

Web Strategies: What we can learn from big and small papers

JOMC 221: Writing for the Digital Media

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With circulation numbers declining, many newspapers have looked at ways to gain readership among young people. Today, only 53 percent of all adults in this country read a daily newspaper, down from 81 percent in 1964, according to a 2004 report by the Newspaper Association of America.¹ Only 40 percent of those surveyed between 18 and 24 reported reading a newspaper daily in 2004. Instead, many young people use the World Wide Web as a primary source for information and entertainment. If newspapers could utilize the Web, instead of seeing it as a threat, they could avoid the death of their own.

Newspapers can use their resources for information and their credibility in local communities to capitalize on the Web.² While one cannot predict with accuracy whether newspapers' Web strategies will succeed in the long run, an analysis of the way different newspapers use the Web and a comparison may provide insight into what works best. For this study, I created criteria based on usability studies conducted by Jakob Nielsen and guides on writing for the Web and performed a qualitative content analysis of newspaper Web sites. I looked at elements such as organization, use of graphics, use of hyperlinks, scannability and interactivity. Organization pertains to the way in which information is presented, such as with menus in the sidebars. Scannability is the ease with which users can scan the page and find the information they seek. It is harder, for instance, to scan long passages than it is to scan short passages with headings and lists. For the purposes of this paper, interactivity relates to the amount of interaction a user has

¹ Newspaper Association of America. From the Scarborough Research Top 50 Market Report 1998-2004. Found at <http://www.naa.org/artpage.cfm?AID=1468&SID=1113> on March 4, 2005.

² Morton, J. (1998).). Protecting the Local Franchise Online. American Journalism Review. 20(3) 60.

with a page. Simple scrolling and reading is low interactivity, whereas posting feedback to a Web site, and engaging in a dialogue, indicate high interactivity.

To provide comparisons among newspapers of different sizes, I analyzed a national paper, *USA Today*; a large metropolitan paper, the *News & Observer* in Raleigh; and two small local papers, *The Herald Sun* in Durham, N.C.; and *The Roxboro Courier-Times* in Roxboro, N.C. I chose to analyze three newspapers from North Carolina because I felt they would have overlapping statewide coverage. There would be little differences, therefore, in major events from state to state. For instance, if the papers were in different states, and a major media event happened in one, then the paper from that state might utilize more tools, such as video links and interactive features. By choosing newspapers with similar coverage areas, I sought to eliminate this factor.

According to its Web site, *USA Today* (the print edition) had a paid circulation of 2,309,853 per day, Monday through Friday, as of September 2004³. The *usatoday.com* site also claims it has 8.5 million unique readers.⁴ (These are individual readers who were counted rather than repeat readers.) In September 2004, the *News & Observer* reported its circulation to the Audit Bureau of Circulations as 164,294 on weekdays, 176,550 on Saturdays and 211,735 on Sundays.⁵ *The Herald-Sun* reported its circulation for the same period as 50,379 per day Monday through Saturday and 54,107 on Sunday.⁶ According to its Web site, the *Roxboro Courier-Times*, had a circulation of 8,438 per day

³ Found at www.usatoday.com/media_kit/usatoday/au_circulation.htm on April 18. Source: September 2004 ABC Publisher's Statement.

⁴ Source: Nielsen//NetRatings @Plan Winter 2004 Release, Average 30-day unique audience.

⁵ Found at <http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newssearchus.asp> on April 28.

⁶ Found at <http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newssearchus.asp> on April 28.

in September 2004.⁷ *The Herald-Sun* was just recently bought by a media chain (Paxton Media Group)⁸ and the latter is still family-owned and operated.

I am particularly interested in how these smaller newspapers utilize the Internet. Although smaller newspapers may have more limitations, the Internet is a great leveler. The popularity of blogs proves what a single person can do with an Internet hookup and a computer. I think all newspapers, both large and small, can learn from each other what works best when posting information to the Internet.

