

Looking for love in all the wrong places

*In their search for online Nirvana, newspapers may
be overlooking the obvious*

by

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Scene 1 (circa 1961): Joe Normal yawns and scratches his chest as he stumbles across the front yard of his suburban home. He reaches down for the rolled-up newspaper recently tossed into the flowerbed by a 12-year-old boy, then slogs back to the house. He pours a steaming cup of Maxwell House from the percolator on the stove, settles into his favorite chair and sighs with satisfaction as he opens the paper to the sports section.

Scene 2 (circa 2001): Isabella Normal wipes the perspiration from her morning jog from her brow as she pops a cup of Instant Latte into the microwave. While the seconds are counting down toward her morning beverage, she lights up a screen by touching the "return" key on the kitchen computer, then grabs her steaming cup from the microwave while scrolling to the "favorite" button of Digital Today. She settles into an office-style chair, then sighs with satisfaction as she sips and reads the latest business news from Europe.

It was supposed to happen that way, wasn't it? Clanking printing presses would be replaced by efficient central servers. We would all look to a cathode-ray tube where once we would have looked to a thin sheet of processed tree. Newspapers would graciously (and profitably) evolve into online information providers.

But somehow, "Scene 2" never materialized. While the Internet has become outrageously popular and newspapers have tried dozens of formats, Web-based news has yet to "replace" newspapers in the lives of American readers. What happened here? Was it something we said, or more to the point, didn't say? We tried to give readers the same content we gave them in print form – wasn't that enough?

This paper explores the problem from the somewhat argumentative angle that it may not be a question of content at all. Content, in the cyberworld, is unlimited. Newspapers have the ability to give their online readers nearly every piece of wisdom or foolishness written. What we

have not done, however, is paid adequate attention to the cultural and behavioral aspects of Internet use. Critically, we have not worked to develop an "online habit" that approaches the universality of the "newspaper habit."

One overlooked yet verifiable truth of the Internet is that readers have more control over what they read than do readers of print media. Instead of 'pushing' information to readers, newspapers that use the Internet can involve readers and help them define and prioritize their own "news." This is not only an issue of customization, but it revises the news product itself by putting the reader in the role of editor.

The power of habit

Habit is a tremendously powerful force not to be trifled with. The ancients realized this. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) wrote that habit – which he defined as “a quality of long duration and difficult to change” – was a boon to man because it reduced his effort. He observed that concentration and hard study involve constraint and compulsion, which make us uncomfortable, he wrote. But habit, he said, replaces that discomfort with pleasant routine (Cooper, 1932). Aristotle is probably better known for his line in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Hsieh, 1997), "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit."

Many centuries later, pioneer psychologist and philosopher William James waxed poetic about the power and social potential of habit. Rather than shunned, he wrote in 1890, habit is to be encouraged among intellectuals. As a founding father of the American pragmatism movement, he lauded habit as a way to reduce many actions into automatic responses that require no intellectual energy. The more routine we turn over to habit, “the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work.” Habit, he said, is the “enormous flywheel of society, its most precious conservative agent” (James, 1890, p. 121).

On a more practical level, newspaper editors and publishers have long noted the dedication some subscribers have to their paper. In the industry, it is called the "newspaper habit." Journalists joke about subscribers who can't start their morning without their crossword

and circulation managers feel the wrath of "addicted" customers when a carrier is late or the press breaks down. Until recently, however, surprisingly little research was done on the phenomenon.

Among the more telling findings of the belated research on newspaper habit was a study by Stone of the merger of the evening Memphis, Tenn., *Press-Scimitar* into the morning *Commercial Appeal* (Stone & Stone, 1990; Stone, 1986). Stone surveyed a large group of readers two weeks before the shutdown of the evening paper, then again three months later and a third time nearly a year later. Remarkably, a majority of the former evening subscribers still read their newspaper in the afternoon or evening after a year of receiving a morning paper,

The effect of habit on newspaper reading was finally quantified by Bentley in 2000. In a statewide telephone survey, more than half the respondents showed some evidence of habitual behavior while reading a newspaper – such as reading at the same time each day or sitting in the same chair. Regression analysis showed that habit, as a "driver" of readership, crossed boundaries of age, income and education. When one gets away from "blind" questions and asks people "How strong is your need to read a newspaper," the newspaper habit appears even stronger. Nearly 75 percent said they had at least "some habit" and nearly 30 percent conceded they had a strong or very strong newspaper habit (Bentley, 2000).

