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Community Newspapers and the Web: Using the Unknown

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Introduction

I have been involved with community newspapers for more than 30 years, first as a reporter/editor, then through my graduate studies and, later, teaching.

Part of that graduate study included a survey of the members of a small Iowa town about the value of their weekly newspaper to the community. Done in 1976, when predictions were rampant about the coming extinction of the local weekly, the study sought to find out if these papers really were necessary.

The community members interviewed were very clear—the weekly was important. It was their link to the decision makers and decisionmaking process of the community. It provide an essential service. Additionally, it provided a significant part of the town’s identity. Losing the local newspaper was, in many ways, like losing the local school; it meant that a significant part of the town was disappearing.

For the past 28 years, I have been trying to teach journalism students how they can fill this vital journalistic role within the community, and in recent years it has become more and more obvious that a new technology has pushed its way into the picture: the internet. It has become part of society from education to politics to the economy, and it has become something that newspapers, large and small, have been struggling to deal with.

The Oregon study discussed below was an effort to determine how the internet, or the Web,
was becoming assimilated by community newspapers, how and why it was being adopted and how it was being used. The underlying motivation for the study was to answer the question “How should I be preparing my students to effectively use the internet in their roles as community journalists?”

Much has been made of and books have been written about how journalists can use the internet in reporting, how it can become an invaluable research tool, but there has been very little about how it can be used as an informational tool for the community in the traditional mold of community newspapers. After weeks of travel and dozens of interviews, one realization emerged: no one really seems to know. This paper is an effort to collect some of the thoughts gathered in the survey and begin to focus discussion on the question, “How can community journalism use the internet in its role as one of the major political and social information sources within a community?”

**Background**

Community newspapers are a significant part of American tradition. When Alexis DeTocqueville wrote of his visit to the United States in the early 19th century he pointed to the large number of newspapers in the country, particularly those in small frontier towns, as a factor unique to America and integral to the American democratic form of government. The key to democracy, he opined, was an informed public and the newspapers were the way Americans kept informed to make decisions, particularly local decisions.

One hundred years later philosopher John Dewey theorized that a community was a community by virtue of the information its members held in common and newspapers were a major way people received this common information.

Other writings and studies since then have put forth much the same kinds of ideas, that newspapers are indispensable to the health of the modern community.

But despite this status given them, community newspapers have also been plagued by other realities that have interfered with their ability to supply crucial information to their communities. The most significant of those have been economic. Small, particularly rural, community newspapers have many times not been the most successful business operations. In the 19th and early 20th century publishers found themselves turning to political groups for unofficial “sponsorship,” positing themselves as “Republican” or “Democrat” in an effort to draw favorable support from subscribers, businesses and political patrons.

As viability became more difficult, many newspapers went in an opposite direction, declaring themselves as “independent” in the hopes of attracting everyone and offending no one. Even this sometimes did not help as publishers in stagnant or dying towns found it more and more difficult to find the necessary financial support.
While the rest of society was restructuring in the 1930s and beyond, with school districts consolidating, shopping facilities becoming more and more concentrated in centralized locations and the local populations declining (and many newspapers merging), many publishers continued to hold on to the idea of having a newspaper and a voice in the community.

The tight financial picture that has plagued community newspapers for years continues today. There are some community weeklies that are very successful financially but two major changes have continued to restrict others.

One is the cost of production. Changing technologies and the increased cost of materials have forced newspapers to readjust their budgets, shifting funds to survive. These newspapers slowly made the transition in the 1970s and 80s (and for some into the 90s) from letterpress to offset printing, to computer typesetting and eventually to computer pagination. A lack of knowledge and a lack of resources, both time and money, frequently kept publishers from adopting technologies they begrudgingly admitted had benefit.

The second change has been the consolidation of ownership into absentee ownership groups. While group ownership has undoubtedly allowed many struggling newspapers to survive it has also changed the financial focus in many cases. Instead of being able to reinvest profits to improve the local product many newspapers are now required to return a large part of those profits to the corporate headquarters. Publishers are frequently given a minimum net return they are expected to meet and their performance is judged by the bottom line–how much money did they make for the group.