Literature Review

In 2000, 99 percent of the nation's largest newspapers and most medium-sized newspapers had an online presence.⁹ Most hope to make money with them. The reality, however, is that very few online newspapers make a profit.¹⁰ Small newspapers, specifically, have a hard time generating advertising for their online operations because they compete against other Web sites catering to national audiences. The potential of a Web site, however, far outweighs the relatively low startup costs.¹¹

Some things never change

Most journalists interviewed agree that many of the same journalistic standards traditionally applied to print media should be retained in the digital age. The standards of print journalism – accuracy, fairness, concise writing, and up-to-date information – will help make an online newspaper interesting, informative and trusted. M. David Arant and

⁷ Found at <http://www.roxboro-courier.com/circulation.htm> on April 28.

⁸ USA Today is owned by Gannett Corp. and the News & Observer is owned by The McClatchy Company.

⁹ Arant, M.D. & Anderson, J.Q. (2001). Newspaper Online Editors Support Traditional Standards. *Newspaper Research Journal*. 22(4) 57-70.

¹⁰ Peng, F.Y., Tham, N.I. & Xiaoming, H. (1999). Trends in Online Newspapers: A Look at the U.S. Web. *Newspaper Research Journal*. 20(2) 52-64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Janna Quitney Anderson conducted a survey of online editors at daily newspapers in the United States with circulations of less than 15,000 to more than 200,000.¹² They found that the editors felt standards should remain consistent from print to the Internet. The 24/7 news cycle of the Internet, however, makes it more difficult to meet those standards. The rush to publish information on the Internet puts more pressure than ever on staffs, and leaves more room for errors.

They wrote:

“Although the new medium demands some changes in protocols practiced in print publishing, newspapers cannot abandon any of the rigor of their standards of accuracy and integrity as they move from print to the online product. Otherwise, the online offspring could damage newspapers’ reputations and reduce reader trust in the parent publications.”¹³

Barb Palser echoed the sentiment in her article “Web Surfers on Speed ... And other Misconceptions about Writing for the Web,”¹⁴ in which she stated, “Good Web writing is news writing 101. Put the important stuff at the top. Avoid long paragraphs and pretentious words. Remember to run spell check.”¹⁵

Thinking outside the distribution box

Despite the desire to retain the same basic standards as print journalism, many journalists see the Internet as an opportunity to break free from old conventions. Newspapers must offer something new on their Web sites if they are to survive, and not

¹² Arant, M.D. & Anderson, J.Q. (2001). Newspaper Online Editors Support Traditional Standards. Newspaper Research Journal. 22(4) Pp. 57-70.

¹³ *Ibid* at 67.

¹⁴ Palser, B. (2002). Web Surfers on Speed ... And other Misconceptions about Writing for the Web. American Journalism Review. October.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

simply replicate their print versions online.¹⁶ While usability experts warn against using all the bells and whistles available, multimedia elements can add a component missing in the print versions of newspapers. These features can draw print readers online, or attract the attention of Web surfers looking for information. In “From Map to Machine: Conceptualizing and designing news on the Internet,”¹⁷ Wilson Lowrey stated that the old way of doing things may cause limitations on the Web. He conducted in-depth interviews with creative directors at various news outlets who agreed design must be kept simple for the Web and content must drive design. Lowrey concluded, however, that industry tradition restricts newspaper designers and that newspaper editors tend to be narrow-minded about design elements.¹⁸ He wrote:

“Many web papers parrot modernist newspaper design, which has become nearly universal in the print industry over the past 20 to 30 years. The modernist layout is a road map in which the route markers are headline size, dominant imagery, story placement and story length.”¹⁹

He did, however, offer a list of remedies for online challenges. He suggested that Web designers break stories into short “nuggets” and use graphics only if they convey information. Large graphics can take a long time to download and Lowrey cited research that found users will not return to a site if they encounter long download times. Scrolling should be kept to a minimum, he wrote, and Web sites should have a consistent look from page to page with clear site identification.

¹⁶ Meyer, P. (2004) *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press at 222.

¹⁷ Lowrey, W. (1999). From map to machine: Conceptualizing and designing news on the Internet. *Newspaper Research Journal*. 20(4) 14-24.

