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WHO WANTS YESTERDAY'S PAPERS? THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT ONLINE MEDIA

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WHO WANTS YESTERDAY'S PAPERS? THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT
ONLINE MEDIA

by

Devin Miller

B.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2008

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
December 2010

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

WHO WANTS YESTERDAY'S PAPERS? THE RISE OF ONLINE
INDEPENDENT MEDIA

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

Approved by:

William H. Freivogel

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
November 9, 2010

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

DEVIN MILLER, for the Master of Science degree in NEW MEDIA, presented on November 9, 2010 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: Who wants yesterday's papers? The rise of independent online media

MAJOR PROFESSOR: William H. Freivogel

My research project focuses on the current financial and editorial health of the newspaper industry in the United States and the struggles newspapers are having in regards to profitability with their online operations. I have collected background information on independent and non-profit online journalism, the emergence of citizen journalism, and the redistribution of news via blogs and content aggregators. In this paper, I analyze these forms of digital media and determine whether they are adding or subtracting from the value creation process of corporately owned news organizations.

My goal in doing this research was to develop a unique alternative community journalism website. The site I have developed, iSouthernIllinois.com, includes video, photography, and text content taking a bottom-up approach to storytelling. While there is some text on the site, iSouthernIllinois.com primarily uses the visual storytelling mediums of video and photography. Another goal of this project was to determine whether the print business model is a necessary compliment to a web product or if a stand-alone news website can be profitable after a complete phase-out of print operations, or as a new startup company. I will also examine my internal debate during the creation process of the site: whether to launch iSouthernIllinois.com as a for-profit business or using a non-profit model.

DEDICATION

For my children: Rosalee, Isabel, and Aiden. Because of you my life has deeper meaning, purpose, and joy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank my chair: chairman William H. Freivogel. Because of your initial recommendation on my behalf to enter the graduate program my life is now on a much different and unexpected course.

To my parents who expect the best from their children and the inspiration and courage to find answers for difficult questions — my eternal thanks.

Roger Hart, thank you for being my mentor for the last thirteen years and convincing me that graduate school was a real option. Your passion for teaching and desire to see your students excel has always pushed me further than what I thought I was capable of.

A special acknowledgement is deserved for Sharrie Glatzhofer who provided day-to-day culinary and emotional support and a critical sound board for my ideas.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For the last 13 years I have held a variety of jobs in print media including working as a photojournalist and owner and publisher of three weekly newspapers. The decision to sell my newspapers and ultimately to re-enter the academy was influenced by my personal experience with declining print revenue and available jobs in the newspaper industry. I found that I could no longer be only a photographer working for a daily newspaper or survive as a weekly newspaper publisher and have a positive outlook on my financial future. The transition from print journalism to online publishing required a variety of new skill sets that previously I had little experience with (shooting and editing video, web content management and presentation, online page design, and Internet advertising models). The desire to continue my work as a journalist pushed me to gain insights into new storytelling methods and Internet publishing models. Through my graduate research and production experience, I am now excited at the possibilities of being a journalist in the 21st century.

Until the emergence of the Internet, newspapers had been able to weather the technological storms of radio and television, if not prosper. The failure of newspapers to embrace and fully understand the power of the Internet (and the expectations of their readers) combined with dire economic conditions has led to an industry-wide depression.

Paul Meyer, author of 'The Vanishing Newspaper,' believes that newspapers and advertisers alike need to make a quick transition oriented more toward the web.

"Newspapers can at last grow their businesses without being held back by the variable costs of newsprint, ink and transportation. In the recent past,

newspaper owners have preferred to cut fixed costs, like editorial staff, which gives a quick boost to the bottom line but weakens their hold on the audience. Using technology to cut the variable costs is a better strategy even though the payoff takes longer" (Jeltner).

Meyer's positive outlook from 2005 on the use of the Internet to sustain the newspaper industry has yet to come to fruition. The challenges for newspapers to balance their editorial health while remaining financially competitive continue to amass.

