

Print and Online Newspapers: Working Together, Becoming Stronger

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Senior Honors Project, 2007-2008

Summary

Over the course of this year, my research has examined the current state of the news industry, delved into readership trends for both print and online newspapers, and assessed technology's effect on journalism. I have interacted with many industry experts and read countless articles on the transforming world of journalism. Under the mentorship of Professor Mary Nesbitt at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, I have learned more than I could have imagined this year and am that much more prepared to enter the industry as a productive and effective journalist.

To put this fourth paper in perspective, it is necessary to recap briefly what was discussed in my first three papers. My first research paper focused primarily on the current state of the news industry and the Internet's rapidly growing and significant role in getting people news when they want it, where they want it, and how they want it. As reported in my first paper, more readers prefer to get their news online, now that "more than two-thirds of Americans (68.1 percent) use the Internet at home, a substantial increase from the 46.9 percent of users who reported home Internet use in 2000," according to University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future (2007). Even so, overall interest in news has declined, especially amongst the younger generation.

My second paper examined how important story content and presentation are in sustaining and gaining readership. My research showed the importance of a paper's audience and how news can be presented in different ways to better appeal to its audience while not being "dumbed down." My research further highlighted the importance of community and local news to readers.

My third paper examined multimedia journalism and its effect on journalists and readers. I looked at how the relationship between reporter and reader has changed significantly, as they are now able to communicate directly and more immediately as well. Facilitated by technological advances, stories can now invite and encourage reader comments to be placed easily online, allowing the audience to react immediately if they so choose right after they read the story. Further, blogs have created a new, still-evolving forum for discussion. This increased form of interactivity has greatly helped reader engagement.

Culminating in this fourth paper, my research presents how print and online newspapers are able to not only coexist in the future, but make each other stronger by adopting changes that respond to reader behavior and preferences, while maintaining journalistic integrity.

Pros and Cons

One way to determine how to improve print and online newspapers is to identify the pros and cons of both media. From there, journalists and media organizations need to keep and improve upon the pros while eliminating or mitigating the cons. Below in chart form is a summary of my research of pros/cons of both media from my past three papers.

The following is a pro/con chart of different features and qualities that make print and online newspapers more or less desirable:

Print Newspapers vs. Online Newspapers:

Pro/Con

PRINT ~ PRO	PRINT ~ CON	ONLINE ~ PRO	ONLINE ~ CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More in-depth stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal and slow interactivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactivity (reliable blogs, videos, maps, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More mistakes made in haste to get story up first
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer distractions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot access as easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speedy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too many distractions/cluttered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More “classic” feel and look 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Costs money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free for the most part 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiring to stare at screen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily transportable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less up-to-date 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constantly updated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories can be too bare or general
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent physical form of archiving for libraries, as historical references, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ad revenue migrating to online papers leading to fewer resources to support this medium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides more ways to tell a story, and offers an alternative to those who want to know the news but don’t like to read long stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially with blogs, it can be difficult to tell what is accurate news
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher chance that what is printed is accurate, since 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorter articles that can save time for readers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone can become a “journalist,” which may lead to a higher

there is more time to research articles; also, almost anyone can become a “journalist” online			risk of inaccuracy, etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A sense of “wholeness” – editors pay special attention to creating front pages with variety and balance among stories, images, etc. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can see more headlines at once 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More sophisticated design 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Easy archiving and retrieval; searching is possible 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attracts more ads, which means more revenue to support the site 	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appeals to a younger audience 	

Readership Behavioral Changes

To determine how print and online newspapers can improve in the future and work together, newspapers need to look at readership preferences based on societal, cultural and technological changes. By addressing and responding to these behavioral changes and preferences, enhancing the pros of each type of medium, while mitigating or

eliminating their respective cons, my research seeks to establish a more effective model for delivery of news.

The recommendations embodied in this model are designed to improve print and online papers individually, as well as collectively, resulting in more effective news delivery and a more informed society in the future. My research has identified a symbiotic relationship between print and online newspapers; by supplementing each other, the two media working in concert and adopting the recommendations in this paper have the potential to create a combination that is greater than the sum of the individual components.