If newspapers take the stand that the World Wide Web is an extension of their pressrooms as a means of presenting their printed word, then logic would dictate that this powerful cultural phenomenon – the newspaper habit – would also migrate to the digital world. Many newspapers seemed to follow that logic, as they created online clones of their printed editions. The wholesale transfer of text and graphics from one medium to another became known as "shovelware."

But the recent dot-com "wakeup call" by the stock market did more than leave new-economy investors wide-eyed. It also sparked a serious round of re-examination by 4,000 newspapers and other media companies worldwide that have earnestly tried to extend their franchises to the Internet (NAA, 2000).

With few exceptions, newspapers have been unsuccessful in their effort to simply "port"

to the Web their tried and true business plan: cover the news, attract the readers, then let their eyes wander to ads for which merchants will pay willingly. Newspaper Web sites have become popular e-news portals, but the advertisers haven't seen results. A study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (Pew Research Center, 2000) discovered that one-third of Americans receiving news online at least once a week increased from one-fifth in 1998 to one-third in 2000. However, a study by Jupiter Communications (Sinnreich, Romano, Lewis, Card, & Johnson, 2000) showed that people prefer to get their news from general portal Web sites. On top of that, studies show that Web news readers spend less time on and are less loyal to e-newspapers than ink newspapers. (Len-Rios & Bentley, 2001)

Light (1999), who studied a special online political news site sponsored by *The Guardian*, found 80 percent of visitors to online news sites came to the site only once – hardly the repetitive behavior expected in a "habit." In an attempt to replicate the earlier newspaper habit research with Internet readers, Len-Rios and Bentley (2001) found that indicators of habit were not nearly so strong. The only strong indicator was that 80 percent of the respondents said they signed on from the same physical location – but most computers are bound to a particular location by a set of electrical and network cables.

Thiel (1998) found a possible clue to the dilemma when she framed the online newspaper as a "postmodern medium." When newspaper editors first ventured onto the Web in the 1990s, they had little concern about what content they would put on their electronic pages.

"They had content down pat; the difference online was the time scale, not the context itself." (Thiel, 1998, p 1)

What they did not realize, however, was that the time scale itself became the "image" of the online newspaper and rapidly came to be seen as part of the context. Readers expected a different "look and feel" to their online edition. Light found some evidence that readers had special expectation of a news site if it also had a print site – everything from the print site, plus more (Light, 1999).

Perhaps, then, it is time for newspaper editors and publishers to take a step back from

both types of editions and look at what they mean to readers in terms of simple habit.

Newspapers are champions of the art of engendering loyalty and they exude credibility like no other medium. But they are limited by space, time and printing technology. The Internet offers unlimited content volume, instant speed and unbeatable "indexing." But it is hard to read, disruptive to family social life and promotes information overload.

The goal of the modern media executive should be to combine the best qualities of both forms of newspaper, while minimizing their recognized drawbacks.

Several researchers over several generations have pointed to specific types of content that appeal to readers (Bentley, 2000; Berelson, 1949; Stone & Stone, 1990). But most knowledgeable journalists can tell you what people talk about when discussing their newspaper. The "news" is always the top draw in any readership study. But beyond that, readers often talk about entertainment features such as the comics or crossword, and about the minor community information such as obituaries, wedding announcements and club news (the "nosey" news).

And indeed many, if not most, newspapers "shovel" into their Web editions their front page news, a few entertainment columns or perhaps a puzzle, and the list of death notices.

By now it is quite apparent that just digitizing the same content that appears on a printed page is not enough to instill a reading habit. For one thing, that content is already available elsewhere. For another, the physical characteristics of the computer world make it nearly impossible for people to read an online edition as they do a printed newspaper.

Printed papers are often read in a relaxed and familiar setting – Dad's recliner, at the kitchen table, in bed. They are also often read in a social setting – in the living room while other family members are watching TV, at the breakfast table or even on the bus. We have developed the cultural tools to enjoy the newspaper personally while we still participate in the family socially.

Desktop computers, however, require one to go to a special desk – often in a corner, facing a wall or off in a back room. Even laptops offer few choices, as wireless Internet connections are still so uncommon that the user is tied to a telephone jack and a modem. The

viability of wireless applications, although developing, has a long way to go before they become mainstream.

But perhaps of greater significance when viewing habits, are the ways that printed newspapers constantly remind you to use them. They arrive with a "plonk" on the front step. You must pick them up or trip over them. Once in the house, they glare at you from the coffee table until you pick them up and read through them.

