

**Date:** April 7, 2008

**Title:** How Newspapers are Losing the Battle With Online News (I just gave the article a title for the Learning Record. I forgot to give it one in the first place.)

**Assignment:** Explanatory article on the decline of newspapers in place of online news for Advanced Feature Writing class, copied for my blog

**Format:** Blog posting (after it was handed in as a Word Document for Advanced Feature Writing)

**Google. Enter keyword:** Presidential Election. **Results:** Google News 2008 election, PresidentialElection.com, United States Presidential Election-- Wikipedia, 2008 Presidential Election-- See Where Their Money Came From, 2008 Presidential Election on Yahoo News. **Click:** PresidentialElection.com. News is easy to come by today. If I want to learn about the 2008 Presidential Election, the weather, the War in Iraq, or when that new Batman movie is coming out, all I need to do is ask my friends Google or Yahoo. This is the grim reality facing newspapers today.

When this search was performed via Google, the first eight hits were not from newspapers websites, but from websites not affiliated with print sources. The Washington Post and New York Times had websites detailing election information, but were not found until hits 9 and 10 on the search. People are using this method to find their news today, and the newspapers, once a respected bastion of political information, may be soon be fitted with a new coffin.

News on the Internet is fundamentally different from traditional media for two main reasons: the speed in which information can be posted online, and the participatory culture that follows. While there are traditional media sites that provide the same stories online that they provide in print or on television, these sites are not as profitable as their newspaper and television brethren had been in the past, and if the Google search is any indication, they are not the most used news sites. Many people today are growing accustomed to using blog sites that pick up stories from larger venues and add their

commentary. While some bloggers are professional journalists, most are not, and anyone can start a blog and begin writing about anything online, no matter how factual or false their findings. Most blog sites also offer forums in which people can discuss the latest developments. Instead of being given the facts and a commentary in the past, people, growing increasingly weary of traditional media outlets including newspapers, are now turning to the Internet to find more diverse opinions of the news, and to present their own.

According to “Out of Print”, a recent article published in *New Yorker Magazine* by Eric Alterman, “Independent, publicly traded American newspapers have lost forty-two per cent of their market value in the past three years, according to the media entrepreneur Alan Mutter.” The article continues, saying, “Few corporations have been punished on Wall Street the way those who dare to invest in the newspaper business have.” That is a lot of revenue. Almost half. Newspapers are now terrible business propositions. Also, Alterman reports that, “Since 1990, a quarter of all American newspaper jobs have disappeared.” These findings could mean one of two things: either no one wants or needs the services provided by newspapers; or more realistically, people are finding their news in other places. The article claims that the average age for newspaper readers is 55.

The failing health of the newspaper does not exist within a vacuum, and may be contingent on a couple clear developments. Alterman suggests that one fundamental problem with newspapers is public perception. News sources in the past attempted to present a fair, objective view of the facts, and for the most part, claim to continue in this aim. According to recent polling, however, many people believe that news outlets actively try to, “influence public policy”, and are not presenting news that is impartial. One observer suggests that 2043 will be the end of newspapers. If we remember that newspapers have been around since about 1720, and were doing brisk business until five years ago, that assessment is worth noting. This comes in the wake of many lay-offs, bureau closings, and loss of readership and advertising. Alterman says that the newspaper, “is starting to feel like an artifact ready for display under glass.”

The alternative: the Internet. The younger, faster, and in some ways smarter venue for news has come into its own as late. *The Carnegie Reporter* shows as early as 2004 in its study, “Abandoning the News”, that, “At the heart of the assessment of the news-related habits of adults age 18-to-34 are fundamental changes driven by technology and market forces.” Furthermore, the article reports, “Data indicate that this segment of the population intends to continue to increase their use of the Internet as a primary news source in the coming years and that it is a medium embraced in meaningful ways.” In other words, people that have kept their ears to the ground have seen this coming. Young people prefer the Internet, and don’t have the historical ties to media outlets such as a newspaper or television program that past generations may have had. The Internet provides an immediacy, a near instantaneous distribution of information.

