

BLOGS : THE FRONTIER OF NEWS DESSEMINATION

A cursory glance through a dozen news and technology reviews yields a not-so-startling realization that traditional channels of media are battling for relevance in a world that has become decreasingly reliant on unidirectional sources of news. What was once a strict informational flow from journalist to newspaper/ broadcaster to reader/ viewer is challenged by interactive technologies such as web logs (blogs) which allow for a more dialogic form of news. Granted, op-eds and letters to the editor have always been available as forums for voicing concern; however, there is still an intermediary (the editor) that renders what is meant to be a democratic dialogue into a highly selective and exclusive hierarchy of opinion. Additionally, according to Ellen Simon, AP's Technology Writer, the news industry is facing a crisis of "declining circulation, vitriolic criticism... plus a series of scandals involving reporters who made up facts," thereby leading both citizens and the entire media industry to reflect on its relevance and credibility.

According to the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, the percentage of people which believe that the news frequently misreports hovers around 56%; in response to declining credibility, *News & Record*, a daily newspaper in Greensboro, North Carolina, has become one of the first media sources to turn to the Internet for salvation from irrelevance. With its new "*Town Center*" initiative, *N&R* utilizes the interactivity of chat forums and blogs to attract (primarily, younger) readership and strengthen its subscription base. While the initiative has been lauded as bold and innovative, it has more importantly been generally perceived amongst media industry as the requisite "next step" in the medium's evolution.

However, as with all experiments, reliance on the Internet has provided new challenges and has ironically complicated the issue of credibility that prompted dependence in the first place. Hundreds of years of print media has afforded the traditional newspaper with a gravity of objectivity that far outweighs words on a computer screen. Online news sources, while convenient, immediate and cost-effective, are often perceived as ephemeral and subjective. Print editions are also finite in that their purpose is completed once the ink has dried on the paper; online news editions carry the burden of instantaneous availability and accuracy, obligating media companies that (must) adopt this technology to re-consider the availability of human resources that must be now spent on what has increasingly become the new online frontier.

http://www.technologyreview.com/articles/05/03/ap/ap_032805.asp

A Bold Venture: Creating an 'Electronic Town Square' with Blogs

Ellen Simon AP Technology Writer

GREENSBORO, N.C. (AP) -- It's a journalist's job to ask questions, but they're usually aimed at outsiders

At the *News & Record*, a 93,000-daily circulation newspaper in Greensboro, reporters and editors are asking tough questions about the paper itself.

The biggest questions: If the paper needs to change to survive, what changes should be made? What can it do, especially online, to make itself the electronic equivalent of a town square?

Seeking the answers, the paper has launched an audacious online experiment.

The *News & Record's* Web site features 11 staff-written Web journals, or blogs, including one by the editor that answers readers' questions, addresses their criticisms and discusses how the paper is run.

That puts the paper way ahead of even much larger news organizations. The *News & Record's* blogs range from "just-the-facts, ma'am," to slightly spicy.

There's a page for reader-submitted articles, another for letters to the editor and an online tips' form. The Web site hosts online forums on 23 topics, including safety at a local high school, FedEx Corp.'s move to the area and cameras at local stoplights. Traffic cams monitor local road conditions. The site posts up-to-date public records on property ownership, marriages and divorce.

"When the paper's overhaul is complete, it may be a model for the sort of 21st century paper that many journalism big thinkers have been talking about, chewing over, and confabbing on for the last few years," wrote the industry-watching magazine *Editor & Publisher*. "Greensboro will be the first place where this conceptually newfangled newspaper actually exists."

"It's a wonderful idea," said Phil Meyer, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "It's important for newspapers to try dangerous experiments." His only reservation: The paper hasn't added any staff to work on its electronic experiment. "I'd rather they were willing to make an investment in this."

Other papers are watching. *The Houston Chronicle*, *The (Portland) Oregonian*, (Raleigh) *News & Observer* and *USA Today* have all called *News & Record* editor John Robinson to discuss what his paper is doing.

Why the interest? Declining circulation, vitriolic criticism of everything from the media's obsession with celebrity trials to its coverage of the 2004 election, plus a series of scandals involving reporters who made up facts has led to industry-wide soul-searching.