¹⁸ *Ibid* pp. 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid* pp. 14.

Research Questions

Since certain elements of creating a newspaper remain the same from print to the Internet, and certain other elements have changed, editors need to find a balance between the old and the new. In order to lure new readers, a newspaper's Web site should not simply act as a replica of the print version, nor should it have so many high tech features that users can't find the information they need. By looking at the Web sites of newspapers of various sizes, and by applying the criteria above, I will attempt to determine how successful they are in offering something new, while staying true to the purpose of the newspaper. In this paper, I seek to answer the following questions:

- What works and what doesn't work, in print's transition to the screen?
- Do large newspapers and small newspapers use their Web sites differently?
- If they do, how?

Methodology

I visited the Web sites of the four newspapers at various times of day, several days per week, from April 1-28, 2005. I analyzed the Web sites of *USA Today*, the *News & Observer* in Raleigh, *The Herald-Sun* and *The Roxboro Courier-Times*. I visited the sites in the morning, afternoon and night, on weekdays and weekends in order to see what each paper had to offer at different times. I wanted to see each Web site as it was posted originally and updated throughout the day. I took screen captures – such as digital photographs in PDF format – of the Web sites at different points during the day – morning, afternoon, night – on different days of the week to document them. After

compiling a list of criteria from various sources, I applied these to the Web sites in question.

The criteria used were culled from many sources. These included *Web Sites that Work*,²⁰ “Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web,”²¹ and the *Web Style Guide 2*.²² These works were chosen because of their seminal nature and criteria were chosen based on the suggestions in the works.

The criteria include:

- Scannability²³
 - headings
 - graphics
 - color scheme
 - consistent look on every page
 - hyperlinks
- Usability
 - clearly defined publics
 - clear navigation²⁴
 - minimum of scrolling²⁵
 - encouragement of repeat visits
- Content
 - length
 - presentation
- Advertising

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Morke, J. & Nielsen, J. “Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web” (1997), available: <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>

²² Lynch, P. & Horton, S. *Web Style Guide 2* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001). Also available: <http://www.webstyleguide.com>.

²³ Nielsen: “users do not read on the Web; instead they scan the pages, trying to pick out a few sentences or even parts of sentences to get the information they want.”

²⁴ Lynch and Horton wrote that users should be able to return to the home page easily and that a table of contents should appear on the left hand side of the page. Lynch, P. & Horton, S. *Web Style Guide 2* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001). Also available: <http://www.webstyleguide.com>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

- Interactivity
- Contact information

Scannability pertains to the ease with which users can find information on a page. Organizational and directional cues – such as headings, graphics, color scheme and consistency – help the users in that aim. Some users visit Web sites to browse, but many use them to find specific pieces of information. Good scannability allows them to get what they need right away. Hyperlinks also help users find more information on their topic of interest.

Related to scannability, usability measures how easy it is for users to navigate and utilize the site. Can users find what they're looking for if it's beyond the home page of the newspaper's Web site? Are there specific sections set up for different types of users? Often, a search function is used, but another way to do this is by using vertical menus on the sides of the screen, delineating the different sections of the paper, for instance. Users should be able to find what they are looking for without scrolling left to right, or even down the page.

The content category deals with the text of the actual articles. I took a sample of articles from each newspaper's Web site and found the average word length and readability for each. Everyone recognizes that writing for newspapers should be clear and concise. This style of writing is even more important for the Internet. Some newspapers can get away with posting a 1,000-word article to a site, but it will usually be presented in such a way that it will not intimidate users. A portion of the article will appear on a page, with a link to read the rest. I examined that in the presentation subcategory. Readability

is a measure of how difficult a passage is to read, based on sentence length and the average number of syllables in the words. It is expressed in grade level. Most newspapers aim for an eighth- or ninth-grade level.

The advertising category examines the invasiveness of the ads on any particular site. While ads are necessary, common knowledge is that if advertisements interfere with a person's ability to use a site, they probably won't return to that site. Ads vary from banner ads to pop-up ads to ads that appear when a user moves his or her cursor over a story. If I could view a site with minimal disruption from ads, a Web site rated high in this category; if I could not, it rated low.

