sophisticated distribution mechanics ... smartly connect[ing] consumers to available, relevant content in virtually unlimited ways.'

BY JIM KENNEDY

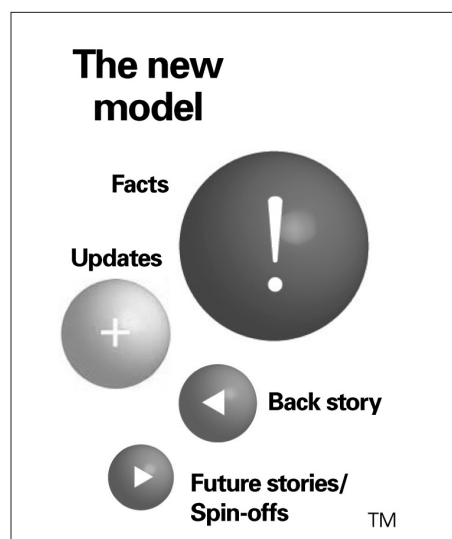
Just a couple of years ago, despite the clear digital direction of news consumption, it was still pretty hard to engage in a serious discussion of business model change in most news media companies. Sure, the world was in transition, but there was still time to adapt, or so it seemed.

That time is now officially, and undeniably, up.

All of the trends that news providers have been analyzing since the dawn of the decade are now in full swing. Consumption of news is generally occurring first on digital platforms, and most of the audience is connecting intermittently through multiple points of entry rather than making regular appointments with traditional news packages such as newspapers, broadcasts or bookmarked news Web sites.

But many media companies remain in a state of reluctant transformation, stuck between the demands of the old and new worlds, mainly because the business model for news distribution has not evolved as fast as consumption has shifted.

Companies are still relying on their edited packages to drive their businesses, and they really have no



other choice. Even as revenues decline, the packages still manage to deliver more revenue, if not audience, than unproven alternatives that allow content components—stories, photos, video clips—to float freely through the channels of search, widgets and mobile applications.

The fledgling revenue models supporting the new distribution of digitized content are not yet strong enough to fund the newsgathering the old models nurtured and expanded

through the 20th century. The dollars for subscription and advertising revenue are different in the new digital world of the 21st century—and lower by an order of magnitude.

The critical question facing the business is whether we can innovate our way through this rough transition in the business model. Can we carry innovation beyond content and technology to the less familiar territory of reimagining the business itself?

Every news company is grappling with a version of the same problem. For newspapers, it's a question of rightsizing to something smaller, or committing to a digital shift that portends big changes in news coverage, packaging and distribution across print and digital channels. For broadcasters, it's all about expanding into new channels without expanding the heavy costs of video newsgathering and production. Even native digital companies face the challenge of figuring out how to distribute content profitably beyond the boundaries of their destination Web sites.

For a news agency like the AP, which serves other media companies, the challenge is to imagine a new model that enables its clients to suc-

ceed across platforms without creating new conflicts among competing publishers, broadcasters and digital distributors. And it must be done at a lower cost to those clients because overall revenue for the news business is compressing.

## Consuming the News

There are no easy answers to any of these questions, and a weak economy compounds the difficulty. But at AP we continue to focus on the fundamental change in news consumption patterns and what that means for both content creation and distribution. In the past year, with the help of a team of professional anthropologists, we studied the behavior of young-adult news consumers in six cities around the world and drew important conclusions about how to reconstruct our news model to fit the new cultural reality of cross-platform, opportunistic consumption of news.

Strip away the research jargon, and what that means is that young people around the world today are more likely to connect to the latest news through e-mail, search or text messaging than through old media channels.

Of course, that was something we very much expected to see. But through the intense interview process that distinguishes anthropology from simple surveying, we also heard something from the subjects we didn't expect to learn: They were mostly unsatisfied with their news experiences.

Despite the convenience of always-on access, the subjects said they were overdosing on short snippets of facts and updates and longed to explore the news in more breadth and depth. They wanted more of the back and future stories associated with the daily stream of headline-driven news. And that was the case across geography—cities in the United States, Britain and India—and across news category. No matter if the topic was war, natural disaster or entertainment, the consumers in our study wanted to know more, and they seemed willing to go get it, if only they knew where to find it.

Whether or not the journalism

market is actually shorting breadth and depth in favor of breaking news is a question that could spark a spirited debate in any newsroom around the world, but the essential point should not be missed. That is, whether or not we're producing it, people aren't readily finding it in the opportunistic patterns of consumption they've adopted.

In today's news environment, technology unwraps the tidy packages that news providers produce. News gets split apart into atomic pieces for today's digital consumption—headlines, 25-word summaries, stand-alone photos, podcasts and video clips—all of which can be easily e-mailed, searched and shared outside of their original packaging.

## Refitting the News

The model that emerged from our anthropology study helped to frame the task ahead by splitting the news into its fundamental "atomic" pieces of Facts, Updates, Back Story, and Future Story. That sets up a mission to create and connect the essential parts of a next-generation news report, much as the old "inverted pyramid" established a framework for newspaper writing.