Making a living as an independent journalist in southern Illinois, a rural and economically depressed region, is difficult. I pay my bills working as a freelancer for a variety of companies producing public relations videos and often have to travel to several states to gain contracts. I have not produced any content for a commercial newspaper since 2006. I see iSouthernIllinois.com as a way for me to continue producing community journalism in the region where I live and also own the means of production and retain my copyright. ISouthernIllinois will not be my only source of revenue as I will continue to pursue a diverse clientele outside of journalism. In order to make this a feasible project I chose not to focus on creating a website that relies on breaking news, sports coverage, or community events (i.e. city council meetings, date specific fundraisers, etc.) for content. Rather, I intend to focus on short-term and long-term stories that commercial media ignore. In response to the popularity of You Tube and other video orientated websites the primary vehicle for storytelling on iSouthernIllinois.com will be short form videos augmented with still photographs and soundslides.

iSouthernIllinois.com will feature a democratic two-way communication structure where area residents will have the opportunity to produce their own content and have a regional venue through which to publish. Unlike traditional

news websites, iSouthernIllinois.com will not allow anonymous comments on stories. The free-for-all commentary that is currently allowed on many newspaper websites (see example from thesouthern.com in Figure 1) distracts more than adds to a reasonable discussion of the story. Taking a page from past newspaper practices, those who wish to engage in discourse will have to take ownership of their viewpoints. Those who wish to provide story ideas that may be controversial can do so in confidence via e-mail or telephone.



Mad conservative said on: November 3, 2010, 12:50 pm

Terrorists and those who support them directly or indirectly don't deserve to have any personal freedoms. Those freedoms are only reserved for those of us who are willing to stand up and defend what is ours. We know who the terrorists are because they attacked us and continue to threaten us every day. During WWII we knew who attacked us and we rounded up all of them on our shores and put them in camps until the war was over. That's just common sense. You're either with or against us madblogger!



madblogger said on: November 3, 2010, 7:57 am

Your sarcasm is wasted. I merely defend personal liberty and any narrow minded attacks against it. Unless you would like to tell me who all the known terrorists were at the reading, your accusations have no merit. That's ok though, attack me all you want, you merely detract from your own point you so desperately are trying to make.



Mad conservative said on: November 3, 2010, 6:23 am

I've suspected it for some time but now I'm sure about it; mad blogger is a closet liberal. I've turned a blind eye to his defense of gays, certain ethnic groups, and even known criminal gangs, but defending terrorism? Come on! I'll bet he even secretly supports Obama. It's the enemy within that is going to be this country's downfall.

«First Page 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Last Page »

Figure 1

The motivation behind launching this website is to return to the intrinsic value of journalism, not an overriding financial interest or obligation. In this way, iSouthernIllinois.com, operating under either a for-profit or non-profit business model, would be considered an alternative media source.

According to Atton (2005), alternative media can be understood as those media produced outside the forces of market economics and the state, that provide the opportunity for audiences to become producers from the periphery (p. 3, 7, 9). Alternative media producers put editorial content at a higher priority than marketing and promotion (Curran, 2003, p. 232). Usually undercapitalized, alternative media must keep production costs to an absolute minimum. The Internet can bypass the restrictions of broadcast range or limited print distribution and can potentially connect citizens internationally. Online reproduction costs are transferred to the receiver, and the need for a large production staff is reduced (p. 234). Alternative media can also maintain its traditionally non-hierarchical, open forum democratic style of communication by the use of the Internet and open source software and web applications such as Wordpress.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thought will spread abroad in the world with the rapidity of light; instantly conceived, instantly written, instantly understood, at the extremities of the earth.” —Alphonse de Lamartine’, mid-19th century French poet.

With the decline of the newspaper industry, the rise of new media requires constant research to stay abreast of current trends and conditions. While initially writing this literature review, I searched for the term ‘newspapers’ on Google and found an article published minutes earlier by The New York Times about a last-minute deal that kept The Boston Globe, one of the country’s premier publications, in operation. The industry is changing at such a fast pace with editorial giants like The Globe facing extinction that the academic research community is having a difficult time keeping pace.

