

Paper or PC?

The Future of News Media in Question

By Kinsey Moberg

Technology has come a long way in the last century. The avenues through which information is accessed have changed dramatically. Just 100 years ago, the newspaper was the primary source for current events. Magazines soon came on the scene as a powerful form of media and offered a different perspective on the world and how readers relate to it. Together, these print publications supplied a genuine source of news and entertainment to the nation. Eventually, the radio and television came along, threatening the print industry and testing its endurance—but in time it was able to rebound. Of all these new technologies, it is the introduction of the internet that could ultimately be the demise of print publications. This electronic media source is greatly affecting print media such as newspapers and magazines; yet, while the magazine industry is adapting to the growing use of electronic sources, the newspaper industry needs to drastically restructure its business model in order to survive in a new, technological America.

It is the prevalence of the internet that threatens print media. According to Miniwatts Marketing Group, nearly 74% of Americans currently have access to the internet. This number represents the largest usage by population of any nation worldwide. (www.internetworldstats.com) *Education Week* reporter Andrew Trotter discusses this when he notes that, “The percentage of families with Internet access has more than tripled, from 15 percent in 1996 to 52 percent in 2000...children are spending more time than ever using [the Internet], averaging 14 minutes daily” (1). Each year, the percentage of people using computers and the internet grows, and the number of people depending on print sources for information diminishes.

Due to its increasing accessibility and convenience, the internet has become a breeding ground for its own form of journalism. The advent of the blog (or weblog) has introduced the idea that anyone who thinks they can write can report credible news. The prevalence of blogs online is overwhelming, demonstrating that

this format is catching on among aspiring web journalists. An example of an extremely successful news blog is *The Huffington Post*. “HuffPo, as it's known, has reached this level of prominence with 55 paid staffers, including Huffington. Twenty-eight of them are editorial, compared with more than 1,000 at the *New York Times*,” says *Time Magazine* journalist Belinda Luscombe (“Arianna” 1). The volume of news HuffPo puts out rivals that of some small-town daily papers. The founder of the site, Arianna Huffington, calls her website’s brand of reporting “distributive journalism.” She feels that this is the future of the news industry and journalism, wherein “anybody who observes a news event can report on it for HuffPo” (Luscombe, “Arianna” 1).

While the internet community may be embracing this distributive journalism, those in the traditional arm of the industry feel the ideals of true journalism have come under attack. To the general public, the advantage of this unfettered reporting lies in the notion that current events can be relayed in a more liberated forum than traditional news models. Where some news agencies may report biased views or incomplete stories due to financial loyalties, a blog has no such restrictions. In fact, the blog has no restrictions at all. Belinda Luscombe laments this fact when she says, “On the Internet, after all, nothing is set in stone; everything can be rewritten. History can be changed with a simple refreshing of the page” (“Arianna” 1). In addition to its whimsical nature, the editorial standards for journalism are more lax in the online environment; a fact that worries print industries. New York *Times* journalist David Carr gives attention to this grave outlook when he states:

At the recent American Magazine Conference, one of the speakers worried that if the great brands of journalism — the trusted news sources readers have relied on — were to vanish, then the Web itself would quickly become a “cesspool” of useless information. That kind of hand-wringing is a staple of industry gatherings...But in this case, it wasn’t an old journalism hack lamenting his industry. It was Eric Schmidt, the chief executive of Google (1).

While the demise of the industry has been lamented over for some time now, it is the rate and magnitude with which it is currently occurring that has drawn the most attention. Several big-league papers that have either

undergone extreme downsizing or ceased their print edition entirely are: The Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*, The *Christian Science Monitor*, The *Detroit Free Press*, The *Los Angeles Times*, The *Newark Star-Ledger*, and even the widely-read *USA Today*. The industry watched in dismay in October 2008, as the *TV Guide* was sold for less than the price of a single issue: one dollar (1). David Carr echoes the sentiment of his colleagues when he says, “Clearly, the sky is falling. The question now is how many people will be left to cover it” (1).