Except for a honeymoon period after Sept. 11, the percentage of people who say news organizations often report inaccurately has hovered around 56 percent, according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Readership has also eroded, especially among young people. According to futureofthenewspaper.com, a project of the World Association of Newspapers, 71 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds read a newspaper in 1967. By 1999, that number had declined to 42 percent.

Last month, Robinson posted an excerpt from *The New Yorker* magazine on his blog that read, "In a world where brand names alone don't confer power, the only way to prosper is to make products that genuinely improve (even if only marginally) on what came before."

Lex Alexander, who is running the paper's "Town Square" initiative, said he thinks no less than the paper's future is at stake.

Plenty of other papers are remaking their Web sites to make them more than a recap of the day's paper.

Some host outspoken political blogs, such as the *Philadelphia Daily News'* anti-war, anti-Bush "Attytood," whose logo looks like a Philadelphia cheese steak. Njo.com, the site for a group of Advance Publications papers including *The Star-Ledger*, New Jersey's largest paper, has blogs on two popular Jersey obsessions: Bruce Springsteen and "The Sopranos."

Others sites have well-trafficked interactive forums.

The site for the *Bakersfield Californian* features reporters' answers to questions such as "What's happening to the old Zody's building?" and readers' complaints about TV ads from a local furniture chain.

The Philadelphia Inquirer runs online "Ask the Writer" forums with reporters, including beat writers for the Philadelphia 76ers and New Jersey high school sports.

Delawareonline.com, the site for *The News Journal* in Wilmington, Del., offers twice daily local news webcasts that don't look much different from local TV news, with lots of crime and car crashes followed by feel-good features.

The *News & Record* is tracking the blogs' page hits and seeing impressive numbers. Still, Robinson said he has no sense that more than 100 people are daily readers of the papers' blogs. Most of the paper's blog posts get only a handful of comments.

Still, "as more people go to the Web, fewer of them buy the paper," Robinson said. "You go hunting where the ducks are flying; right now they're flying on the Web."

That said, being impartial and fair is a bedrock goal of journalism, but not blogging, and the paper's journalist-bloggers are well aware of the balancing act involved.

"We can't rant," said John Nagy, the business editor, who works on the business blog along with three other staffers.

Some reporter-bloggers don't want to take a side on hot issues.

After Wake Forest University basketball player Chris Paul was filmed hitting another player in the groin, *News & Record* sports reporter and blogger Jim Young didn't touch it.

"Because I'm not the columnist, I don't feel I can pass judgement," Young said. "It can make our blogs less juicy than others. I'm not comfortable being opinionated one minute and objective the next."

Some of the *News & Record's* blogs have inspired lively debates since the paper first launched them last summer.

The education blog, launched in October, is written by two reporters who post everything from the agenda of a board of education retreat to news about a proposal that would pull \$1.5 million from poor schools. The latter post got 126 comments, including some spoofs of Dr. Seuss book titles with commentary on the district superintendent. ("Terry B. Grier, Will You Please Go Now!")

Some on the paper have their doubts about whether blogs can win over young readers.

Night cops reporter Eric Townsend, a 26-year-old who also contributes to a blog about traffic, said he's happy to post to the blog, but he thinks declining newspaper readership among the young is more a symptom of a decline in civic engagement than anything else.

"Young people don't have a sense of involvement, a sense of community," he said. "It doesn't matter how many 'young' stories we do. I don't think blogs are the answer either."

Which brings the biggest thinkers back to a basic point: The paper's Web site can only be as good as the actual paper, which is an example of the triumphs -- and frustrations -- of reading a solid local paper.

The *News & Record* looks good; it won an international award for design. The two education reporters regularly break news about changes in the county school system. A series of reports on crime, drugs and unpaid loans at low-income apartment buildings, one of which was managed by a county commissioner's company, is classic watchdog journalism.

But nobody's perfect: a recent headline about a car accident that killed two local teenagers read "Report concludes driver in crash wasn't drunk," when in fact, the article said the report concluded he had no alcohol in his system at all.

Still, the *News & Record's* work on the Web is seen as essential to the paper's future.

Alexander, the editor spearheading the effort, said, "I don't know for a fact that what we're doing is going to get us to the goals we have, but continuing what we were doing certainly wasn't an option."