Research on what inspires a customer to buy a newspaper is, according to Jack Rosenberry, “broad but not deep” (p. 378). However, there is information about what age groups do read newspapers on a daily basis. Studies have shown that among 35 to 44-year-olds, daily newspaper readership had been declining before the use of substitute technologies such as the Internet. A 1980 study found that 66 percent in this age group read a newspaper, but by 1990 it stood at 60 percent (Rosenberry, p. 377). According to the Pew Research Center who polled a broader but similar demographic (30-to-49), readership fell to 49 percent by 1996. Combining both online and print readership, the Pew Research Center's poll found just 40 percent of this demographic were reading a newspaper on a daily basis in 2006 as seen in Figures 2 and 3 (Pew, 2006).

Newspaper Websites And Overall Newspaper Readership					
	Total	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
2006	%	%	%	%	%
Newspaper Yesterday*	43	29	40	50	58
Print only	34	20	27	41	55
Web only	5	7	7	4	1
Both	4	2	6	5	2
NET: Print version	38	22	33	46	57
NET: Web version	9	9	12	9	3
1996					
Newspaper Yesterday	50	29	49	58	70
10-year change	-7	0	-9	-8	-12

* Figure includes people who said they got news online yesterday, and when prompted, said they visited the websites of one or more newspapers when online yesterday.

Figure 2

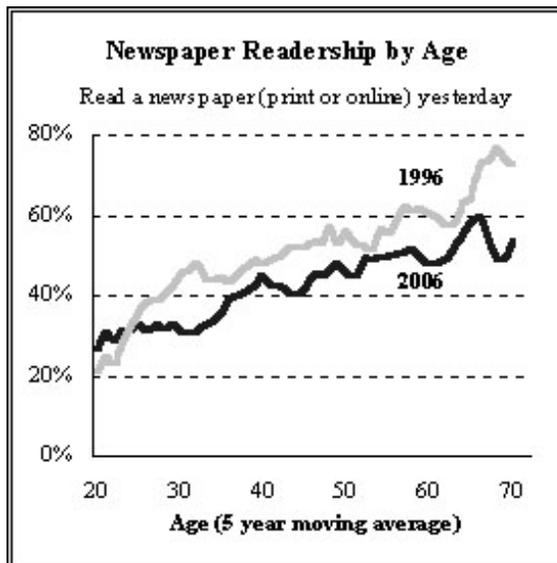


Figure 3

Further research suggests that part of the newspaper industry's ills can be attributed to a decline in editorial quality in publicly owned publishing companies. Finding the 'sweet spot' where a newspaper can please both their advertisers

and readers is difficult and can result ultimately in loss of revenue. Lowering quality by reducing staff size, decreasing editorial-to-ad content ratio with fewer, shorter stories can provide a company with immediate financial gains. But in the long term, Kim and Meyer (2005) suggest that the “cost in diminished reader loyalty and reduced cohort replacement are slower to materialize.” (p. 12).

A declining readership and management style that favors reductions in editorial content is a central part of the problem. There is no denying the role of the web in the current financial struggles of the newspaper industry. While Phil Meyer suggests that “it is in the interest of both newspapers and advertisers shift content to the Internet,” (Meyer, as cited in Farhi, p. 20), Paul Farhi says the sheer number of blogs, aggregators and other competitors are driving down ad rates (Farhi, p. 18) The CPM, or cost-per-thousand, of reaching online advertisers is as much as 10-to-1 when compared with print. The news reading audience has been fragmented into smaller groups, and their page views are considered less valuable than if their respective eyes were on a printed page. Online advertising revenue continues to rise, but its growth doesn’t replace the ad revenue lost in the print editions (Farhi, p. 18). For example, if The New York Times were to exist solely on online revenue, 80 percent of their current editorial staff would have to be laid-off (Hirschorn, p. 44).

Meyer believes that printed news will survive the current and projected ad crunch, “but mainly in niche products for specialized situations” (Meyer, as cited in Farhi, p. 21). Many newspapers, large and small, have started to produce niche products filled with entertainment, health and business news. These niche publications don’t feature hard news, but rather fluff pieces highlighting ‘good news,’ attracting traditionally large advertisers such as hospitals and large businesses (Hirschorn, p. 43).