The affects of this nationwide trend reach far and wide. *CNN* reporter Stephanie Chen gives a status update when she says, “At least 120 newspapers in the U.S. have shut down since January 2008, according to Paper Cuts, a Web site tracking the newspaper industry. More than 21,000 jobs at 67 newspapers have vaporized in that time” (1). This downward spiral is not projected to end any time soon. *New York Times* correspondent Tim Arango summarizes the reason when he says the following:

The rate of decline in print circulation at the nation’s newspapers has accelerated since last fall, as industry figures released Monday show a more than 7 percent drop compared with the previous year, while another recent analysis showed that newspaper Web site audiences had increased 10.5 percent in the first quarter. In the first quarter of 2009, newspaper Web sites attracted more than 73 million unique visitors each month, on average...(1)

For all its efforts to remain a viable source of print information, the newspaper industry is suffering greatly due to the internet. The fact is that readership itself is not down—simply the readership from print sources. Decline in newspaper reading has been a decades-long process as the public looks for news elsewhere. Household subscriptions have been falling since the 1920s due to radio and television, but in that time, the print industry has been able to effectively adapt despite competition (Chen 1). According to the Newspaper Association of America the total number of newspapers in print had been steadily on the rise, up until the last decade. For instance, by the year 1997, there were a total of 1,509 daily papers published, and 903 Sunday editions in circulation. Just over ten years later, in 2008, the daily paper count was down to 1,408, and the

Sunday count down to 902 papers (naa.org). Tim Arango explains some of this attrition by saying, “The figures...illustrated the continued migration of readers to the Internet and, in some cases, the effort by papers to shed unprofitable circulation” (1).

Even the larger national papers are affected by these practices, but in the end they still fair much better due to their size and market share. For example, *USA Today* currently has over two million subscribers, with *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* following behind (Arango 1). The closeout of some small competitors leaves room for these larger papers to pick up the readers left behind. “[Experts] say the largest papers could even benefit from industry woes and grab market share because of their wide penetration,” says Stephanie Chen (1). As positive as this may ultimately be for these larger papers, there still is not much help for the smaller outfits.

In many cases, this issue affects more than just printed news. Belinda Luscombe explains the impact of this fallout on another type of news media:

Fewer than half of Americans say that losing their local paper would hurt their civic life "a lot" and even fewer say they would miss reading it, partly, it seems, because they get their local news from other media, mostly TV. But since papers are the primary source for most other news outlets, a major link will be missing from the news ecosystem. If a paper does not cover a story, it is unlikely to be covered in the broadcast media, whose reporting staffs tend to be even smaller (“What Happens” 1).

The attrition of the newspaper industry demonstrates the fact that the current attempts to adapt the use of electronic media are doing much more harm than good. What are the detrimental behaviors? *Time Magazine* journalist Walter Isaacson offers one by saying, “Newspapers have more readers than ever. Their content is more popular than ever—even (in fact, especially) among young people. The problem is that fewer of these consumers are paying. Instead, news organizations are merrily giving away their news”(1). In their attempt to stay current with technology, the newspaper industry has begun the widespread practice of giving away that for

which they used to charge. The papers themselves are devaluing their own product by offering it online instead of in print.

In choosing between readership and sustainability, they've chosen readership. But even their audience questions the business model in practice. "For readers, the drastic diminishment of print raises an obvious question: if more people are reading newspapers and magazines, why should we care whether they are printed on paper?" says David Carr. The issue, he explains, is that "paper is not just how news is delivered; it is how it is paid for" (1). The print product still pays for more than 90 percent of the industry's revenue. In the online age, this is a technology that draws fewer advertisers and consumers each day. The cost of a print ad could bring thousands of dollars to the newspaper while an online ad may bring in only a few dollars for every 1,000 readers who view the page. Carr elaborates by saying, "The difference between print dollars and digital dimes — or sometimes pennies — is being taken out of the newsrooms that supply both" (1).