The inverted pyramid conditioned writers to organize the information in their stories from most important to least important. It drove the journalism and the business of the AP news cooperative for more than a century and a half, as the news was packaged day in and day out for space-efficient display in newspapers.

The model even worked for new media as they came along through the decades. AP created services based on newspaper stories to supply news for radio, television and eventually the Internet and mobile platforms. But newspaper stories, packaged as a snapshot in time, struggle to connect with an audience that is being conditioned to aggregate and manipulate unpackaged information on their own.

For AP, these trends delivered a clear directive to adjust the newspaper-story-first mentality. A shift to fastest-formats-first had already been made at the agency well before our consumer

study. That shift has now accelerated with key new initiatives to enhance the differentiation of services to match platform and market needs.

Chief among those initiatives is a fundamental new process for news-gathering in the field called "1-2-3 filing." The name describes a new editorial workflow that requires the first words of a text story to be delivered in a structured alert (headline format) to be followed by a short, present-tense story delivering the vital details in step two. Then, in a final step, a story takes whatever form is appropriate for different platforms and audiences—a longer form story or analysis for print, for example. Other media types are coordinated along the way in similar fashion.

Another major initiative at AP responds to the need for more variety in the news. Major new content development projects have been launched in entertainment, sports and financial news to create more entry points for consumers with appetites for broader, deeper content in those categories.

Across the gamut of AP's reporting, we are pursuing stories with impact and writing in a lively and authoritative style that has both raised our profile and caused some traditionalists to wonder where the old wire service went. Despite the stir in some journalism circles, there's no reason to mourn the loss of stodginess, real or perceived. AP's origins may trace back to transcribing the shipping news, but its future lies in engaging the audience with more than just the facts, as our new model suggests.

Content initiatives alone, however, can't get the job done. Digitally based consumption by a fragmented audience requires new and sophisticated distribution mechanics, meaning an infrastructure that can smartly connect consumers to available, relevant content in virtually unlimited ways. The key to making that happen is to make content more linkable and discoverable. For that, you need a system for tagging news content with codes for categories and names (famous people, places and things) that computers can easily read to deliver content at

a user's command.

The AP has created such a system and is using it to power a comprehensive news service, called the Mobile News Network, for the Apple iPhone and other smartphones. In the future, we hope the AP "metadata" tags will help surface more relevant and timely news content through search engines.

Still to come, to complete the business model shift, are the revenue streams that will drive the new distribution of smart content. For the Mobile News Network, national and

local advertising is being pursued to support display of headlines, stories, images and video clips on the phones. Constituent newspaper members of the AP are joining the network to build the scope and scale that new digital businesses will require to succeed.

As Google's advertising model has proven so definitively, a business built on clicks requires a network of massive numbers, not just a single Web site. While the old packaged media models may have enjoyed bigger returns on smaller bases, they dealt in scarcity, not ubiquity.

When information is available any time, any place, as it will be for generations of news consumers to come, models must be constructed to connect huge numbers of people with personalized bits of information. Those models will be driven by the aggregation of content, advertising and audience on a very large scale—perhaps not all in one place, but virtually all connected. ■

*Jim Kennedy is the vice president and director of strategic planning for The Associated Press.*

## Blogging From Inside a TV Station's Newsroom

'Comments on the blog began generating tips that turned into leads for on-air reporting, and the blog became a tool for promoting and teasing stories we planned to air or publish later that day.'

BY KATIE ALLISON GRANJU

In 2006, as a producer with the top-rated TV news affiliate in Knoxville, Tennessee, I frequently found myself holding onto bits of information, news tips, commentary from the local blogosphere, and peculiarly fascinating local stories and photos—items that didn't fit neatly into our on-air or online news coverage. To many in the newsroom, this was the throwaway chaff of the newsgathering process. But I'd been keeping a personal blog for several years and was active in East Tennessee's surprisingly rich and diverse blogging community, so I knew without a doubt where this kind of material would fit best: in a blog.

However, at that time, the idea of a blog coming directly from someone working in the newsroom was an unpopular one around our office water cooler. Blogs, I was advised, were flighty, rabble-rousing fluff, not to be mixed up in any way with the serious journalism we were practicing within the inner sanctum. A newsroom blog

would simply confuse viewers/readers and water-down our brand. Discouraged, I dropped the idea.

Then, however, in early 2007, I ran across a blogger working from within a television newsroom in another area of the state, doing exactly what I had envisioned, and drawing a large and highly participatory readership. Her name was Brittney Gilbert, and she was the brain, as well as the face, behind the cutting-edge blog "Nashville Is Talking" (NIT) hosted by WKRN-TV.<sup>1</sup>

Gilbert was the first blogger ever hired by a local news station specifically for the purpose of blogging, and she plied her trade right out in the middle of the newsroom. Working as a sort

of human aggregator, she injected her singular voice and sensibilities into multiple posts throughout each day, most of which pointed her readers to the smartest content from the many dozens of Tennessee-based blogs from which she drew her material. Gilbert acted as sort of a salon hostess, guiding and shaping but never overwhelming

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying the 'knoxnews.com' blog page. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, News, Sports, Business, Blogs/Opinion, Entertainment, Life, Video, Obituaries, JOBS, Cars, Real Estate, and Classified. Below this is a banner for 'Rhodes Real Estate' with the text 'For Open House Times Visit www.rhodescommunities.net'. The main content area is titled 'knoxnews.com blogs' and features a search bar. The primary article is titled 'Because I said so' by Katie Allison Granju, dated October 31, 2008 at 7:35 AM. The article discusses a 'Bonnaroo won a big environmental award' and 'How I plan to vote on the charter amendments'. To the right of the article is an advertisement for 'Reach higher ground.' with the text 'GATLINBURG' and 'Log onto Gatlinburg.com'. At the bottom right, there's another advertisement for 'Online Degrees' from 'www.bestmg.com'.