Craigslist founder Craig Newmark says traditional media management hasn't quite yet figured out a way to continue being profitable while attracting talented journalists and printing hard news: "While there are people working on it, no one's figured it out yet" (Farhi, p. 21). Large newspapers may begin to mix original reportage with aggregation, allowing them to close far-flung international bureaus and concentrate on their regional and national markets as a cost-saving measure (Hirschorn, p. 44).

There have been attempts in the industry to re-think core creative strategies. Under the headline, "Tierney stirs newspaper ad revolution," a 2006 Advertising Age article paints an optimistic picture for the future of The Philadelphia Inquirer (at that time the company also published The Daily News). Brian P. Tierney, formerly in public relations, bought the newspaper with the hope to create new ad-friendly formats and boost both publications' online presence (Mullman). Tierney merged The Daily News with The Philadelphia Inquirer and in early 2009 the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection despite his efforts.

Doomsday predictions are as easy to find as a pebble in a creek bed. Many negative forecasts are difficult to dispute. Fitch Ratings service said in 2007, "More newspapers and newspaper groups will default, be shut down and be liquidated in 2009, and several cities could be without a daily print newspaper by 2010" (Hirschorn, p. 42). Fitch Ratings was partially correct in its predictions. Not including the student newspaper at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor saw the Ann Arbor News shut down daily print operations after 174 years. The paper has been rebranded as annarbor.com and publishes a print edition bi-weekly (Knight, 2009). There have been several newspaper closings since the Fitch report; The Tucson Citizen, The Rocky Mountain News, The Baltimore Examiner all ceased operations in 2009.

However, there are glimmers of hope. Examples include the widespread use of mobile devices with web capability or emerging technologies that use an active-matrix electrophoretic display that reflects light much like paper (Hood, p. 11). Apple's rollout of the iPad in 2010 increases the opportunities for newspaper companies to provide content to users. In the past you may have heard the argument in newsrooms that you couldn't or wouldn't take your computer into the bathroom, but with these lightweight and small portable devices, readers are able to access online content virtually anywhere. Widely available wireless high-speed connectivity will be central to the success of these devices. These technological developments certainly don't mitigate the advertising revenue decline, but it does give hope to publishers for increasing and migrating readership online. Overall, newspapers continue to be profitable despite the many challenges they face, still posting a 11.3 percent profit margin for the first 8 months of 2008. These statistics also reflect a steep decline from the 22.3 percent margin the industry produced in 2002 (Morton, p. 52).

Where do we as trained print journalists go from here? For recent journalism school graduates, the competition for the remaining jobs in newspapers is stiff. Some young journalists are signing up with Patch.com. Owned by communications giant AOL, Patch is launching hyper local news websites throughout the country (Brauer, 2010). Staffed by local editors working from their homes salaries can reach up to the mid-\$40,000 range. Each applicant is required to write a short story within a half-hour and post a full version on twitter within an hour and then follow up on any questions or comments from readers (Brauer, 2010). The potential editors then have to then go through the same process again in order to prove that they have the skill sets needed.