Interaction has many meanings, but in this case it deals with the amount of input a user has into the content of the site and the degree to which they can enter into a dialogue of sorts. The Internet is more of a democratic medium than the print newspaper and therefore readers can participate in the creation of a newspaper's Web site in ways they never could with the print version. For instance, if a user can post comments to a discussion board, or vote in a poll, the Web site has high interactivity. Other definitions of interactivity include multimedia presentations, where users can click on slide shows and videos, but they still remain passive observers. I have measured those elements as low interactivity.

The simplest measure, contact information, is self-explanatory. Is the contact information readily available? Who does the reader have access to? A customer service representative, or a member of the editorial staff? Some contact information is presented with stories, such as email addresses for reporters. If contact information was easy to

find, and readers could have access to the people who produce the paper, it scored high in this category.

I assigned a scale to each category, four being the highest and one being the lowest, and used it to assign ratings to each of the online newspapers. The highest score a newspaper Web site could receive was 52; the lowest was 13.

Analysis

usatoday.com

USA Today's Web site, www.usatoday.com received a score of 44 for rating “4” on six measures and “3” on six, but “2” on only one (See Appendix A). The site’s strong points include content presentation, graphics and multimedia components. One might expect usatoday.com to focus on the visuals, since its print counterpart emphasized that element since its unveiling in 1982. It’s no surprise the Web site also does an exemplary job of integrating multimedia components, such as links to video content.

Its links to supplemental materials and Web sites with additional information also work well within the text. They do not distract the reader, but they provide opportunities to learn even more about a topic of interest. For example, the Web site included several links in the story on Eric Rudolph, who admitted to the 1996 Olympic bombing in Atlanta on April 12, 2005 (Fig. 1.1). The story included a link to his plea agreement via findlaw.com. It also contained a link to a video of Rudolph making his plea and another to his full statement.

While usatoday.com played to its strengths, making great use of photos and other visual materials, it still has room for improvement. First, www.usatoday.com uses too

many colors in its menu bar, which may confuse users. This dimension earned the site its only “2” rating.

USA Today could also improve its Web site by including more opportunities for feedback and dialogue among users. While the site offers sections such as “Talk Today,” which allows users to send in questions to be answered online by a prominent figure, it does not allow everyone to participate. Letters to the editor may be limited due to space, but the Internet has no such limitation. The site should include some sort of forum in which users can communicate and voice their concerns. Likewise, the “contact us” page leads users to an unsatisfying form, which can be filled out and submitted online. Because of the size of the operation, and the site’s readership, the staff probably could not filter large amounts of feedback. If usatoday.com can incorporate some sort of discussion board where users could discuss issues freely, it would easily raise its score.

newsobserver.com

The *News & Observer*’s Web site, www.newsobserver.com, received a score of 45 for earning a rating of “4” on six criteria, and a “3” on seven (Appendix B).

[Usatoday.com](http://usatoday.com)’s weaknesses appear to be newsobserver.com’s strengths, perhaps because the latter has a smaller scope. The Raleigh-based newspaper includes a daily poll on its Web site, which links to related stories. It also hosts forums, in which residents can weigh in on issues such as “Should North Carolina raise the six percent cap on alcohol content in beer?” or “How hopeful are you about prospects of democracy in the Middle East?”

One of the site’s other main strengths is the staff directory available by clicking on “contact us,” under the heading “Newsroom.” A complete list of newsroom staffers, organized by department, with names, positions, phone numbers and links to a contact

form. It would be improved only by including individual email addresses. The reporter's email addresses do appear, however, at the end of each article.

One major weakness is that users must register to receive nearly all content (Fig. 1.2). Registration is free, but users must enter personal information. The Web site states that personal information will not be shared without permission. The site does state, though, that aggregate demographic information will be shared with advertisers. This type of registration form can scare away potential readers.