The overall opinion of the public has gone the way of the cliché: Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free? Walter Isaacson further discusses the issue from the consumer's viewpoint:

Last year more people in the U.S. got their news online for free than paid for it by buying newspapers and magazines. Who can blame them? Even an old print junkie like me has quit subscribing to the *New York Times*, because if it doesn't see fit to charge for its content, I'd feel like a fool paying for it (1).

As detrimental as the move to online news reporting has been for the industry, newspapers continue to supply their content on the web. "Some papers are also changing the kind of coverage provided in the print product, focusing less on breaking news, which the Internet is much better suited to deliver, and more on analytical or contextual stories," says *Reporting Magazine's* Paul Grabowicz (1). This practice may help bring value to a print edition, but much of the stories read there could still be read online elsewhere through the competition.

Even more papers have cancelled their least popular daily editions all together. Doing this further weakens audience loyalty by attempting to change the habits of those accustomed to reading the paper daily. In some instances, a newspaper may decide to ease the transition by posting the same edition online as well as in print, though this format is not always well-received. Grabowicz explains that, “An electronic version of the newspaper... can be downloaded from the newspaper's website... and critics say they are transplanting a print format into a medium that demands a very different product” (1). Online content is written very differently than print media, mostly due to the nature of its younger readership, their shorter attention span, and how they view web pages. Here the industry incurs a problem in the diverse demographics of its readership, as Paul Grabowicz discusses:

"They are essentially counterintuitive products: older readers who may like the idea of 'reading the paper' in its traditional format don't like reading online; younger readers who like reading online find it nonsensical to read yesterday's news -- and pay for it -- when they can get news of the moment free online" (1).

It is the younger audience, with its desire to stay at the forefront of technology that drives this transition. The old way of reading papers is swiftly losing relevance among this tech-savvy crowd. “But easily accessible, high-speed Internet connections and smart phones have dramatically shifted the way people get their news. Ironically, news is still in strong demand. It's abundant, accessible and usually free on the Web,” says Stephanie Chen (1). Chen speaks for industry analysts in estimating that the accelerated decline is only the beginning; more papers will soon follow the trend into extinction, possibly as soon as the end of 2009.

In a defensive move to stave off extinction entirely, more and more newspapers are discontinuing their print editions outright and delivering straight to their website. While this may keep them competitive in certain marketplaces and help bolster online readership, it does little in the way of generating income for this struggling industry. Walter Issacson explains the downside to this transition by saying, “Newspapers and magazines

traditionally have had three revenue sources: newsstand sales, subscriptions and advertising. The new business model relies only on the last of these” (1).

Depending on a third of its previous avenues of income leaves newspapers in a volatile position. Advertising income can fluctuate greatly and is determined by a number of unstable factors—a lesson that this industry is learning to its detriment. In fact, ad revenue for the year 2008 dropped 23 percent from the year before, from \$49.5 billion down to \$38 billion (Chen 1). David Carr explains, “Advertising from the car industry, retail business and financial services — for years, the three sturdy legs of a stool that print once rested comfortably on — are in steep decline” (1).

The current economic recession is not the only thing at fault, however. In yet another way, the internet has encroached on the newspaper industry’s ability to generate revenue. Stephanie Chen discusses exactly what is happening:

The advertising dollars that used to flow freely to the news industry are now being reallocated elsewhere. Some of the biggest threats to newspaper profits have come from Web sites like Craigslist and Monster.com, online advertising venues that are chipping away at newspapers' classified ad sections (1).

Given the current instability of the industry, what can be done to save it? *Masthead* journalist Jeff Charis Carlson explains that some industry professionals are already working on that:

The publisher of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* has been an evangelist for what he considers a basic economic theory—that people won't continue to pay for a newspaper's printed product if they can get everything online at no cost. Hussman and the newspaper's online staff view the site as the place for free headlines and lede [sic] paragraphs designed to draw people into the printed product—as well as complementary information and multimedia options (1).

