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**Convergent journalism: the new life of old media**

News on the Internet, however, requires audiences to do something. They search, browse, click, and read. Online news poses the greatest challenge and potential for journalism because the medium and its use are so new and open to experimentation. Its strengths lie in creating new ways of storytelling, by building on its capability to be interactive, searchable, updatable, and multimedia. Its weaknesses lie in its newness. Its credibility, ethics, and financial viability are still being formulated. As a result, working online has both fascinated and frustrated news organizations. The major strengths of online news, like broadcast, also pose its biggest challenges. The ability of a news consumer to interact with the news and the people producing the news give online news an instantaneous connection to its audience that older media have not had. Many news organizations, in putting a story on the Web, include an e-mail address for audience commentary. Several news organizations provide the e-mail address of the main author or producer of the Web story. Special projects editor Walter Robinson, who put together the Boston Globe’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning reports on abuse by priests in the Boston area, credited the ability of readers of the Globe’s first story to contact the reporting team via e-mail and phone with more information on the abuses, which led to more stories. However, journalists and news organizations can get inundated with e-mail. While some of that e-mail can provide new information or perspectives on news stories, much of it does not. “The bulk of e-mails tend toward the opinionated, not the factual, and a depressingly high number of those are personal attacks” writes former Miami Herald assistant managing editor Mark Seibel. One Miami Herald reporter received nearly 1,000 e-mails in one day in response to a story he did on the 2000 presidential election vote in Florida.18 Online news organizations also make discussion boards and chat rooms available for users to communicate comments on stories, story ideas, and related information. The Providence Journal website still maintains an online forum for discussion and comments relating to the February 2003 nightclub fire that killed 100 people. However, news organizations are faced with problems when the information might be deemed inappropriate due to language or content or when it does not meet standards of ethics and reliability. Some news organizations, such as the Christian Science Monitor, have had to curtail their discussion boards because the organizations could not serve as adequate gatekeepers for the discussion boards and chat rooms linked to their websites. News organizations have had similar conflicts over Web logs, or blogs, written by their own employees. When CNN’s Kevin Sites began blogging about news from the northern Iraq front during the beginning of the U.S. incursion into Iraq, he was asked to stop because it was outside the realm of CNN editorial review and because of concerns that blogging distracted from the main focus of his CNN work: producing for television. Sites left CNN and later worked producing for NBC News and blogging. Sites put his blog to work in November 2004 to explain how he came to shoot and then distribute controversial footage of Marines shooting arrested Iraqi insurgents. Sites’s blog, at www.kevinsites.net, has been praised as an example of journalistic ethics in war reporting. Sites’s reporting gives the reading, listening, and watching public insight, or what could be called transparency, into the journalistic process. Blogs not only give journalists a chance to relate to news consumers, they also make news consumers into news producers. Bloggers first pointed out discrepancies with information in the documents CBS News was using as the basis of its later discredited story on President George W. Bush’s National Guard service. Bloggers have also kept alive issues or stories that the mainstream media started to ignore, forcing journalists to rethink and adjust their standards of news judgment. Some public officials record interviews they have with journalists and post them on their blogs to provide another viewpoint on a story. Rebecca MacKinnon, a former Beijing and Tokyo bureau chief for CNN, said she began seeing the value of blogs when she used them to find story ideas. Tom Regan, who blogs for the Christian Science Monitor, agrees. He notes that interactivity will force changes in the role of journalists. Mainstream news media will no longer be the only voice of authority for the news of the day. “You can’t fake it anymore because it’s too easy to be found out,” Regan says. “The Internet will force us to be better, more careful journalists, and that’s good for journalism.”19 The Internet also provides interactivity by giving news consumers the capability of what Regan calls “drilling” into a story to search for additional information, using links to access background information, commentary, and previous reporting on a topic. Many sites build in links to recent archives to allow online users to quickly find additional information about the topic of a news story. And the success of aggregators on the Internet, such as GoogleNews, websites, or portals designed to link users to news and information, have spurred news sites to open more links to other news sites. In an article for Online Journalism Review, Mark Glaser notes that news organizations worried that a link meant tacit endorsement of a site. That fear is fading. “We leave it to the readers to make up their own mind whether it’s valid or not,” says Bill Grueskin of wsj.com, the Wall Street Journal’s website. Online news has also given newspapers the ability to compete with television and radio in providing news as soon as it happens. The Internet can allow newspapers and television to make breaking news available to audiences who use their computer during the workday. But both newspapers and broadcast news managers