This bottom line approach often makes it difficult for the publisher/managers of the newspapers to make decisions based on what is best for the community as opposed to what is best (financially) for the company.

The New Technology

Once again community newspapers are being confronted by the development of a new communication technology, but unlike previous innovations such as computerized typesetting and offset printing, there is no clear cut understanding of how the technology relates to the newspaper.

In the past, there was generally some obvious relationship or lack of relationship. The importance the telegraph, which speeded the delivery of news, became evident during the coverage of the Civil War when Americans sought immediate updates. (Although after the war most weeklies went back to their position of not placing too much importance of news outside the community or how fast that news was acquired.)

Newspapers shied away from photographs in the early years, recognizing their value but also recognizing the cost of using them in the papers. When the technology became more affordable,
the use of photos increased.

The advantages of the changes in printing technology, offset printing and computerized typesetting, were clearly obvious, improved quality of the product and, more importantly, a way to reduce labor costs by reducing the number of the people involved in production and their expense.

But the role of the internet in modern newspapers is currently in a void. No one really seems to know how newspapers, particularly community newspapers, can best use this new technology.

Jennifer Greer and Donica Mensing have looked at the development of web sites by newspapers in the United States in the past decade. They summarize their findings by saying,

“Web sites are increasingly more sophisticated in news presentation, revenue-generating features, multimedia and interactive elements. Small papers lag significantly behind medium and large ones.”

What Greer and Mensing suggest in their article in the Fall 2004 edition of the Newspaper Research Journal is that the larger newspapers are able to realize a significant profit from their web sites, and that makes the sites viable.

For larger newspapers the template is emerging. With most of these large paper sites, the profit comes primarily from advertising sales and the sale of links to other commercial sites. Content is generally recycled material from the day’s newspaper or the wire services and archival is minimal. The “news” is used as a teaser to get people into the web site but is not the core function of the site. The reader is given access to a small portion of the day’s material and advertisers are given access to the reader in a different venue. In short, the large newspapers are able to generate the resources needed to justify having the web site.

For smaller, community newspapers this becomes a problem. Finding the resources just to have a web presence is frequently difficult if not impossible. Making a profit off the site is extremely rare and considering how the newspaper can use the internet to further its traditional role as the source of crucial information in the community is something generally left to late night discussions after all of the other work is done or no consideration at all.

**The Oregon Study**

In the fall of 2002, the publishers of 26 Oregon weekly newspapers were interviewed to determine their attitudes toward the internet, the importance of their newspaper having a web site and how their sites were used. Virtually everyone of them expressed a positive attitude toward the web. Many were very enthusiastic. Many expressed ambivalence. They felt they had to be on the web because, for lack of a better reason, it increased their credibility. For even the smallest, plainest newspaper, being on the web meant they were part of the modern growing
society, not some sort of useless relic. As more than one publisher put it "we are on the web because we are afraid not to be." In some cases, this felt need of a web presence had a definite downside. Being on the web meant being up-to-date and being weeks or month behind in posting the material often carried very negative implications. In some cases it led people to wonder if the newspaper was still in existence.

Being on the web eventually came down to a matter of resources. Were the resources available and, if so, was the web the best use of those resources?

The first consideration was the financial support of the web site. Most of the newspapers had no one on the staff who had the technical background to create and maintain a web site. Nor, did many of the young journalists have any desire to develop the technical competence. (Which is not surprising. Newspapers have long provided reporters with cameras only to find most reporters don’t have an interest in learning how to use that simple technology.) Only one of the papers had a full-time webmaster (although one publisher served as his own web developer and one of the newspapers had a production manager who had a side business of developing web sites.) One small group had a webmaster who served the entire chain that included two daily newspapers as well as a number of weeklies. The presence of the dailies and the need for them to be serviced on a daily basis made the full-time web position viable. But even in this situation, the service generally included posting material from the weekly newspapers on the web, nothing more.

