



Newspapers Recreate Their Medium

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Newspapers large and small have a long history of adapting to technological and market change. Small-town and community newspapers are flourishing in a new technological age that allows them to provide coverage of local events with detail and delivery speed that they've never had before.

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Photo montage: Traditional, printed newspapers still provide readers with a low-cost, portable, and comprehensive source of news. The Internet has made it possible for newspapers—even weekly, community papers—to report up-to-the-minute news 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on their Web sites, frequently with more content and photographs than in the newspaper itself. (All photographs from AP/Wide World Photos)

In the 21st century, newspapers have become chameleons, adapting with the changing environment. That's the way it's always been: from sheet-fed to rotary presses, linotype machines to desktop publishing, black and white to color, and now paper to electrons.

Newspapers continue to offer unique-value propositions that ensure their long-term future even as they change to encompass new forms of presentation and distribution. Newspapers remain the only medium that is primarily news; information that is usually verifiable, accurate, fair and in search of truth.

Radio is primarily a music and talk medium. Television is dominated by entertainment. The Internet is a search medium, offering access to a wide range of information with no assurances about the quality or veracity of content.

Local, community newspapers offer something that readers prize—local news.

Television stations and large-city dailies serve regional audiences spanning large cities, sprawling suburbs, and communities with total populations numbering in the millions. Cable channels and the Internet serve national or international audiences. None have the staff, time, space or pages to cover truly local, neighborhood news in a comprehensive and consistent way. They are limited to covering the bigger stories, the controversies, not day-to-day life that is the hallmark of community newspapers, including local government, schools, local health care and medical resources, neighborhood sports, social events, service clubs, and church activities.

This explains why the number of American dailies, and subscribers to those papers, has declined, while the number of community, nondaily newspapers has grown from about 5,500 to more than 7,000. Readership of the nondailies has almost tripled, to nearly 70 million every week.

New technologies pose challenges to the traditional newspaper business—a new learning curve and untested business models—but these technologies also bring new capabilities and opportunities to local news organizations.

Local Newspapers Meet the Competition

Local weekly papers no longer have to forfeit breaking news or sports to local radio stations.

Pre-Internet, reports on the Thursday night local government or school board meetings or the Friday night high school sports games would not see print until the following week. The Internet gives community weekly newspapers the ability to compete head to head with daily newspapers, radio, and television for breaking news and sports.

But even the Web is becoming old news. My local paper now sends me news alerts and sports updates and scores as they happen, throughout the game, via text messages on my cell phone. When the local coach resigned unexpectedly, I was among the first to know, and my thirst for details pushed me toward my computer to access the paper's Web site (I was traveling in another state and a print edition paper was not available). When I returned home, I eagerly anticipated the next edition of the paper for further developments and interviews. Americans don't carry their newspapers or computers everywhere, but we carry our cell phones everywhere. Now newspapers can reach their audiences virtually anytime, anywhere.

Newspapers no longer have to cede color, video, and photography to television. Community newspapers can now deliver more visual elements to local stories than

regional television stations. The TV station might have a five-second clip of the Friday night game between the two largest high schools, but the community newspaper's Web site can put an unlimited number of color photographs or video clips on its Web site from all the area high schools, junior high schools, and community sports leagues.

Even better, community newspapers have learned that, by posting more pictures to their Web sites, they receive more requests for reprints, thus creating a growing revenue stream. If the paper had previously printed one picture from an event, and Johnny was identified, his parents and relatives might buy a couple of pictures from the paper. But when pictures of Johnny and all his teammates are on the Web site, the opportunity for more family purchases grows exponentially.

Newspapers are delivering a wider reach for advertisers by combining the still-vibrant print distribution of community newspapers with the new and growing audience of those papers' Web sites and text-messaging alerts. Most newspaper Web sites or electronic editions are now considered profitable, while the print products continue to generate profit margins averaging about 20 percent. That's the top line.

Emerging technologies have an impact on the bottom line, too. The nationally-distributed *Christian Science Monitor* print edition costs about twice that of its electronic edition. The common assumption was that the more print editions sold, the more revenue the company would generate and the more profit it would realize. More sales revenue would result in more profit.

WRONG. The print product generated more revenue but the print product cost much, much more to produce and distribute. The profit from each print edition sold was only about half that of producing and distributing a single electronic copy. Without the need for more newsprint, more ink, and expensive distribution channels, the electronic edition could sell for less yet earn more profit.

Newspapers are learning that electronic distribution is a viable alternative to traditional print editions, especially for distribution outside the core market area. Papers sent to vacationing readers, retirees who've moved away, or those who have moved to a new region but want to keep up on news of family and friends back home often arrive weeks late and damaged.

Digital editions are delivered the same day, no rips, no tears. Births and deaths and news of a local sports hero are available to friends, family, vacationers, and retirees near and far ... in time to send a note of congratulations or condolence.

All in all, new technologies help news companies improve customer service and control costs. For decades to come, millions of Americans will value the inexpensive price, availability (no need to buy a computer) and portability (no need for a power cord or batteries) of a printed newspaper. But there will also be those who value urgent alerts and updates (cell phones) and more depth and context (Internet) than a printed newspaper can deliver.