<sup>1</sup> <http://nashvilleistalking.com/>



the conversation that evolved on her blog through links, comments and, eventually, face-to-face local blogger meet-ups.

WKRN also had Gilbert appear on-air on a regular basis to discuss what Nashvillians were talking about online that day. Just as the station's evening news anchors and morning show hosts became the faces for their on-air content, Gilbert became the face for the station's online content. It was a forward-thinking and savvy strategy that paid off with growing blog traffic, as well as national recognition from journalism pundits. Today Gilbert has taken her newsroom blogging expertise to a much larger market, KPIX in San Francisco. But many credit Gilbert with bringing to life the strongly connected network of local bloggers that grew up around NiT and that still exists in the Nashville market today.

After I became a daily reader of NiT, Gilbert graciously allowed me to pick her brain, and she encouraged me to start my own similar enterprise within my station's online brand. Although I still didn't have strong buy-in from newsroom management, they never actually told me I couldn't start a newsroom blog. So I did.

Over one weekend away from the station, I bought the domain KnoxvilleTalks.com, set up a free WordPress template, and started blogging. On Monday, I showed our Web master my handiwork, and he quickly figured out how to link the new domain to the station's, so that any traffic to the blog would be credited to our news department.

For the first month or so, I didn't have so much as a link from our station's Web site directing people to Knoxville Talks, but I doggedly began taking moments here and there throughout my workday in the newsroom to guide blog visitors to the most interesting activity taking place at that hour within our local blogosphere. I developed a comprehensive blogroll, linking out to dozens of area bloggers. And I also linked back to and commented on the most interesting news content on our station's site.

As traffic to Knoxville Talks grew,

my news director became supportive, encouraging me to use some of my work-time to blog. Our managing editor started suggesting and pointing out blog-worthy items as they came into the newsroom. Comments on the blog began generating tips that turned into leads for on-air reporting, and the blog became a tool for promoting and teasing stories we planned to air or publish later that day.

Six months after launching Knoxville Talks, I left the job I loved with the TV station for a wonderful opportunity with E.W. Scripps. By that time, my little side project had generated nearly 350,000 page views for the newsroom, and traffic was building every week, still without any significant promotion beyond a link from the station's homepage. And, most interesting to me, after years of having my writing published everywhere from the local alternative newsweekly to Parenting magazine to The New York Times, for the first time I had the experience of being recognized in public.

### Offering a Distinct Voice

Daily visitors to Knoxville Talks grew to know my online "voice," which they associated with the photo of me on the blog. People began approaching me to introduce themselves when they encountered me out and about. Or when I would tell someone new my name, he or she would respond with, "Oh, you're that Knoxville Talks blogger!" Readers would then often want to discuss what I was covering on the blog, or suggest topics or other blogs I should check out. For a journalist used to working behind the relative anonymity of a byline, it was a revelation.

After leaving the station in August 2008, I started a political blog for a Scripps-owned newspaper, and in its first eight weeks, the blog has already generated close to 200,000 page views for that newsroom. My experience, and the success of a small but growing number of other newsroom bloggers across the country, demonstrates that even as the audience for "old journalism" is shrinking, there is a hunger for

the type of very active, personality-driven, truly local newsroom blogging that characterized Nashville is Talking and Knoxville Talks.

While virtually all local news sites now offer some sort of blog or blogs, few are reaching their full potential in terms of audience or influence. There are several reasons for this. First, successful blogging requires a very specific skill set. Just because anyone in a news organization can blog doesn't mean that just anyone can do it in a way that builds and supports an audience. Clearly, different types of journalists have their own spheres of excellence. For example, the top investigative reporter for the local newspaper likely wouldn't fare very well anchoring the local TV newscast. Top-notch newsroom blogging is no different; it requires specific training, talent and effort. A successful blogger has to really know what she's doing and, just as with on-air talent and the most popular of op-ed columnists, she has to offer a distinct voice and personality. That's what keeps readers coming back.

This leads to the second reason why so many local news organizations continue to drag their feet when it comes to effectively leveraging the power of blogging. Far too many publishers, reporters, editors, anchors and producers still see blogging as some sort of second-class, redheaded stepchild. Bloggers aren't real journalists, so the argument goes, and they certainly don't belong in the newsroom. But as real journalists and journalism professors continue to grapple with what exactly it is they do these days, bloggers are out there just doing it—without the angsty navel-gazing or handwringing. Bloggers certainly can be real journalists, albeit ones who fall into their own category within the profession. The sooner the powers that be accept this new reality, the sooner they can begin reaping the benefits. ■

*Katie Allison Granju is a project manager with the E.W. Scripps entrepreneurial fund. Links to her blogging projects can be found at [www.katieallisongranju.com](http://www.katieallisongranju.com).*

## Live Web Cast—From a Newspaper’s Newsroom

‘We did not want to produce an imitation of local TV news. We wanted to create something far less polished—more like a video blog, short and raw and conversational.’