For most of the papers, being on the web meant contracting with one of the many services that have sprung up around the country offering simplified access. These services, which are analogous to the centralized printing operations that evolved in the transition from letterpress to offset printing, provide simplified software and a prefabricated template that enables newspapers to easily upload materials to their web site. No significant expertise is required. The problem for many small newspapers, though, remains the expense. Most of these services are priced according to circulation and the kinds of services they are asked to provide and can range in cost from $150 to several hundred dollars a month. This is a seemingly small amount but when taken in the context of staffs peopled with part time, hourly workers and a few full time employees making $250-$300 per week, even a few hundred dollars a month becomes a significant amount.

This scarcity of resources was a common concern for all newspapers, even the corporately owned ones. In all of the newspaper groups in the state except the one cited above, the corporate headquarters provided no direct financial support for its newspapers’ web efforts. Community Newspapers, Inc. (CNI), a collection of 14 weeklies in the Portland area, required its papers to be on the web but offered no financial stipends to support it. As one publisher put it, “It has to come out of my budget.”

Another chain, Eagle Newspapers, created a software package for its papers to use and provided some technical support at the home office but no additional manpower to help with the
web sites and the Western Newspapers group, a collection of weeklies and dailies, offered no support for its papers beyond planning.

(One chain, the Lee Newspapers, did offer its weeklies support in two cases where the smaller newspapers were under the auspices of a larger chain mate nearby. The larger newspaper took responsibility of posting material from the weeklies on the web.)

Financially (and time) strapped publishers and editors were quick to describe the place the web had in their newspaper organization. One publisher who owned two small weeklies, neither of which was on the web, summed up his position. "I’d like to be on the web, even if just a mailbox page where people could get our contact information and subscribe. But," he said wearily, "I have owned the papers for three years and last week was the first two-day weekend I have had since I bought them."

Another independent owner had a similar comment. "I think the web is wonderful. There are a lot of things I’d like to try. But I already work 60 hours a week on this newspaper and that’s enough. I have other things in my life."

The publisher of one of the CNI newspapers in Portland expressed similar concerns. “Our reporters have to post their own material. They already work too many hours and I’m not going to ask them to do more.”

Another publisher, this one overseeing two newspapers owned by a large out-of-state group, had a quick answer to a question of resources. Asked what he would do if he had money from the chain to improve his web site he stopped the question short. "If I had more money, I’d hire another reporter so we can cover this community better."

Many of the publishers on the web did not have a clear concept of what they were supposed to be doing even if they did have some resources. They were on the net for a variety of reasons. For some it was because their ownership had ordered it. For others, there was a sense of self-defense, “we’re on it because the competition is.”

Certainly, few have much of an idea of how to use the web commercially in their communities. Only two of the newspapers included in the study were making a profit while the remainder struggled. Pronouncements of the web as a “gold mine” for advertising were running into the reality of small town economics. The small, local businesses that are the backbone of many small newspapers did not see any benefit to being “available to the world” or even the rest of the state. Their advertising budgets were limited and they were concerned about the best return for the dollar. (In one town the publisher said her biggest competitor for merchants advertising dollars was the school fundraisers including the signs at the athletic fields.) They did not feel they had the resources to gamble.

Many of the newspapers felt the same way. Their advertising sales forces were limited and they
did not feel they had the resources to gamble that resource on an unproven area.

Advertising has gradually grown on most of the web sites in the past two years but the kinds of businesses that find web advertising appealing are limited and the rates charged tend to be rather minimal.

**Playing a Role in the Community**

The economic pressure of maintaining something that is “required” in many cases but not fully understood or wanted makes it difficult to clearly define what the role of the internet and the web should, or could, be in community journalism, particularly in the context of the historical ideal, with the newspaper as a purveyor of crucial community information.

Many of the Oregon publishers have made efforts to find some sort of journalistic rational for their web sites. One that has been most obvious is the reporting of timely news. Long hindered by a weekly schedule with publication dates that come days after something has happened or production schedules that preclude the coverage of more timely events, many weekly newspapers look at the web as a chance to add a sense of currency to their news. Many of the publishers post breaking news on their web sites. Some post regular daily updates highlighting the latest events, others limit themselves to more significant events, posting materials when something of significance happens in the area.