If a reader is jogging, he or she can't read a print paper but can listen to a news podcast (a newscast recorded to an iPod). If riding a train or bus with no power outlet, a reader will value a print edition (or a good battery for the laptop). If a reader is outside a major metropolitan area, he or she may not have wireless access for a laptop or a strong signal for a cell phone. Newspapers have to be where the news consumers are, and delivered on a device they can use wherever they are, whatever they're doing.

For the near term, those devices include paper, computers, cell phones, and iPods. Tomorrow can and most assuredly will introduce even more ways to share information.

Newspapers that capture that vitality and deliver the news when, where, and how the audience is equipped to receive it will enjoy a long and prosperous future.

The Ties That Bind a Community Together

A current theme in the media is an exploration of how to engage citizens in civic activity. Newspapers are experimenting with expanded online letters to the editors, local and personal blogs, online forums, and various forms of citizen-originated content.

Some argue that community newspapers have never lost touch with their communities, that the emphasis on new technologies is misplaced. Readers in small towns have always had access to editors, reporters, and even the publisher. They chat while in line at the supermarket, at service club meetings, at church functions, and in the barbershop or salon. The distance between reader and newspaper is smaller than in large cities or metropolitan areas.

A perhaps unforeseen benefit of the new technology to community newspapers is the expansion of the old-fashioned network of correspondents. Small newspapers have always been challenged with small staffs and too few reporters or photographers to be everywhere at once, especially when the school board, city government, local sporting event, and church social all occur on the same evening.

Community newspapers have long relied on part-time or occasional volunteers to contribute reports from meetings or events that staff could not get to, or to contribute columns on local topics of interest. Wireless laptops and digital cameras have made it easy for virtually the entire community to become reporters and photographers for their local newspaper.

This has strengthened not only the connection between the community and its newspaper, but connections within the community as well.

Many American newspapers are producing issues that are filled with content submitted by local residents. In Columbia, Missouri, *MyMissourian.com* [<http://www.MyMissourian.com>] is a citizen-produced collection of stories, columns, commentary and photos published online under the umbrella of the local newspaper and (traditional) newspaper Web site. It

doesn't replace the newspaper or the newspaper's Web site—it complements it. It is news and information that doesn't necessarily fit the space requirements of the print newspaper nor the hard news orientation of the paper's Web site.

It is full of pictures of newborns and college graduates posted by proud parents and grandparents, community social events, and even the largest vegetables grown locally and favorite pets. There are personal stories, remembrances, reports from meetings and events that reporters could not attend, notes on church and school



Photo: *MyMissourian.com* publishes online articles and photographs by residents of the Columbia, Missouri, area who want to share stories about life in their communities. The best submissions are printed in the weekly edition of the *Columbia Missourian* newspaper. (Courtesy *MyMissourian.com*)

committees that often do not get covered in a newspaper, local recipes, and columns, commentary, and letters to the editor.

The best of these are assembled in the weekly print publication—news of, about, and by your neighbor.

Technology is a neat thing, and early adopters drive key portions of economic growth. But sometimes it's just

another tool to help people and communities do what they've always done: connect with each other. ■

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

HOW COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS ADAPT TO NEW TECHNOLOGY

News

- Weeklies can function as dailies for little added cost.
- The newspaper is no longer limited by 12, 24, or 48 pages.
- Photographs and color are no longer limited by press position or space.
- Web site links give readers more depth and context.
- The newspaper and its archives are searchable. Once community papers have digitized their back issues, staff and the public can easily keyword search through the history of a community with much more ease and speed than previous methods. Many such systems are set up on a fee basis, providing another revenue stream for the newspaper. Smaller community newspapers are still exploring this business model.
- Newspapers can provide everywhere, anytime delivery via cell phone text messaging, competing with radio for breaking news.

Advertising

- Newspapers can expand their reach to include Web and text message readers.
- Newspaper offerings can include video and audio advertising messages.
- Advertisers can promote a sale immediately via the paper's Web site or text messaging service, allowing greater ability to address unexpected inventory rather than waiting for next week's print edition. If a new product arrives or overstock needs handling, advertisers don't have to wait until next week's print edition but can tout a sale immediately via the paper's Web site or text messaging service.
- Newspaper Web sites can be programmed to display a different message from the same advertiser each time the same viewer clicks back on the paper's Web site.
- Readers can click on a link in an online ad that provides more detailed product information, product reviews, related services.
- Many coupons from newspaper Web sites can now be printed out on a home computer. Depending on the data collected from readers, such coupons can be individually targeted to address key demographics.
- Text message coupons can be captured on a cell phone and shown to retailers and advertisers. These, too, can be individually targeted.
- Unlike with radio, television, or the print edition, users can click through and purchase items through newspaper Web sites.

Production and Delivery

- Newspapers can publish as often as they like via the Web or electronic editions, with limited added costs. There are no added press lines and no increase in ink or paper supplies.
- Expanded distribution does not require more paper or ink.
- Electronic editions can be delivered outside the core market, even around the world, same day, without delay. No papers are lost or damaged; there are no added postage costs; and no extra delivery trucks or staff are needed.

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