BY JOHN HASSELL

It was 10:30 a.m. on Thursday, July 31st, when the bombshell dropped. At a standing-room only gathering of The Star-Ledger’s staff, publisher George Arwady stepped onto a riser and said the newspaper, after years of losses, was in deep distress. The largest paper in New Jersey, he said, needed to obtain 200 voluntary buyouts and to renegotiate contracts with two unions. If these conditions were not met by October 1st, the newspaper would be either sold or shut.

As employees headed solemnly back to their desks, one small crew from the newsroom was already wrestling with the implications of the announcement. Just three days earlier, the newspaper had launched a noontime Web cast called “Ledger Live.” Like many of our other digital efforts, it was designed to reach new audiences and—it was fervently hoped—to help the company’s bottom line.

But now?

“Breaking news this morning from The Star-Ledger, about The Star-Ledger,” host Brian Donohue told viewers when the cameras went live an hour later. “The state’s largest newspaper is, and I quote, ‘losing a battle to survive.’” Without embellishment, he laid out the conditions described by the publisher and noted that the news had left “a lot of people walking around here ... pretty stunned.”

### Radical Change

Welcome to newspaper innovation, 2008-style. Faced with steady circulation losses and rapidly deteriorating ad revenue, newsrooms across the country are moving swiftly, if belatedly, to retool and refocus on digital content and delivery. But they are

doing it with an existential question pointed like a gun at their heads: Will it all be enough to halt the slide and save the business?

In some cases, the answer will probably be no. Mark Potts, a consultant and entrepreneur who helped overhaul Philly.com earlier this year,

one station stop in each 24-hour news journey, and increasingly our Web site, nj.com, is a platform not just for the delivery of content but for meaningful engagement with users.

Like many of our peers, we have made these radical changes in practice and culture in a hurry, creating new



Star-Ledger reporter Brian Donohue hosts the newspaper’s Webcast “Ledger Live.” *Photo by John Munson.*

wrote recently of daily newspapers that “sometime in the next few months we’re going to lose one—or it is going to be changed so radically as to be barely recognizable under the current definition of daily newspaper. And given the lemming-like tendencies of the newspaper industry, once one newspaper goes, others will quickly follow.”

The truth, of course, is that the definition of daily newspaper is already barely recognizable, at least in terms of newsroom workflows and relationships with local communities. At The Star-Ledger, nightly print deadlines are just

products and new business models on the run. This revolution has touched every aspect of what we do, but maybe nothing illustrates the pace and extent of change as well as our video efforts—and, specifically, the creation of “Ledger Live” in the days before the reality of the newspaper’s plight became so painfully clear.

### Learning Video Journalism

“The business of newspapers is to go into the community, find stories, and publish them. As newspapers move to the Internet and the Internet concur-

rently moves into video, it is incumbent upon newspapers to begin to embrace video as a means of newsgathering and storytelling.”

Those two sentences were the opening lines of a proposal made to The Star-Ledger in January 2008 by Michael Rosenblum, the firebrand consultant who over the years has helped to create New York Times Television and the NY1 cable news station, among other notable projects. [See story by Rosenblum on page 75.] At The Star-Ledger, Rosenblum hoped to engineer a seismic event, changing the way newspapers think about video—and about news coverage in general.

As it happened, Rosenblum’s ideas meshed perfectly with the goals of editor Jim Willse, who for years had seen opportunities for video in a state without its own network TV news outlet. Bracketed by the New York and Philadelphia markets, New Jerseyans have grown accustomed to seeing local news on television in only the rarest of cases and usually when calamity struck. The idea of filling this void held enormous appeal.

So it was that Rosenblum, dressed as usual in head-to-toe black, arrived with his team in The Star-Ledger newsroom on a pleasant Monday in late May to train 20 people how to tell video stories and, in the process, lay the groundwork for launching a five-minute noon Webcast in a matter of weeks.

The group of trainees included reporters, photographers, editors and a graphic artist. Everyone had volunteered, along with more than 80 other staffers from a newsroom of about 330, and had been selected after shooting a three-minute tryout video. Each arrived equipped with a high-definition Sony video camera and a MacBook Pro laptop loaded with Apple’s Final Cut Pro editing software (at a cost of about \$7,000 per kit, including all accessories).

We spread the training across different departments partly to share the workload, but mainly because we wanted video to become part of who we were as a news organization and how we thought about everything we

did. As Rosenblum noted on more than one occasion, we were aiming to “change the vocabulary of the reporting” to embrace a multimedia, multiplatform approach to local news and information.