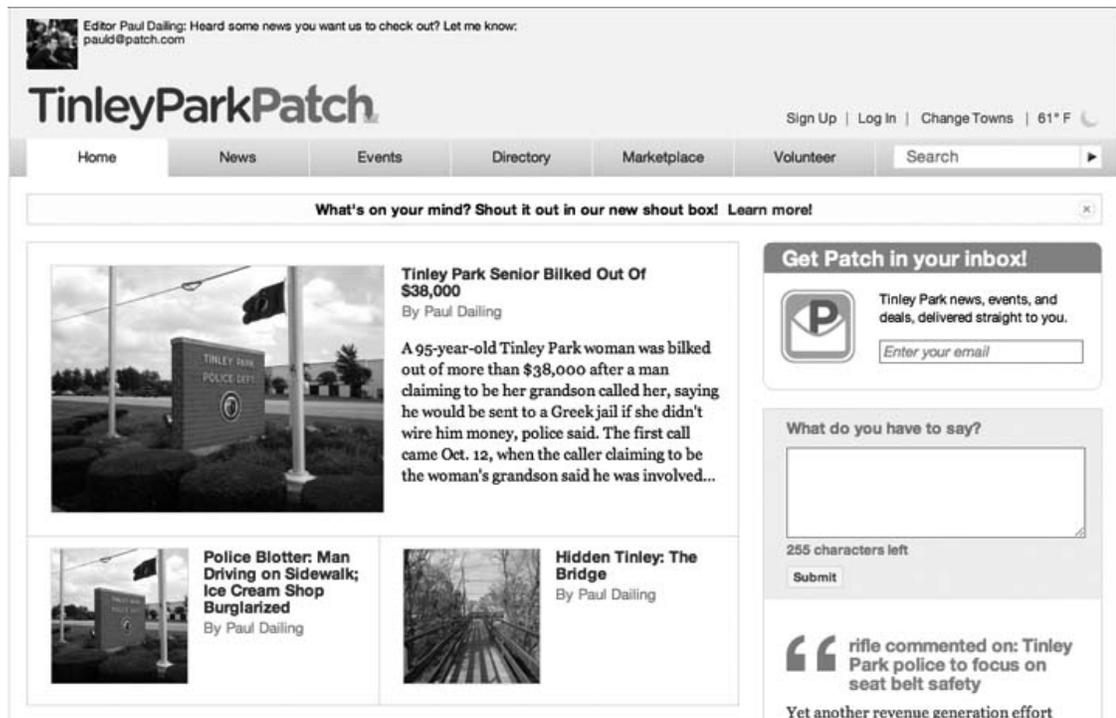


Figure 4

After surfing through a dozen Patch.com local sites, it was evident to me that quality photojournalism was not par for the course. A lack of dominance in terms of design made the website bland and uninteresting. The stories were glorified briefs for the most part. In my opinion, Patch is making the same mistakes as those in the newspaper industry. They are pushing out content faster without much regard to quality.

The 24/7 news cycle that Patch.com is catering to is not for the faint of heart. From a New York Times article from July 2010 by Jeremy Peters:

Young journalists who once dreamed of trotting the globe in pursuit of a story are instead shackled to their computers, where they try to eke out a fresh ...thought or be first to report even the smallest nugget of news — anything that will impress Google algorithms and draw readers their way.

According to Peters (2010), burnout and fatigue are becoming commonplace, not just for veterans, but for rookies as well.

There are other opportunities available rather than working for a newspaper or for-profit online news website. Originally staffed and founded by former Post-Dispatch employees, the St. Louis Beacon (stlbeacon.org) began publishing as a non-profit regional news organization. The Beacon takes an opposite approach to status quo for online reportage attempting to build trust with their readers by allocating time to fact check their stories before they are published.

The Beacon is funded largely by donations from the public and foundations. The first seed money came from a \$500,000 challenge grant given by Emily Pulitzer. Mrs. Pulitzer was the wife of Joseph Pulitzer III, grandson of Joseph Pulitzer, who founded the Post-Dispatch (Miller & Macpherson, p. 14). It's worth noting that Emily Pulitzer sold the Post-Dispatch to Lee Enterprises for \$1.46 billion dollars in 2005.

This relatively new idea of running a online newspaper as a non-profit is yet to be a proven viable business model but three years after its launch. The Beacon is taking innovative approaches to reporting. They have collaborated with local St. Louis public television station KETC (who initially gave the Beacon's staff office space) for in-depth coverage of the mortgage crisis and its effect on the St. Louis metropolitan area. The competition is apparently not threatened by the presence of The Beacon. Mandy St. Amand, the continuous news editor at the online arm of the Post-Dispatch (stltoday.com) had this to say:

I would beg to differ with the categorization of us as the 'other' online news source [in St. Louis], because I think we are *the* online news source in the St. Louis area. We have a vastly larger number of resources that we can put at a major event like that. We have a lot moreresources we can marshal and a lot more ways that we can get our news and coverage out there” (Miller & Macpherson, p. 15).