worry that putting news on their websites discourages Internet users from picking up the paper or turning on the TV station, thus cutting into their main sources of revenue. “I’m happy as a journalist to provide information any way people can get it,” says Tom Heslin, managing editor of the Providence Journal. But while the speed of the Internet can satisfy people’s need for immediate news, he is worried about inaccuracy and its reflection on the paper’s credibility. “The Web’s dynamic is speed but you can’t be reckless.” Newspaper and television stations also worry about “scooping” themselves, putting their exclusives out for the public before they can be published or aired in their traditional outlet and alerting their competitors about their scoops. Convergence advocates maintain that scoops are a holdover from an old way of thinking about the news, and that most news audiences are not fixated about who gets a story first. The difference between being first and an also-ran is often measured in moments, a difference that means little to audiences. “So much of the information is available to everyone pretty much at the same time,” Wright says, and that fact should lead to better journalism. “It forces us to do things that make a qualitative difference rather than reporting something that happened twenty seconds before someone else reported it.” Online websites can give newspapers the chance to make the news immediately available to audiences, but many newspaper sites are not in the habit of updating their local news. A review of some thirty newspaper websites by researchers at the University of Texas in 2003–2004 found that while a dozen were diligent in updating their sites, the others either updated infrequently with breaking news stories or not at all. Many news outlets update their websites by refreshing their wire service offerings or putting out new pictures on major national or international stories. But newspaper or television websites lag in updating their news during the workday, when most people go online. The Internet also provides news organizations with the chance to develop new forms of storytelling since it is multimedia: using text, still pictures, video, animation, graphic illustrations, and sound. Multimedia, according to the Christian Science Monitor’s Tom Regan, is about giving choices to people looking for news. “We’re different in that we give people control,” says Angela Clark, deputy editor of MSNBC.com. For Clark, that opens up the possibility of providing more public service initiatives that benefit a national audience. Clark and others note that one of the most successful multimedia projects at MSNBC.com was a searchable database on unclaimed property that drew in the largest amount of traffic for the website. Another project that received acclaim was a multimedia game designed for the Web to coincide with an NBC examination of airline security screenings. The game gave the online audience a chance to be a baggage screener and understand the difficulty associated with the job. “We have the unique ability to create on the Web an experience for people,” Clark says, one that goes beyond telling or showing audiences the problems baggage handlers routinely face. ESPN.com has also pushed multimedia. “The medium I’m in, dot-com, really allows us to exploit all of the media at once,” says ESPN.com editor Neal Scarborough. ESPN.com can use print, with sports scores and game stories, audio from interviews, and commentary from ESPN radio and ESPN Motion, which includes video highlights of key plays of games and meets. Scarborough adds that ESPN has worked with what he calls “verge events,” or live game coverage that allows for fan interactivity with commentators as well as video and audio game reports. Using all the strengths of online news takes a commitment of time, money, and people, all of which tend to be in short supply in many newsrooms. Of all the outlets for news, online news has seen the greatest growth during the past decade. But news organizations are still seeking ways to make money from that growth. While online news popularity soars, few news organizations are reaping much financial reward from high audience interest and use, because most information on the Web is still free. Ninety percent of all news organizations say they now put news on the Web, but few organizations are investing large amounts of personnel and financial resources in it because of the low rate of financial return. One effort to tip the balance sheet from expenses to revenues involves online user registration. News websites are asking users to register by providing demographic information such as age and gender. That registration gives the online news provider a sales opportunity. With the demographic information from site visitors, the news organization can provide potential advertisers the ability to target their online pitches to certain consumers. In return for registering, users get access to the full versions of news stories. The New York Times (nytimes.com), Los Angeles Times (latimes.com), and the Chicago Tribune (tribune.com) are just a few of the organizations that require user registration. Some news groups look for revenue by charging users for access to certain website features. CNN’s site, www.cnn.com, used to charge for access to streaming video reports. The Boston Herald charges nonsubscribers for access to its columnists’ articles. Many online newspaper sites charge for access to their archives of stories that are more than a week or a month old. The Wall Street Journal requires a subscription for access to all of its stories online. The New York Times has created Times Select, in which Web subscribers can pay extra for access to the paper’s columnists and other Web features. “I don’t think we’ve sorted out yet what the Web is for,” says Tom Heslin, Providence Journal’s managing editor. “The Web as an information provider cannot live for long as a free environment, and newspapers can’t afford to put information in the market for free.”

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