Over the course of five long days, fueled by coffee and doughnuts and a lot of enthusiasm, the group learned how to shoot and edit complex video stories. Looking back now, it’s clear we were only just beginning, but it’s still pretty remarkable how good some of those first stories were—and most were shot, narrated and edited by people who had never picked up a video camera before their tryouts.

A big reason for the immediate results, I think, was that the room was filled with journalists who knew already how to tell stories; they merely needed the tools and training to translate those stories to video. But it had a lot to do with Rosenblum’s method, too, and especially his insistence on simple techniques: think before you shoot, decide what you need, shoot only what you need, and for crying out loud don’t move the camera while you’re shooting. Oh yeah, and no stand-ups with blow-dried “talent.” Just good visual stories, shot up close and tightly edited.

Everyone who went through the training left with a responsibility to produce one video story each week. And everyone was given one day each week to do it. To manage all this, we created a couple of important new positions: an assistant managing editor for video and a video enterprise editor, who together coordinated the activities of our 20 new video journalists and edited the work they produced.

Suddenly, our Web site came alive with videos about urban drug addiction, suburban wildlife management, cancer survivors, glass-blowing artists, taxi drivers, and taxidermists. On big news stories, we produced deeper and more timely video coverage than the New York and Philadelphia TV stations. And day after day, right from the start, we offered a steady diet of enterprise stories and news clips that you couldn’t find anywhere else.

We had the goods for a pretty decent

daily show. Now we just had to figure out how to do live TV.

## Going Live

Why live? Why not just record the segments and slap everything together in postproduction? Certainly that would have been the safer route, allowing greater quality control and ensuring more consistent production values—which is really just a nice way of saying we’d be less likely to make fools of ourselves. Why not learn to walk before leaping onto a high wire?

For us, the reasons were pretty basic: We did not want to produce an imitation of local TV news. We wanted to create something far less polished—more like a video blog, short and raw and conversational. If we could edit things after the fact, we figured, we’d probably squeeze the life out of it. There was also the matter of efficiency: A five-minute live show takes five minutes to produce, every time. No postproduction, no do-overs.

The technology was the easy part. Two cameras, three overhead lights, four monitors, a switcher, a graphics deck, a recording deck, a digital encoder, and—voilà!—we had a set in the middle of the newsroom equipped to produce a multicamera live show for the Web. It took practice and dexterity to run it all, of course, but that was nothing compared with the job of figuring out what exactly we wanted the show to be.

Was it a straight news show? That didn’t work, because text headlines are a far more efficient way to catch up with news in a hurry. Was it a variety show? That didn’t seem to play to our strength as the state’s largest newsgathering operation. We settled finally on a hybrid, with a twist: Quick headlines at the top when there was fresh news, a couple of Jersey-centric videos, and a constant effort to involve bloggers, vloggers and podcasters from across the state. The show would be short, original and as interactive as possible.

We played around with a Tele-Prompter, then realized it was killing the sense of spontaneity. We noodled

with slick intro packages, then decided we were getting too fancy. We looked across the room for a central-casting brand of anchor, then picked a veteran beat reporter who wouldn't be caught dead in make-up but had a knack for talking about the day's news in a way that made you feel as if you were sitting on the edge of his desk, chatting.

So with Brian Donohue in the host's chair and two technical wizards, Seth Siditsky and BUMPER DeJesus, running the switcher and producing in-show graphics, we started making two pilots each day, one at noon and another at 5 p.m. We did this for the better part of a month, blowing our original deadline of a July 1 launch because we were determined the whole process should feel like second nature before we started for real.

We made a lot of mistakes and learned from them. We repeatedly switched to the wrong camera between segments and worked on set direction until we got it right. We realized we couldn't expect Brian to remember every detail of a complicated story without a TelePrompTer, so we taped notes with key names and numbers beneath the camera lens. And we learned the hard way that we needed to unplug Brian's desktop phone before going live.

On Monday, July 28th, just nine weeks after the first day of the Rosenblum boot camp, we officially launched "Ledger Live,"<sup>1</sup> believing we were helping to shape, in our own small way, the future of New Jersey's largest news organization. As the cameras started rolling, Brian smiled and delivered his



"Ledger Live" broadcasts from inside The Star-Ledger newsroom. Photo by John Munson.

now-standard greeting: "How ya doin', Jersey. Welcome to the Star-Ledger newsroom."

This was a newsroom that, just three days later, would be wondering if it had a future at all.

The show received some nice early reviews from a wide range of places. Frank Barth-Nilsen of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation called it "perfect for mobile journalism, bringing news back fast from the streets of New Jersey." Ryan Sholin of GateHouse Media said it was "the best newspaper webcast I've seen yet." Others were less kind. Don Day of Lost Remote described our effort this way: "Another newspaper launches another boring webcast."

The reaction to "Ledger Live," though, held far less interest for those of us working on the show than did the life of the Ledger. In the worst-case scenario, the newspaper would be closed, and all of our work would have been for nothing. Even in the best of outcomes, there was a chance we'd lose some or all of the talented people who made the show possible. In the meantime, we had a show to make five days a week.

When the dust settled, The Star-Ledger's owners got the union concessions

they sought and received more than the required number of buyout applications—including, after weeks of painful deliberation, mine. The result was a reduction of newsroom staff in the neighborhood of 40 percent.