The Beacon's website utilizes Twitter and Facebook accounts, though feedback from persons who 'like' the Beacon's Facebook site was not heavy. The site also suffers from a lack of strong visual content, and the design does not reflect the groundbreaking editorial work they are doing for a non-profit. In the interest of full disclosure, the chair for my research paper is the husband of Beacon co-founder Margaret Wolf Freivogel.

By sheer coincidence, before I entered graduate school I was freelancing in the Metro East and listening to the local community radio station. A show featuring an hour long interview of Mrs. Freivogel began to air. The Beacon had just started operations, and I listened to every minute of the program. That interview partially led me to this point in my life, as I was inspired by the Beacon's launch as an alternative to working for a for-profit newspaper.

There are other examples of non-profit news websites led by former newspaper editors, including the MinnPost, the Dallas South News, and the Bay Citizen. All three were funded initially by single large donations similar to the Beacon (minnpost.org, n.d., dallassouthnews.org, n.d., baycitizen.org, n.d.).

The Texas Tribune began operations in the summer of 2009 and is located in Austin, Texas. The Tribune was founded by venture capitalist John Thorton and lists a 68 corporate sponsors who the majority contributed an initial \$2,500 (Redman, 2010). Thorton contributed \$1 million of his own capital to seed the project (Kramer, 2010). The Tribune focuses on state politics and exploratory journalism and has 1,500 individual members, who on average contribute \$98 annually (Redman, 2010). The Tribune publicly lists its founding corporate, individual and investor sponsors on the 'about us' section. Providing full-disclosure of the money trail may give the site more journalistic credibility. The non-profit website exceeded their fundraising goal for 2009 by \$500,000 – landing \$4 million for the year. Kramer believes despite the early fundraising success for the site that the “post-launch slowdown and the static corporate donations suggests the low-hanging fruit is in the basket” (2010). From my research, increasing individual reader donations and maintaining corporate and foundation support is a hurdle all of the above mentioned sites will have to cross on a yearly basis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The experience of founding three weekly newspapers from scratch has given me some needed business acumen to launch a news website. My previous experience as an undergraduate student web editor of the student newspaper at SIUC, The Daily Egyptian, and running blogs for my newspaper properties has provided me some insight into online news operations. My skills in video production, photojournalism, and editorial writing will be necessary after the launch as I will be a one-man operation other than user provided content. Where my past experiences have provided me some advantages, my weaknesses are evident. I have little web design experience and the methods of delivering content on the Internet have changed considerably since I last published on the web.

Brand Management

Branding has become an increasingly important component when sorting out what market strategies to use in achieving product differentiation (Chan-Olmstead, p. 641). Beginning with the name of the website, I wanted to be clear that my site would not be a traditional newspaper that was now online. Staying away from traditional brands like The Herald, The Courier, and The Independent (the names of my former newspapers), I opted for iSouthernIllinois.com. For the web, the site name is rather long but is easily typed due to the number of vowels in the url. As an exercise, I experimented with typing the url before choosing the

domain name. The site is intended to draw user generated content, and placement of the I before Southern Illinois was an attempt to give ownership.

Babak Zafarnia, the founder and president of Praecere Public Relations, feels that designing a logo for his clients must reflect the overall mission of the company, should be consistent and should amplify those themes (Schiff, 2010). Borrowing from The Beacon's mantra of quality over quantity, I aim for the site's brand to emphasize strong storytelling. I asked a former employee and web savvy designer Julie Flesner to aid in developing several logos that would include quotation marks. Variations of these logos would also be used on social networking and video streaming sites. I provided Julie an outline of how I thought the site would be presented and the types of stories I would report on. I stressed to her that the logos must be compact because of the lack of design real estate that would be available. The upper logo as seen on Figure 5 works well for individual webpages, and the logo on the lower right is better suited used as a favicon or for social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter.