Online newspapers, however, are almost totally dependent upon the memory of the reader. Someone must find the address of a Web site, navigate to it and then open the site (sometimes with a password) before seeing anything that looks like news. Although many start-up browsers include a set of pithy news headlines, acquiring a true online newspaper habit takes hard work, dedication and a very organized set of "bookmarks."

Or maybe it takes something just a bit more addicting than the normal version of the newspaper.

The core content of the newspaper – the main news stories and photographs – will probably always have a place in the Web edition. They are what define it as a "news" paper or site. One could increase the "addictiveness" of the Web edition, however, by emphasizing the strengths of the Internet in those three areas we all know : news, entertainment and community information.

Time is the killer in the news category. It takes hours to publish a newspaper even in the best of circumstances. Many newspapers have responded by putting their stories online instantly, but this is little different than the approach of radio or television.

The solution? Publish the news *before* it happens. While this may sound impossible, it correctly describes the boom in "webcams" on college campuses, traffic intersections, sunny beaches and even fish tanks. A webcam is a digital camera connected to a computer so that it constantly broadcasts images on the Internet. Some can even be manipulated from the viewer's keyboard.

Webcams may be the ultimate appeal to our voyeuristic instincts, as they simply monitor

a situation *in anticipation* of action. Missing, however, is the application of photojournalistic skills to the webcam. If the staff photographers deployed portable webcams they could use their training to find truly interesting scenes that would change frequently. Why not bring the webcam to a fire or to the big basketball game?

From a habit standpoint, the advantage of the journalistic webcam is that the reader would have to constantly check back with the Web site to see what was available. Habit could be further induced by having certain types of scenes on a schedule: 7 a.m. traffic and weather, noon tee-off at the country club, art gallery shows, reviews from movie goers who have just watched a new movie release, etc.

The key to developing the entertainment aspect of the online newspaper is to employ the interactivity of the Web. Crossword puzzles are fun, but you can get them in any paper. But what if you only had 30 seconds to put your word on the puzzle, then you had to wait until someone else took their turn? Or in lieu of a comic strip, what if the readers wrote their own story – but each could only contribute 250 words at a time? Perhaps it is not quite entertainment, but a similar tack could be taken with letters to the editor – a moderated online discussion board in which the editor replies and even goads the readers into comment.

Most editors will tell you the biggest problem with community news is the shortage of space. Even in the smallest town, newspapers could publish reams of reports on club meetings, Little League games, 50th anniversaries and heartfelt tributes to departed friends.

There is no space restriction, however, on the Internet. The major concern for the online editor, instead, should be finding ways to have the readers supply the content so staff writers have time to cover "hard" news.

An easy way to accomplish this would be to offer each club, church or scout troop a page or area within the paper's Web site. If the Women of the Moose No. 1123 wanted to post the detailed play-by-play of their annual installation meeting, so be it. The only obligation of the staffer would be to assemble a list of headlines or links to the sites. The newspaper would also have to provide a simple interface that uses common software to avoid the problems Knight-

Ridder had in its early explorations of this idea.

Obituaries online offer the newspaper revenue potential. The popular trend in funerals currently is to display pictures, memorabilia and personal tributes to the deceased on a wall or table at the funeral. Newspapers have long battled with families who want to publish stilted, flowery odes "to our sister who has gone home," so have no room for expanding the current obituaries. But the obits are popular with readers of all ages and are a powerful catalyst of habit (Bentley, 2000).

Again, the unlimited volume of the Internet is a possible solution. The in-paper obituary could carry a reference to an online "memory book" of photos, tape recording, film clips and scans of letters or stories. For an added fee, the newspaper could allow community members to log on and submit their own memories of departed friends to families, developing a sort of "virtual scrapbook" for the family. While many papers feel obligated to run all obituaries at no charge, a fee for such an extra serve would seem acceptable.

The above examples are less important in their details than they are in their general concept. News consumers will use and enjoy traditional newspaper content that is delivered online. But persuading those news consumers to return again and again to the same Web site for a "fix" – as they do with the daily newspaper – requires that editors and publishers pay attention to the roots of reader habit.

Newspapers can have their cyber cake and eat it too. They need not abandon their traditions, practices and ethics as the industry moves into an online age. They must, however, look at the content they put on the Internet in more terms than simply news value, sentence structure and AP style. They must realize that online reading is goal driven – and that they must find goals that cannot be addressed in print or broadcast.

Above all, newspapers must constantly search for and capitalize on the reasons *why* the reader wants the Web site's content.

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