The newspaper lived to fight another day, providing a little breathing room to find the innovations that

might secure its future. The existential question had been answered, at least for the moment, allowing the "Ledger Live" team—still intact, somehow—to focus on finding its place in the world.

Can a newspaper turn video into a profitable business model? Can a daily news show made for the Web build audience and compete for advertising dollars with established network and cable TV? How can a show such as "Ledger Live" help change the relationship between the newsroom and the community it serves?

The jury is still out on all of this, but a few things are clear. Newspapers have the talent to do new and innovative things in the digital sphere, and they still have the reporting resources to deliver a depth of coverage that is unmatched in most markets. The future belongs to those who are willing to experiment, to evolve, to fail quickly when they do fail and to move on, even as disaster waits at the door. ■

*John Hassell is the former deputy managing editor/digital for The Star-Ledger of Newark, New Jersey.*

<sup>1</sup> Information about and a connection to "Ledger Live" can be found at [www.nj.com/ledgerlive/](http://www.nj.com/ledgerlive/).

# Video News: The Videojournalist Comes of Age

‘It is now possible for a person working on his or her own to make high-quality, intelligent and, most importantly, very inexpensive television.’

BY MICHAEL ROSENBLUM

In 1988, I was a producer for “Sunday Morning,” the CBS News show with Charles Kuralt. At the age of 30, it was a pretty good job. I made a good salary, and I got to travel the world. It was a prestigious job and a good start to my career in network television.

So I quit.

I quit because I had grown increasingly frustrated with the way that television journalism was made. Everything was incredibly complicated: cameramen, soundmen, vans, equipment, talent, lighting, audio. The simplest bit of video seemed to take forever to shoot. It was like a Hollywood movie doing a scene: endless preparation and an army of workers to manufacture a few seconds on the screen.

I had first been attracted to visual journalism by photography. I had been mesmerized by the images in *Life* and in books by Magnum photographers. When I graduated from Williams College in 1976, I received a grant from The Thomas J. Watson Foundation to spend three years traveling around the world photographing. On my own.

I spent the first year traveling from London to Kathmandu, Nepal, overland, camera in hand. I was able to spend months in Afghan villages or in Isfahan in Iran, really getting to know a place. The photographs reflected a certain sense of intimacy. The second year I moved in with a family in a Palestinian refugee camp, and the third year I crossed Africa overland, taking pictures all along the way.

When I went to work in the TV business, it was incredibly different. We might spend a few hours, at the most, shooting a story. When the crew was working, the clock was running. And it was annoying not to have the camera myself. I began to wonder if

it was not possible to make television journalism the way I had made photojournalism—alone, living the story, just me with my camera in my hand—spending real time with the subjects.

So in 1988, I quit my very nice job at CBS News and headed back to the Gaza Strip with a small, inexpensive camcorder. I moved in with a Palestinian family in the Jabalya Camp and spent a month shooting and talking to them. When I left, I took my tapes to “The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” and sold them two pieces for \$25,000 each.

I had discovered a new way of working in television journalism. Twenty years later, my views have not changed. But the technology has. Today a small, hand-held, high-definition video camera, one that is unquestionably broadcast quality, costs less than \$1,000. Audio equipment, radio microphones, and the like have gotten better and smaller. Editing systems, which used to take up an entire room and cost more than a half million dollars, have been reduced to a piece of software that more often than not comes free with your computer.

What does this mean? It means that we have a unique opportunity to reinvent television journalism. No longer does it have to be complex, expensive, difficult, require an army of technicians, or rest in the hands of the very few. It is now possible for a person working on his or her own to make high-quality, intelligent and, most importantly, very inexpensive television. No cameramen. No one carrying the audio equipment. No producers. And no “on-air talent.” This means the barriers to entry have not been lowered—they have been completely blown away.

## Technology Accelerates Change

So the question to ask now is, what can we do with the technological revolution at our fingertips?

The first thing is to decouple television news from the TV news people. The idea that we would take the most powerful means of communicating news and ideas ever invented and consciously turn it over to a tiny handful of self-appointed “professionals” is an act of cultural and intellectual suicide. Who are Brian Williams and Katie Couric, after all? Each is just one more (highly paid) journalist with something to say and a platform given to them to say it. Fine. But there are millions (quite literally) of others who also have stories to tell or opinions of equal value to voice.

Never, in the world of print, would we say that all books sold would be written by Katie Couric and Brian Williams. That would be seen as insane. Yet we gladly embrace this ridiculous approach in television news every day. Why does this happen? Up until now alternative voices have been silenced because producing television news was expensive and getting video images into people’s homes was vastly complicated. No more.

So what we are doing now is empowering millions of journalists (and others) to be a part of this great global dialogue we call television and video news. I call it a dialogue, but that is really the wrong term. Monologue might have been more appropriate for the past, so perhaps “multilogue” is a better term to describe its future.