Figure 5

Using Wordpress Themes

Due to my lack of contemporary web developing experience, I took the advice of Professor A.J. Stoner and chose Wordpress, an open-sourced Content Management System (CMS). The ease of use and the variety of themes available for Wordpress made the platform the obvious choice. The Wordpress theme that is used on iSouthernIllinois.com was created by Graph Paper Press. The company is owned by a photojournalist and their themes emphasize the visual rather than text. As long as a developer doesn't tinker too much with the color palette and default .php scripts, it is difficult take their clean professional templates and turn them into an amateurish looking website.

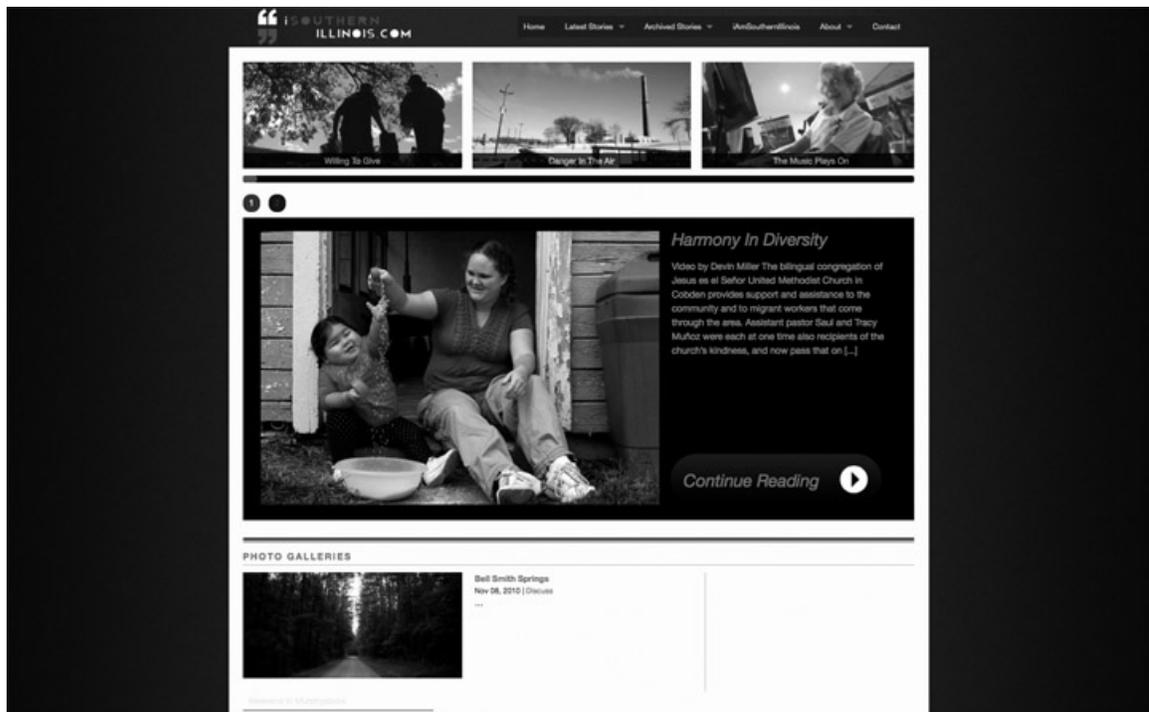


Figure 6

Content and Navigation

Attracting user generated content (UGC) to iSouthernIllinois.com is a priority for the mission of the site – whether it is photo, audio, video or text based content. According to Smith (2010), helping shape the style and tone of UGC and establishing editorial continuity is a constant challenge (p. 1). My plan is to only accept thoughtful and reasonable content from users. A strong opinion on a subject doesn't preclude anyone from participating, but projected hatred and bigotry will not be tolerated. I hope to differentiate my product by only allowing those who identify themselves with their full name and e-mails to comment on stories or provide content.

I have placed a menu tab at the top of the page specifically for UGC – iAmSouthernIllinois. A person can make a cell phone, web cam or flip video of them commenting on a issue of the day or use a video camera and software to edit and publish a full-fledged story (see figure 7).