Overriding the attitude toward the web site for most of the publishers is the fear of being their own worst competition, of giving away their product. In fact, some publishers refuse to establish a web presence for that very reason, or else require people to subscribe to have access to the site.

For some, though, the ability to post breaking events is looked at as a benefit to the newspaper. Many use the short news briefs to promote more complete coverage in the next issue of the print product. Most of the newspapers also only post a small portion of their content on the web, giving people a few major stories and the prompt “for all the week’s news buy (subscribe to) the_____.” Despite this connection, however, most of the publishers admitted they made little effort at cross-promotion between the print edition and the web site.

Some of the publishers see the web as a way to go beyond what is in the weekly newspaper. Photos are one of the prime examples. With the adoption of digital photography by most of the papers, it has become easier to load photos onto the web site that could not be accommodated in the print paper. (And the site, conceivably, can be used to make those photos more available to the public for purchase.)

Many newspapers saw the benefit in the internet during elections. They were able to use it to post up-to-the-minute vote totals of local elections, which were too small and local to attract the attention of the larger electronic media outlets. Though it did require the expenditure of resources
in terms of staff time (or overtime), most newspapers pointed proudly to it as an example of their community service.

But this was one of only a handful of efforts made by the newspapers to actively use their web sites in the community information mix. Some provided links from their sites to community and governmental sites (although this was not as common as expected), some made a point of including public record information as part of the material they posted on their sites and all used the web to expand their classified ad reach.

One had experimented with the newspaper hosting a community discussion “chat room” where community members could offer their opinion on public matters but the specter of being potentially responsible for defamatory allegations posted on the site and the need to have a staff member monitor the chat room on a regular basis led the paper to discontinue it. The possible anonymity and the lack of personal, immediate accountability for comments gave many people a license to use the chat room for intemperate and personal attacks rather than engage in serious discussion of issues.

For a few of the editors/publishers, the web did seem to offer the possibility of doing “more.” The editor of a small weekly 25 miles west of the state capital envisioned the web as a chance for the return of literary journalism, a kind of wordy and personal prose that had filled the pages of newspapers in earlier years. “It gives the journalist a chance to be a story teller, to try new ways of presenting information,” he said, and he also hoped that it might be a way to reengage readers with the newspaper.

Some saw the web as a sort of expanded news hole. Limited financially as to how big their print edition could be they saw the web as a possible place of stories that would not fit in the print paper and as a place for secondary, expanded and analytical stories that would provide more complete coverage of local issues. But once again it came down to a question of resources. Who was going to produce this additional material? Already overworked and underpaid reporters and editors could not realistically be stretched further. Even soliciting writings from people outside the staff brought with it a series of possible difficulties. First was the question of having to pay for the material which meant reallocating resources from other places. And, even if the people were willing to submit information for no compensation, there was still the need for the material to be edited and verified and the possibility of alienating people whose submitted material was not posted because of quality or other concerns. While the newspapers welcomed the idea of an expanded community voice in their newspaper, they did not want their publications becoming bulletin boards filled with poor quality material.

Part of the challenge for the web site is to draw people to it, to make it vital and necessary, and the publishers were struggling with how to do that. Over the years a number of strategies have evolved to help assure people pick up the newspaper. Classified ads, local names in the news, and in-depth information about community issues have all played a role. For many, the newspaper has become a habit. But no one has been able to develop strategies that make the
web site indispensable.

Part of the problem is the technology. Whereas acquiring a copy of the local newspaper either means subscribing and having it passively delivered to the mailbox or by laying out 50 cents at one of many locations throughout the community, accessing the newspaper’s web site is not as simple. The newspaper is intrusive, it is there in front of the reader, it is readily available. The web site must be accessed and that access requires a certain level of technology and it requires effort. And, accessing the web site is like buying that newspaper in a national bookstore; there are literally thousands of competitors just as available.

Publishers can’t currently make the web as accessible as the printed newspaper. What they must work on is making it as necessary as the printed newspaper. They must develop ways of making people as anxious to log on the the web site each week when the new edition comes out as they are to stop by their mailbox or the local newsstand to pick up the latest print edition.