The site could improve with the addition of links inside the text of the story. When links do appear, they are usually alongside or below the main story. Stories could also be broken up into sub-sections, or editors could make more use of bulleted lists.

herald-sun.com

The Herald-Sun's Web site, www.herald-sun.com received a score of 40 with ratings of "4" for four criteria, "3" for seven and "2" for two (Appendix C). The site rated very well on navigation, headings, and consistency, and one of its strong suits is its contact information. Contact information appears at the bottom right of home page – address, phone number and email address for the web administrator. "Contact us" appears on the home page, which leads to the mailing address, plus a staff directory, information on how to subscribe, and a phone list of the newspaper's different departments and frequently called numbers (Fig. 1.3). The staff directory includes names and phone numbers for the staff in management, advertising & marketing, circulation and in the newsroom. The staff's names link to the preferred email program, and writer's email addresses are shown in the directory. Writers' emails are also displayed with articles they write. Users should have no trouble getting in contact with whom they wish.

The site also allows for easy navigation. The herald-sun.com logo appears on every page in the upper left-hand corner leads back to home page. There is also a search function visitors can use to search the news or the Web. Menus appear on the left and right. On the left, visitors can choose Local news (with five different counties beneath this heading), Sections (such as Nation/World, State, Sports and Business), Resources (such as archives and maps) and News Partners (other newspapers, including the *High Point Enterprise* and *The Sanford Herald*). The menu on the right side of the screen contains links to customer service, community info and advertising info.

Many users visit the Internet for more than written information, however, and herald-sun.com does not offer much more than what appears in the print edition. The Web site offers very few interactive components. Despite the few “Interactive Specials,” which contain multimedia content, herald-sun.com offers little opportunity for users to interact with the site. Likewise, the site could use more links to supplemental materials or to sites with additional information. Very few stories contain links.

roxboro-courier.com

The *Roxboro Courier-Times*’ Web site, roxboro-courier.com, received a score of 32, rating “4” on two criteria, “3” on two and “2” on nine. (Appendix D) Needless to say, the Web site needs a lot of work. Like herald-sun.com, one of roxboro-courier.com’s strengths is its contact information. The name, email address, and phone number of the publisher is featured prominently on the “contact” page. The directory reads: “We want to hear from you!” Contact information for all six editorial staffers appears below that, followed by information for the circulation department, advertising department, office management and layout and design staffs. Partly because the staff is so small, and partly

because the audience is small, the staff at the *Roxboro Courier-Times* is much more accessible than any of the staffs at the other three newspapers.

The Web site also capitalizes on the newspaper's reputation as a trusted source of community information with its county links at the bottom left, with links to the Chamber of Commerce, city hall and the schools. It cannot compete with Web sites of newspapers like *USA Today* for national news, but it is the only place residents of Roxboro can find news about their town and county.

This strength is exactly the reason the roxboro-courier.com should improve its appearance and organization. The Web site should reflect the professionalism and credibility of the newspaper. Instead, this site is saturated with advertising. Animated, flashing ads are at the bottom of the page. Colorful block ads are on both sides in the "gutters." The Web site looks like a billboard. Most of the ads, however, are for the newspaper, or for "E=Ads Solutions," the paper's own ad service. Minimizing the ads, or organizing them in such a way that they do not intrude upon the content may help the Web site look more professional.

A clear color scheme would also help in that aim. The home page is instead a mishmash of colors, all coming from advertising. Several different colors of blue are used as backgrounds for navigational features. It is not clear what is content and what is advertisement. The staff at the newspaper probably wouldn't like it too much if their print edition appeared that way. Their Web site should be no different.

If possible, photos or other graphics should be added. No graphics currently appear that are related to the stories. A U.S. flag flies above the masthead at the center of the page, and that is the only picture not contained in an advertisement. Also, no

hyperlinks appear in any of the stories. At times a link to a Web site appears at the bottom of an article to offer additional information, but it is not linked. It is just written at the bottom of the page.