Pelosi Versus Puppies



Video by Todd Ellis

Carterville resident Todd Ellis states his opinion on Nancy Pelosi's recent decision to run for house minority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Figure 7

As a daily Internet user who visits a variety of news websites daily, I find the overuse of menus, pages, and posts confusing and distracting. I wanted my site to be as clean and simple as possible while still allowing for a large amount of content to be available at any given time. The latest story window on the front page is for centerpiece stories that have recently been published. Above resides the feature story slider that allows users to navigate through several stories with a simple slide of a mouse. There are recent still photo galleries along with archived videos and photographs.

Mobile Web

According to an April 2010 report from Admob.com, there were roughly 38 million iPhone, iPad, iPad Touch and Android mobile device users in the United States (admob, n.d.). With the exception of the iPad, the remaining devices have small screens compared to a desktop computer screen. The Wordpress theme I used allows me to publish the page for smart phones. Users can decide if they want to view the full-size website or the template that is designed specifically for mobile devices.

Sponsor Support

Currently on the site, I have three video advertisements that are on second tier pages. I personally dislike pop-up ads or videos that play automatically when you visit a webpage and I made the decision to not include those elements in my design. One of the three video advertisements, The Watershed Nature Center, is story based. I have taken this approach before while working as a freelancer for a PR firms. I'm using the story behind the small

business or non-profit organization as a marketing technique. The approach generally satisfies the customer and provides a story line to an advertisement. I wish to experiment further with 15 second advertisements that will precede editorial videos (pre-rolls) and placing animated gifs in the sidebar. Both the pre-rolls and gifs would be offered at a lower ad rate than the longer video advertisement.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

—R. Buckminster Fuller

We are in the most important transition of how people receive information since the invention of the printing press. The method of content distribution is rapidly changing. The decision making process on what stories to cover and why has shifted from a central management strategy to potentially millions of citizen journalists and bloggers. This transition is problematic as websites and aggregators may choose to publish stories that feature the lowest common denominator, distributing titillating content but not informative pieces on important issues facing our democracy. The ability for one person (or a geographically separated group) to develop their own news content with a personal computer and a smaller and increasingly inexpensive camera has the potential to further spread the watchful eye of the fourth-estate while traditional news outlets are diminished.

This is an exciting and chaotic period for journalism in the United States, where the future seems unknowable with the rapid changes in technology (Lenatti, p. 8). As we have seen in the research presented, newspapers are laying off editorial staff in droves and profits are tanking. The rise of independent online media may reinvigorate the fourth estate, moving it solidly into the information age. Former newspaper editors who put the intrinsic value of journalism before the bottom line are offering a pioneering alternative to corporately owned media conglomerates.

Innovation and collaboration are two key words in 21st century business practices. You can witness the participation of visitors in nearly every website on

the Internet through comments on posts and contributions of UGC. The media can no longer provide a one way flow of information; participation with their audience is required and expected. A recent graduate now can be expected to have a broader range of skill sets in journalism than following a clearly defined job description such as a photojournalist or a reporter (Brauer, 2010).

As a photojournalist initially trained in 20th century journalism practices, the transition to a purely web based content delivery system has been difficult in some regards and advantageous in others. I understand the importance for allowing time on a story that will provide credibility to my readers. Having instant access to information doesn't always equate to factual content. On the other hand, I must learn how to adapt to a rapidly changing cultural environment that expects updated news on a 24/7 cycle. With iSouthernillinois.com, I hope to engage a rural and relatively impoverished region of Illinois. My family has lived in southern Illinois for over 200 years, and I believe that the citizens of the area deserve better. I hope to provide a space online for those in the region who have a voice that hasn't been heard or a story that others won't tell.

Southern Illinois media tends to focus on those at the top and ignore those at the bottom. I want to take the opposite approach by starting a thoughtful and reasonable conversation with the folks who are my neighbors. I wish to end my research paper with a portion of the mission statement for iSouthernIllinos.com:

Grab your camera or your keyboard and head to the party. Big media's shindig is about over, let's help them out the door and into the cab. They were spoiling the fun anyway.

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