During the past few years, I’ve been working with journalists at news organizations—not only broadcast outlets—to pass along my enthusiasm

for and the techniques that enable this approach to video news to work. Recently, at The Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey, 20 print and photo-journalists were empowered to create television journalism. [See article by John Hassell on page 72.] Whether their video news stories appear on their Web site, as they do, rather than being broadcast, is immaterial; the reporters use video they shoot and edit themselves to tell news stories.

As it turns out, making TV news isn't any more complicated than picking up a camera and starting to shoot. Nor is video editing more complex than word processing—and the equipment to do it is no more expensive to purchase. So this puts us at the precipice of a revolution. It's a revolution in how television news gets made and, as such, a revolution in who gets to make it.

The first recruits to this video-journalist revolution were, of course, those already in the business—the huge armies of journalistic “support staff” who populated TV stations and networks. They were in the office, working for NBC or CBS, because they wanted to report stories or felt they had something they wanted to say. Yet 99.99 percent of those who work in TV newsrooms never get to create their vision—at least until now. They get to make phone calls or coffee or do research or produce (whatever that means). This approach not only wastes talent, but it's nonsensical as a business practice.

So the first step was—and still is—to empower those in the business, from local TV news producers to writers to former cameramen and technicians



Michael Rosenblum conducts a VJ training session at KRON4 in San Francisco. *Photo by Lisa Lambden.*

to newspaper reporters and photographers and more. We teach them how to use the digital tools, assure them that they can, and then say the words: “Here’s the camera. There is the door. See you at 6:00.” This is how we make television journalism in the digital age.

### **Empowering Voices Long Silenced**

This is, however, only the tip of the iceberg, because there are millions of others who also have something to say and want a place for their voice to be heard.

J.K. Rowling, a 38-year old single mother on welfare, has an idea for a book. Harry ... Something. But she is not a published writer. She is an unemployed mom on welfare. But she also has an idea. The barrier to writing is a pencil and a piece of paper. So she sets to work. She has never interned for Diane Sawyer. She has never made

coffee for Brian Williams. She has no “experience.” But she produces Harry Potter and is dogged in pursuing a way for Harry’s story to be told.

What Rowling did with a pencil and paper (or cocktail napkins at the start) anyone can now do with a camcorder and a laptop; they can make their vision. Fulfill their dream. Create. Maybe it stinks. Maybe it’s Harry Potter. Only one way to find out: make it.

This incredible revolution in who gets to make it is percolating into journalism as well.

The United States military has been in Iraq for five years. And U.S. news organizations have covered Iraq during those five years by sending in American TV reporters who, for the most part, don’t speak a word of Arabic, don’t know the country’s (or the region’s) history, don’t know the country, but their reports dominate the nightly news. At the same time, there are probably a million Iraqis who have home video cameras and who nightly

can and do record the destruction that has been wrought on their nation. In five years, how much of that video have Americans ever seen?

Exactly my point.

Now, this is going to be upsetting to many of my colleagues in the business. When anyone can pick up a video camera, shoot a story and post it on the Web, then the “TV professionals”—an oxymoron, to be sure—are no longer so special.

No, they aren't. If we profess to believe in a free press, then it doesn't make sense to get freaked out when a free press actually starts to emerge. A.J. Liebling wrote, “Freedom of the press

is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Today, pretty much anyone can own the means to report and produce video news. To which I say, “Good.” It's going to get very competitive out there, and it's about time it did.

As we begin by empowering journalists of all stripes, the democratization of video will not be contained within newspaper or TV newsrooms—nor should it. Everything about our time tells me that we are about to embark on a great global awakening. Voices that have never been heard are about to make themselves known, and the rather tiny spectrum of information and opinion that has dominated our

national and global public discourse is about to be split wide open. And, I say, high time. ■

*Michael Rosenblum has run Rosenblum Associates for 20 years, training news organizations throughout the world in how to equip and prepare their staff to work as videojournalists. Among his clients have been the BBC, the Voice of America, NY1, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Verizon, TV4 Sweden, and WKRN-TV in Nashville, Tennessee. He also was a founder of New York Times Television and Current TV.*

## A Retired Newspaper Journalist Takes What He Knows to the Web

‘What “sold” RappVoice to the local audience was solid and timely reporting, analysis, and in-depth explanation of complex subjects ...’

BY JAMES P. GANNON

I am an old newspaper guy—a reporter, columnist, Washington bureau chief, and finally editor of The Des Moines Register. I love ink on paper, the feel of newsprint in my hands, and the old standards of newspaper journalism as I came to understand them in the 1960's, when reporters simply reported, editors edited, and opinions went on the editorial and op-ed pages, where they belonged.

In other words, I am as outdated as a polyester pantsuit. So what am I—a retired journalist nearing the age of 70—doing operating an online news service?

First, some history. I got into this unruly world of Web-based journalism about two years ago, in October 2006, when I created and launched The Rappahannock Voice ([www.rappvoice.com](http://www.rappvoice.com)), an online community “newspaper” for my home community—a scenic, rural retreat along the Blue

Ridge Mountains in Virginia, about 75 miles west of Washington, D.C.. “RappVoice,” as the locals call it, covers only local news—Rappahannock County government, school news, local politics, business and people.