The larger the newspaper, the more it tends to take advantage of the opportunities presented by new technology and the Internet. Web sites like usatoday.com offer more than just the material contained in the print version of the newspaper. Multimedia presentations give users something extra that they can't get in the newspaper and attract web-savvy people seeking information. The large photos and multimedia elements hinder those with older computers or slow internet servers, though, and alienate potential online readers.

Regardless of size, the sites examined in this paper have several things in common. All of them present top stories of interest to their print readers in an online platform. None of them require left to right scrolling on their home pages. All of them maintain a consistent look throughout, so if someone links to an article from another Web site, he or she will know they are visiting the newspaper's site. All of them except for one, roxboro-courier.com, charge for archival content. The archives at roxboro-courier.com are by no means comprehensive, though, and the owner makes it clear he does not seek to make money with the Web site. Despite the size of the staff, the amount of money a newspaper has at its disposal, or the purpose of its Web site, certain elements can help these sites attract and keep loyal users.

If a newspaper has control over its site design, the easiest way to make it appealing and professional-looking is to create a color scheme. Designers should choose a color that's easy on the eye, and does not distract from photos or other graphics. That

color scheme should remain consistent throughout all pages, as should navigational tools, such as menus. A link to the home page should appear prominently, preferably through the name of the Web site or newspaper. Articles should have clear headings, with links to the full story that appears on another page. Studies have shown that people who read newspapers online focus first on words, not images.²⁶ If possible, photos should be included, but designers should keep in mind the possible technological limitations of their audiences. Smaller photos typically take less time to download, but some of the impact is lost. Designers should also include hyperlinks to additional information, when possible.

Content is key. Writers should maintain standards of print newspapers, writing concise and clear articles. Editors should make the information more digestible by using bulleted lists and sidebars. Users should also be able to navigate the Web site just as easily as they find their way around the newspaper. The most effective menu options seem to be sections, such as sports, news and features.

Limitations and future research

The Web sites analyzed in this paper are produced by newspapers with varying staff sizes and financial resources. They are all published in the same state, however, excluding *USA Today*, which is distributed nationally. Geographical diversity would yield more varied strategies and allow a more broad comparison. Also, a survey of young people could help determine why they do (or don't) read newspapers online and what motivates their decision.

²⁶ www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000/index.htm.

Conclusion

As Lowrey stated, not all design elements from the newspaper translate well to the Internet. The road map that developed over the last 30 years may now be obsolete. Some elements of the print newspaper work online and some do not. Large headlines don't make sense on a screen with limited size. Instead, Web sites can have a headline that stands out, by using a slightly larger and bolder font and a different color than the rest of the text. Large portions of text tend to turn off online readers. These should be broken into small chunks of information. The elements that do translate well from the print version to the screen include clear, concise writing, good visuals and good organization, such as sections for news, sports, features and so on. The most important stories should be placed at the top of the page. Photos and graphics should add something to the story.

Large newspapers and small newspapers do indeed use their Web sites differently. They play to their strengths. The larger newspapers, like *USA Today* can afford to hire staff to create cutting edge graphics and features for their Web sites. They can also hire a staff to create supplemental content, like video. Smaller newspapers rely more on their connection to the audience, with discussion forums and easy access to editorial staffs. While www.usatoday.com may not add a link to its publisher's email address any time soon, smaller papers can make small changes to improve their Web sites.

They can incorporate a discussion board. If users can post their thoughts about important issues, they may feel more invested in the newspaper. These features also encourage repeat visits, as people want to hear what their peers have written about issues that concern them. Smaller papers also have an advantage in the accessibility of their

staffs. This dimension, which builds trust, can be emphasized on the Web site by a clear contact page, with a large amount of information.

The addition of discussion boards presents certain challenges however, such as monitoring content. Newspapers with small staffs can follow the lead of usatoday.com, which lets readers take turns moderating discussions. Also, some automatic-censorship programs are available.

Smaller newspapers can also add links to supplemental material outside their Web site. While the creators of the sites should be careful not to lead readers away from their sites, they can add to their site, without having to create extra content. While larger newspapers have the advantage of staff size and money, smaller newspapers can play to their strengths, and teach the big papers something in the process.