*The Carnegie Report* finds that young people, aged 18-34 reported that using the Internet was, “the most useful way to learn”, as opposed to television or newspapers. Also, the report finds that young people prefer to use to Internet because it provides information, “when they want it.” The ability for webmasters and web users to use hypertext to link various sites together and to archive previous articles may very well be at the heart of these findings. If someone wants to learn about the 2008 Presidential Election, the example we used earlier, he or she would likely find scores and maybe hundreds of sites from around the world that provide coverage. If someone wants to find more information on Hillary Clinton, they can find her website. When the user stumbles upon Barack Obama or Hillary’s husband Bill, the user can embark on a new trail of information. While this process can be highly disorienting for some users, it can be highly engaging for younger readers, according to Jakob Nielsen and Hoa Loranger’s *Prioritizing Web Usability*. A whole generation of young people is growing up with this outlook on information in general and the news in particular. One more thing, this news on the Internet is free.

Wired Magazine reports that while *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* had been offering paid subscriptions for its services in the past, almost all of their services will be free by the end of this year.

In *Free! Why \$ 0.00 is the Future of Business*, Chris Anderson explains that part of what makes the Information Age so transformative is the price of information. While this article is not entirely about how *The Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* have lowered and/or cut subscription costs, its implications are significant. If this trend continues, and people grow to believe the idea that paying for information, goods, and services provided on the Internet, including news isn't necessary, newspapers will certainly have more trouble in the future. Anderson argues: "The rise of 'freeconomics' is being driven by the underlying technologies that power the Web." He continues, "Just as Moore's law dictates that a unit of processing power halves in price every 18 months, the price of bandwidth and storage is dropping even faster. Which is to say, the trend lines that determine the cost of doing business online all point the same way: to zero." Surfing the Internet, reading a movie blog, listening to a band on myspace, and reading the news are all the same in some people's eyes, and all of these things should, and can be free, according to some observers.

Newspapers appear to be far behind to curve and slow to respond to market demand in light of these findings. By charging fees to use their services, *The Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and any other respected paper of the past may have really been selling itself short. While it is difficult to anticipate what *could have happened*, it is clear that the market is quickly passing these two former giants by. This can be seen as liberating to some, and dangerous to others.

There is something fundamentally democratic about this process. On the one hand, we see old media institutions, oligopolies, really, running their perspective shows with no end in site. With the advent of the Internet, and user-generated content, Old Media is quickly becoming irrelevant. If a tornado takes place in Texas or Oklahoma, and destroys 10 houses, I can probably wait until it's shown in the newspaper the next day. Or, I can go online and see videos of the event and read about it immediately. The point is really that in the past, the few (newspapers and television outlets) spoke for the many (everyone else). This is no longer the case, and everyone can now share in the distribution of news. A story can hit cnn.com or *The Times'* site, and a blogger can write about it. That same day a person can

Google the story, and can be brought to that blog site. People can link to the blog post or email it to friends. Thus, news is becoming fragmented, with the audience being split among various television shows and an ever-increasing variety of websites.

While this development is seen as having mostly positive effects, some people, such as Andrew Keen, author of *The Great Seduction: The Cult of the Amateur* disagree. In his book, Keen reports, “the new Internet was about self-made music, not Bob Dylan or the Brandenburg Concertos.” Keen continues, “Audience and author had become one, and we were transforming culture *into cacophony*.” (Emphasis added.) Really, it can be argued that the decline of the newspapers is just a natural development in the wake of the Internet’s growing influence. News is just one of many institutions that is being beleaguered and beaten by the onslaught of the Web, and this development may not be entirely positive.

The newspaper is not dead yet, but it is clearly on the decline. However, observers argue that this isn’t necessarily because the medium is inherently flawed, but rather because it has just been slow to react to fundamental market changes. Most large (and even small papers, for that matter) now offer most, if not all of their coverage online, and for free. Also, papers have been quick to add blogs and forums to their sites so that their audience may have some involvement in the news discussion and commentary. The near instantaneous nature of the Internet, and the participatory culture that it engenders are seen as the major impediments to the success of traditional newspapers. With these new changes, newspapers can perhaps reclaim their place as the most trusted and implemented of American news distribution institutions. There is no guarantee that newspapers will survive from these recent developments, but their adaptability will give them a fighting chance.

**Comments:** As I've mentioned before, I also took Advanced Feature Writing for Print Media this semester. Interestingly, some of the developments regarding online communities are cutting into newspaper and magazine business. I talk about that theme in this article.