*The following is an inventory of **readership behavior** changes:*

- Fast-paced society which wants news *now*
- Timeliness and convenience have become extremely important based on fast-paced society
- Busier and more unpredictable schedules call for more flexible ways to receive news
- Usually prefer shorter stories or things like pull-out boxes that get to the point more quickly when in a rush
- Multitaskers
- Changing interest in news
- More skeptical of what is reliable news
- Want better service

*The following is an inventory of **content** readers want in stories:*

- Interactivity and multimedia

- More feature-styled stories, particularly in print newspapers, to replace “dry” stories
- More community/local news
- Complicated topics written in more simplistic ways
- Articles that:
 - Give the reader something to talk about
 - Make the reader smarter
 - Look out for the reader’s civic or personal interest
- “Go and do” information
- Shorter stories online
- More in-content promotion

Recommended Improvements

To ensure that both print and online newspapers survive in the future and work together to make each other stronger, improvements have to be made to both content and presentation – the two main driving forces behind increasing readership. Media organizations should try to enhance the pros and eliminate as many of the cons as possible for each medium.

In addition to making individual changes to each medium, having both print and online newspapers work together can help supplement what each lacks by itself. Stronger connections between print newspapers and their online counterparts need to be established; neither alone is adequate. This development has started happening at newspapers like the “Los Angeles Times.”

When asked in an email interview whether she had any suggestions for ways print and online newspapers could most effectively work together in the future, Diana Day, creator of the blogs inSierra Madre and BeTwinned, wrote:

“I don't know whether I have any clever suggestions. The only thing I know for sure is that print and online versions of the newspaper are going to have to work together to survive,” Day wrote. “Online is having trouble figuring out how to make money, and print papers are circling the drain, to use a phrase I heard recently from a hardworking print reporter I know.”

That said, Day does prefer print newspapers, although she also sees the benefit of online newspapers:

“I like print newspapers because I have an easier time directing my attention to stories that I consider important,” Day wrote. “For me, this is a balance between what catches my eye and what the newspaper editors & [sic] the layout staff think is important. Additionally, a newspaper is more portable for people who don't like portable electronic devices like PDAs. I do not think that these features came about due to readers' behavioral changes; I think that these are longstanding features of a print newspaper.”

“Online newspapers are often free and convenient for many people to access. Still, though, I don't like any of the available portable electronic gadgets for newspaper reading. If I want to read the paper on a train, then I'll choose the print paper. I have always really enjoyed excellent slide shows (like those on the NY Times site) as a feature of online news, and more and more, I'm enjoying video too. Obviously, these are online-only features. Yes, I do think that changes to online newspapers come

about as a result of readers' behavioral changes. Or, the changes come about simply because that's what employers will allow. I know folks in online newsrooms, and sometimes they are faced with ignorant bosses who only let certain changes go through, and they might not be the changes that readers most desire.”

Content improvements

1. Print newspapers should provide stories with “go and do” information that require readers to go to the paper’s online site.

- a. For a print newspaper to feel worth the cost, stories should have more “go and do” information at the end of each article. Online stories have a multitude of sources that link articles to various videos, links, blogs, etc. that contribute to their popularity. Print newspapers do not have this, so they need to include something that will allow the reader to do more than *just* read the paper.

2. Print newspapers should provide stories that have multimedia versions of the story on the paper’s online site.

- a. In light of the previous suggestion, to create a symbiotic link between print and online newspapers, print newspapers should have information as to where readers can see the video or hear the audio clip that accompanies a related story online. This is particularly significant for stories of tragedy – being “in the moment” after receiving the facts from the newspaper would allow the reader to feel more connected to what they’re reading and thus invest more in the stories.

3. *Online newspapers usually include national stories – there should be links to the more “localized” story that is found in print newspapers.*

- a. One of the changes readers want from print newspapers is more community news. While of course not every national story can have a more “hometown angle,” having a story with this angle would allow newspapers to better differentiate themselves. Many major newspapers cover the same national news. To become more “competitive” and be successful, a “hometown angle” would help them move towards increasing readership and interest in news. While it is true that generally people do not have as much time to read print news stories, which are usually more in-depth, having a more human interest angle could entice people to pick up a print newspaper during free time and instead use online newspapers for the quick facts. Both include the information, and each is working to help the other.

4. *Online pages should have one or two print stories that they “push.”*

- a. On almost any online news site, there is often a large section of the page taken up by one story or a clearly predominant image or story. These are stories that online newspapers seem to want to “push” on its readers based on its prominence and importance. If the story is bigger and more colorful, readers will be drawn to it and think that the story is more significant. Whether these stories are actually important is debatable, but this technique of “pushing” or subtly suggesting stories of importance is a

good one. Online newspapers should push one or two stories they consider significant in their respective print publications.