Summary

The internet is the currently evolving communication technology of the future, and as with past technologies, little conscious effort has been made in how to direct its development in ways that are most beneficial.

With newspapers, as with many other institutions, the development of the the web presence has been based on economics and on technical capabilities, doing things because they will make money and because they are doable. There is little sense of purpose behind the content except to make money.

In this regard, smaller, community newspapers suffer because so far few people have discovered a consistent way to make money with these sites. The concern is that as people try harder to create a role for the web in community journalism, most of the efforts will focus on the commercial and little thought will be given to the best journalistic use. Balancing the conflict is the most crucial issue. Maximizing resources from the web while at the same time maximizing the newspaper on the web as a resource to its community in a variety of ways.

The general manager of the newspaper in Woodburn, Ore., summed up the frustration when she talked about the newspaper and the web in her community.

“It can be a force for developing community,” she said. “We have very little community here right now, just a number of factions. I think the web can play a real role in developing that sense of community.”

She just has not figured out how and she does not have the time in her 60 plus hour week to figure it out.
13 THOUGHTS ON “COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS AND THE WEB: USING THE UNKNOWN”

building a list in android
on January 30, 2014 at 1:57 PM said:

Admiring the commitment you put into your site and in depth information you present. It’s good to come across a blog every once in a while that isn’t the same out of date rehashed information.

Great read! I’ve bookmarked your site and I’m adding your RSS feeds to my Google account.

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on February 2, 2014 at 8:31 AM said:

I’m impressed, I must say. Rarely do I come across a blog that’s equally educative and entertaining, and without a doubt, you’ve hit the nail on the head. The issue is an issue that not enough folks are speaking intelligently about.
I am very happy that I found this during my search for something concerning this.

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on February 3, 2014 at 8:42 PM said:

I am regular visitor, how are you everybody? This article posted at this web page is in fact nice.

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on February 3, 2014 at 9:57 PM said:
What a information of un-ambiguity and preserveness
of valuable know-how about unpredicted emotions.

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on *February 3, 2014 at 11:40 PM* said:

Hmm it appears like your site ate my first comment (it was extremely long) so I guess I’ll just sum it up what I wrote and say, I’m thoroughly enjoying your blog. I too am an aspiring blog writer but I’m still new to everything. Do you have any tips and hints for rookie blog writers? I’d definitely appreciate it.

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on *February 4, 2014 at 1:24 AM* said:

It’s a shame you don’t have a donate button! I’d most certainly donate to this brilliant blog! I guess for now i’ll settle for book-marking and adding your RSS feed to my Google account. I look forward to fresh updates and will share this blog with my Facebook group.
Chat soon!

**folding bike reviews**

on *February 4, 2014 at 3:49 AM* said:

Hey just wanted to give you a quick heads up. The text in your post seem to be running off the screen in Internet explorer. I’m not sure if this is a formatting issue or something to do with internet browser compatibility but I thought I’d post to let you know. The layout look great though!

Hope you get the problem resolved soon. Thanks
robotic pool cleaner reviews  
on February 4, 2014 at 4:43 AM said:

Hi there, You have done a fantastic job. I'll certainly digg it and personally recommend to my friends. I'm sure they'll be benefited from this web site.

induction cooktop reviews  
on February 4, 2014 at 8:24 AM said:

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on February 4, 2014 at 6:09 PM said:

Why visitors still make use of to read news papers when in this technological world all is existing on net?

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on February 4, 2014 at 11:39 PM said:

It's not my first time to visit this site, I am browsing this website daily and take good facts from here everyday.

table saw reviews  
on February 5, 2014 at 12:20 AM said:

I do not even know how I ended up here, but I thought this post was great. I don't know who you are but definitely you're going to a famous blogger
if you are not already 😊
Cheers!

**Royce**

on **February 5, 2014 at 6:18 AM** said:

Hey there! I simply would like to offer you a big thumbs up for your excellent info you have got right here on this post. I am coming back to your site for more soon.