RappVoice was started out of frustration with the inadequacy of local news coverage in Rappahannock County, where I've lived since I left daily journalism in the mid-1990's. Our county has no daily papers, no radio or TV stations, and only one local weekly, The Rappahan-

nock News, whose local coverage at that time tended toward light fluff and little enterprise or hard news.

Seeing major local stories going unreported, I decided—almost on

The screenshot shows the homepage of [rappvoice.com](http://www.rappvoice.com). The main headline is "Patrick O'Connell borrows \$17.5 million to buy out former partner and finance future of his famous Inn at Little Washington" by James P. Gannon. The article text is partially visible, mentioning that O'Connell has borrowed \$17.5 million under a loan agreement that assigns all its properties, leases, income and fixtures to the lender as security for the loan. A photo of the Inn at Little Washington is shown. To the right of the article are several advertisements, including one for "GILPER INDUSTRIES INC." featuring a woman's portrait, and another for "Grawford Fencing" serving Rappahannock County. The website navigation includes Home, About Us, Polls, Place an ad, County Links, Weather Page, Subscribe to Feed, and My Books. A sidebar on the left contains a "Departments" menu with links to Arts/Entertainment, Classified ads, Events, News, Opinion, Politics & Elections, Reviews, School News, and Sports. Below the menu are links for "REGISTER" and "LOGIN". At the bottom of the sidebar are advertisements for "Business Loan" and "Personal Loans".

a whim—to create an online news service. No geek, I knew nothing about how to do Web journalism, but I soon found that a common blogging software (WordPress) could be adapted to look like a news Web site and, with some help from a local Web designer, RappVoice went public. With less than \$1,000 in start-up costs and a simple, how-to manual as my tech training, I entered the publishing business.

I was amazed at how quickly RappVoice took hold in our media-deprived area. My ability to publish a story immediately—often within a few hours, or even minutes of an event—was an eye opener to local readers and left the local weekly looking stale when it published several days or a week later. RappVoice did stories in greater depth than the weekly and published them when they were news, not history. We dug out news (like a story about the county's most famous business—The Inn at Little Washington—needing to borrow \$17.5 million to buy out a disgruntled partner) that the paper wouldn't touch.

What sold RappVoice to the local audience was solid and timely reporting, analysis and in-depth explanation of complex subjects, like county budgets and taxes, salted with some OMG (Oh My God) stories, like a rare sex-and-gore murder trial. The audience boomed, and soon local advertisers (real estate agents, a bank, a fencing company, a dentist, etc.) wanted to advertise on RappVoice—without any sales pitch from me.

In short, I found that the old-fashioned journalism that I learned decades ago at The Wall Street Journal remained much in demand on the local level. I put a high premium on accuracy, completeness, clarity and fairness—the old virtues of traditional journalism—and submerged or masked my opinions about what I reported. I valued credibility for RappVoice over

controversy; I wrote mostly about what happened, not what I thought of it. I insisted that readers posting comments on stories sign their real names, just as a good newspaper shuns anonymous letters to the editor. (This substantially reduces the number of comments posted, because many

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Web users prefer to rant under screen names, but it eliminates anonymous cheap-shot attacks.).

### **Publish—Until I Quit**

Two years of experience convinces me that RappVoice could be replicated in countless local communities—rural towns, suburbs or even urban neighborhoods—where local news coverage in print and broadcast is weak. I think it means the journalism of the old values can reach and win over new readers in a Web-delivered package. What we knew as “print journalism” doesn't have to die—it can be reborn, still clinging to old virtues, with digital delivery. Take it from me: Old dogs can learn new tricks.

This doesn't mean it's easy. RappVoice takes an inordinate amount of my time—going to county meetings and hearings, interviewing, writing and editing. RappVoice ate my retirement freedom, swallowed me whole. Disappointments: I had hoped to recruit many locals to write for the site but found few willing. I had hoped for more feedback from readers but found few willing to stand up publicly to state opinions under real names.

Internet publishing has its special perils. In early December 2008, a

cyberdisaster struck RappVoice. With no warning to clients, the Web-hosting firm I used suddenly shut down its servers—apparently because of financial trouble—making RappVoice inaccessible to readers. Worse, my archive containing two-plus years of work disappeared and may be gone forever. I am outraged by the Web-host's irresponsible behavior and chastened by my failure to keep a backup. I am attempting to restore or rebuild RappVoice, but the outcome is uncertain.

Even with payments from the local weekly newspaper that published some of the RappVoice stories and my advertising revenue, my income does not match what an entry-level reporter might earn today. Possibly, in a larger community, the income from such a site might be higher. But my experience suggests that an independent, local online news service is a viable avocation for those who can afford it, such as a retired journalist or someone who doesn't need to support a family. The rewards are more in personal satisfaction than in monetary payoff.

Reality check: the work is demanding, the deadlines ever-present, the financial rewards very modest—a few thousand dollars of revenue. Moreover, sustaining this project over time poses a dilemma. It's mostly a one-man band; if I quit, the music stops. With no successor in sight, RappVoice is both a triumph and an albatross. With apologies to Samuel Coleridge, I feel like the Ancient Mariner, sailing precariously on the Internet sea, wind in my sails, but unsure what's over the horizon. ■

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