5. *Print stories should direct people to related blogs.*

- a. A negative aspect of print newspapers is their lack of immediate interactivity with their readers. If print stories were to indicate where to find related blogs for immediate discussion after reading the article, this would help link interactivity to print newspapers. Also, by having print newspapers direct readers to specific blogs, this would potentially eliminate skeptics who may wonder whether a blog is legitimate.

6. *Letters to the Editor for print stories should be submitted online.*

- a. Letters to the Editor for print newspapers are a slow way of communicating with a paper's writers and editors. However, if they are done electronically, readers feel a sense of having taken initiative in a way that seems more immediate than writing a letter. By having a "Letters to the Editor" section online for print stories, this also allows print newspapers to publish much more recent letters, in particular, if they are daily publications.

7. *For each article that covers a complicated topic or issue, like war or finance, have a separate link that will explain in basic terms the background of the issue, important terms, etc. – this "reference sheet" will be applicable to all stories related to that issue.*

- a. This would help alleviate the complaint readers have that journalists assume the readers know too much about an issue, which can be a

8. *Newspapers should include more in-content promotion.*

- a. If newspapers don't include more in-content promotion, readers are less likely to see the improvements or changes newspapers make to gain more readers. Interest in news is declining – so newspapers need to do something that draws readers in. Newspapers need to show what sets them apart from other papers.

Presentation improvements

1. *To avoid clutter on online sites, scroll over headlines to get summary of article.*

- a. Newspaper real estate is valuable. And although online newspapers can fit much more on one page than a print newspaper can, sometimes it can be overwhelming or not visually appealing. On various news sites, if users scroll over a headline, they receive a summary of the article instead of having a short description placed right beneath the headline. It saves space and presents a cleaner page.

2. *Online sites should keep articles short on the homepage.*

- a. A Poynteronline study (2004) conducted a test to see what worked best in attracting readers amongst 46 participants in San Francisco, and it discovered that online stories that were shorter received more views,

suggesting that when readers go online, they're not looking for in-depth stories, but rather the quick facts.

3. *Be clearer with section headings in print newspapers so people don't have to search for the article they want, and have dedicated sections to news that readers have specifically requested they want (probably more community news for print newspapers).*

- a. Consistency is important in gaining loyal readers. This can be done especially well in print newspapers, since layout is usually less distracting than in an online newspaper. If newspapers gain more loyal readers based on a small regular section that is of importance to the reader, then it will have benefitted the entire paper. The reader will subscribe to that paper if only for that section.
- b. Readers want community and local news. The argument that journalists are the gatekeepers of information and should decide what to write about, versus the argument that journalists should write about what readers want to read, will always be an issue. However, there is a way to compromise between the two. Journalists need to cover certain news that may not be popular among readers but also be responsive to readers' preferences and behavior – after all, that's the only way newspapers can “improve” in the future. Readers are the ultimate audience which the paper is informing; readers are also the target of ad dollars that as a practical matter support the operations of the paper and all its staff.

4. *Just like with print newspapers, online newspapers should have grouped stories – for each new headline that appears, related or past stories should be grouped underneath that headline as hyperlinks.*

- a. Readers, if they so choose, can read the other links in more depth for context, background, more detail or learn about related news and topics. Grouping the stories makes it more convenient for readers, which is an important consideration in readership satisfaction.

5. *Within print stories, there should be pull-out boxes and summaries of articles for quick scanning.*

- a. Even if readers don't end up reading the whole article, if they can at least read the information in pull-out boxes or any type of summary, they will become that much more knowledgeable about the topic and will have at least spent some time with a paper. At the very least it draws the readers' eye into the story – instead of seeing a huge block of text, they may see text along with interesting visuals that break the story apart in a more visually attractive way.

Newspapers all over the country have begun taking steps, some bigger than others, to ensure their survival and continued relevance. Many have turned to the Readership Institute at Northwestern University for guidance, and they have become increasingly cognizant of the significance of reader behavior and preferences in the rapidly transforming media world of print and online newspapers. My research has culminated in a series of feasible and practical recommendations that both respond to such behavior

and preferences, and maintain journalistic integrity. If print and online newspapers listen to their readers and adapt to the changing technological multimedia world, the future looks hopeful for them.

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