This approach has been successful thus far, but it does not take into account future technological developments. Rupert Murdoch, chairman of News Corp believes that, “the future of newspapers is digital” (Palan 1). Going all-digital may take time, but this platform will separate the journalistic wheat from the chaff. “There’s a lot of news that is always going to be free . . . But investigative journalism, the kind of information that does have value, can be charged for. And there are successful sites, like the Wall Street Journal site in America” (Palan 1).

Murdoch and Hussman together represent a growing sentiment: that news content can no longer be given away for free if the industry is to survive. Walter Isaacson discusses how one popular publication has been successful in its efforts to charge for content: “Currently a few newspapers, most notably the *Wall Street Journal*, charge for their online editions by requiring a monthly subscription. . . . [This] move looks really smart. Paid subscriptions for the *Journal's* website were up more than 7% in a very gloomy 2008” (1).

The *Wall Street Journal's* success demonstrates that people are willing to pay for quality news. But how could the rest of the papers in this vast marketplace implement the kind of system necessary for a successful large-scale conversion? With the amount of information available online from a multitude of sources at any given time, tracking charges for the content would be difficult. Isaacson says the solution is simplicity:

The key to attracting online revenue, I think, is to come up with an iTunes-easy method of micropayment. We need something like digital coins or an E-ZPass digital wallet — a one-click system with a really simple interface that will permit impulse purchases of a newspaper, magazine, article, blog or video for a penny, nickel, dime or whatever the creator chooses to charge. . . . Under a micropayment system, a newspaper might decide to charge a nickel for an article or a dime for that day's full edition or \$2 for a month's worth of Web access. Some surfers would balk, but I suspect most would merrily click through if it were cheap and easy enough (1).

Making news-surfing cheap and easy for the consumer could very well save what is left of the news industry. While technology and convenience may eventually dictate that printed newspapers could disappear all together, at least the industry itself would survive.

Walter Isaacson's solution addresses multiple issues plaguing the news industry. In charging for content, the sites not only make a financial profit, but cut down the questionable reporting that runs rampant in the internet realm. He offers hope by saying, "The need to be valued by readers — serving them first and foremost rather than relying solely on advertising revenue — will allow the media once again to set their compass true to what journalism should always be about."

It is undeniable that the internet has changed the landscape of the print world, but the magazine industry is not suffering in the same way as its cousin the newspaper. Though many doomsday reports try to stress the fact that all print media is suffering, the recent struggle with technology has brought to light that not all print is seen as equal to consumers. *Advertising Age* journalist Renetta McCann explores the power of print when she says, "Today's conventional wisdom says that digital is dynamic; paper, passé. Yet wherever we look—in parks and offices... on planes and trains—we see people reading magazines. Whatever else competes for readers' attention, it seems their passion for print remains" (1). In fact, the Magazine Publishers of America report that, "80% of all adults have read magazines in a public place at some time in the past month" (23).

Though readers may still be passionate about reading their favorite magazines, how they buy them is changing. *MediaPost* correspondent Erik Sass says, "Total newsstand sales of 100 leading consumer magazines declined 37% from 2001-2009.... Many magazines had their ups and downs during this period... Only 15 of 100 titles saw newsstand sales increase from June 2001-June 2009" (1). Joe Mandese of *MediaPost* discusses how these numbers reflect the changing of the American economy "as Americans reduce the number of shopping trips they make, and as they shift from conventional supermarket chains to so-called supercenters, dollar stores and warehouse stores that are less likely to merchandise consumer magazines" (1).

Though the decrease in newsstand sales may seem drastic, it is important to remember that newsstand sales only account for 12% of the industry's circulation. As the Magazine Publishers of America say, "Newsstand is a small slice of the circulation pie" ("Full Story" 1). Joe Mandese goes into further detail on the trend, "The longer term shifts include dramatic shifts in how American consumers shop at retail locations - a

major source of magazine newsstand sales - and the impact digital media is having on the distribution, consumption and subscription of consumer magazines” (1).

As the newspaper industry fights to keep itself afloat against this digital media, the magazine industry is dealing with the issue in a very different way, and with exceptional results. Magazines have branded themselves as a more distinct print product than newspapers, using much more interactive methods to keep readers in their printed pages first and their websites second. By getting creative and engaging with the way they advertise, magazines have been able to keep more ad revenue than other types of print media. *Seybold Report* correspondent John Parsons gives insight on this method by saying, “The magazine advertising experience is a unique combination of visual and tactile (and sometimes olfactory) communication. It appeals to consumers on a high visual level but without the intrusiveness of broadcast or online advertising” (1).

In fact, magazines are one of the only forms of media where the advertisement is ingrained in the content itself. Even those ads that are blatant are made to flow with the rest of the publication, providing an entertainment value of their own. Renetta McCann gives another account of this when she expresses, “When you see a great ad in a magazine, you tear it out. When another pop-up ambushes your Web experience, you tear your hair out” (1).

It is not that readers enjoy these ads because they do not see magazine ads as often—the exact opposite is true. Magazine Publishers of America report that readers see twice as many magazine ads as internet ads, and four times as many magazine ads as primetime television viewers are exposed to (“Magazines” 41). The content itself is nearly half advertisement. MPA discloses that “Most magazines contain both editorial and advertising content. Over the past ten years, the ratio of editorial and advertising content has remained relatively equal.” The actual percentage is 53.8% editorial versus 46.2% advertising (“Magazines” 92).

When nearly half of the content in a magazine is advertising, it demonstrates that advertising is still a stable form of revenue for the magazine industry. Despite economic recession or technological competition, ad revenue has gone up in the last decade for this industry: from \$15.5 billion in 1999 to \$23.6 billion in 2008 (“Magazines” 22). Through advertising income combined with subscription income, magazines are still faring

quite well compared to the newspaper industry. Why are readers so much more accepting of magazine ads of this volume than ads from other media sources? What makes them different?

It comes down to control. While offering current and relevant entertainment, magazines take advantage of their own versatility and portability. McCann explains that, “Consumers increasingly seek control, [and] magazines give it to them in a way that speaks volumes. Magazines allow consumers to customize their reading experiences to suit their own tastes. Where they read... How they read... When they read magazines” (1). Readers like to control their environments, and often they do this by deciding what they will pay attention to. When it comes to magazines, readers are exercising their ability to focus. “BIGresearch found that magazine readers are least likely of all media users to engage in other (non-media) activities while reading. In addition, their data show that when consumers read magazines, they are much less likely to engage in other media (MPA “Magazines” 32).

Exercising this much control over how they read adds to the level of enjoyment. Magazine Publishers of America reports that, “Magazines are second only to video games for consumers enjoying the content at the time they saw the ad” (“Magazines 33). It is an advantage like this one that gives strength to the notion that print magazines will be around for some time. How then, is this industry adapting to the current technological trends? John Parsons, reporter for the *Seybold Report* says, “The trick for publishers is to migrate their advertising efforts to a multiplatform approach, which requires not only good technical decisions but also a rethinking of how ad space is sold and designed” (1).

The magazine industry has found a way to make the internet work for it and not against it. Joe Mandese explains that, “Magazine publishers also are adapting to changing sales channels, and are now reaping more of their subscription sales from online and digital methods, including digital editions of printed magazines” (1). The Magazine Publishers of America break down the effectiveness of this online strategy by saying, “As with newsstand, magazine publishers are evolving their “go-to-market” practices for subscription sales. More than one in five subscriptions will be sold online in 2009—up almost 70% versus three years ago—while subscriptions from Amazon.com are forecast to increase 35% this year” (MPA “The Full Story” 1).

The internet is now playing a very vital part in the success of the magazine industry. Magazine Publishers of America explains this in the following statistic:

The number of consumer magazine websites has increased 78% since 2005, extending the reach and influence of magazine's editorial and advertising messages to an even wider audience... Consumers who use both magazine websites and their print counterparts overwhelmingly state that the printed magazine still has value ("Magazines" 11).

This report shows a drastic departure from the impact seen on the newspaper industry, where many readers reported that they would not miss the printed version (Chen 1). The audience finding value in the print edition above the electronic option proves that the two can co-exist. For this reason, the magazine industry is intentionally fostering growth in the online environment. The number of magazines with websites in 2009 is 15,204... and counting. Yet even with a large number of editions supplied online, the number of total magazines in circulation has grown: from 17,970 in 1999 to 20,590 in 2008 (MPA "Magazines" 10).

What is different between a newspaper website and a magazine website? Magazine digital editions are more than electronic versions of the print content—it provides supplemental information or information from past editions that has been reformatted or written specifically for an online audience. Magazines are using the free content to bolster their print sales and keep consumers interested in current or upcoming issues.

At the heart of this issue is the difference in business models. Most magazines specialize in reporting on more "evergreen" subject matter. Instead of informing the public on the immediate happenings of the world, magazines have focused their content on consumer-driven topics that work with the power of advertising. Heavy reliance on human interest content such as celebrity activity, health and beauty, or the automotive industry provides stable content that readers continually find interesting. This aspect of print media sees the advent of the internet in an entirely different light. Instead of giving away the relevant content for free online, magazines use the internet to supplement the current editions, not replace them. A optimistic message comes from the Magazine Publishers of America when they say, "Given ongoing changes in consumer shopping behavior and the increased opportunities that emerge with new technology, magazine circulation will continue

to evolve as magazine executives shift their strategies to reach consumers” (MPA “The Full Story” 1). While some magazines will undoubtedly be called to adapt their business model to take advantage of newer technologies, the industry as a whole is headed in a profitable, sustainable direction.

Could the newspaper industry follow the lead of the magazine industry? To do this would require a drastic restructuring of the current business model, and any changes would have to be enforced industry-wide. In order to bring in more ad revenue, newspapers would have to reconsider their formats: depending primarily on three struggling advertising sectors has helped the industry very little. By enlisting a variety of advertisers from a wide range of industries, print newspapers can lessen the impact of an economic downturn in specific industries.

Since enjoyment has been linked to advertisement effectiveness, it may be necessary for papers to report on things that are more positive in order for readers to enjoy the experience more. While the news is not seen as a form of entertainment, perhaps it should be viewed as such. By reevaluating how the product is presented, the news media could gain more than just readers. Currently, news reporting is overwhelmingly negative, therefore reading the news could be an unpleasant experience for the audience, resulting in ineffective advertising and the ultimate loss of ad revenue.

In dealing with the competition among internet sources and other electronic media, papers would have to become much more selective (as magazines are) in what gets released online. While it may not be possible to stop reporting content on the internet entirely, industry professionals could work together to only report online for free that which gets them publicity or can bring in revenue. Any special reports or pieces of interest should be charged for, especially if offered electronically. The mentality of most consumers is that free equals valueless, therefore charging for news would give it value to both readers and advertisers.

The advancement of technology has become a focal point of many industries in America today. Almost anything new and electronic is a hot commodity, while paper is seen as a thing of the past. This progression has forced changes on the print industry that it was not equipped to handle. The newspaper industry left itself vulnerable to this change by not adapting sustainable methods to work along with it, and has therefore suffered

at the hands of its changing readership and its desire for technology. While it is impossible to go backward and undo the attrition in the industry, it is possible to keep it alive. By observing and adapting some of the many ways in which the magazine industry has been successful in its ventures—both in print and electronically—the newspaper industry could start to turn a profit after all.

In conclusion, the print industry can survive this technological revolution, just as it survived the coming of radio and television. By restructuring and reformatting as necessary, the newspaper and magazine industries can prove themselves a valuable and relevant part of the lives of Americans for future generations.

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