
THE ADVENT OF E-MEDIA

Consider this:

- Fleisher, CFO of Gartner Group, a US Company that supplies research and advise on IT, catches the morning news on the car radio. On his office PC, a customised page of technology news from the Internet portal Yahoo! pops up when he taps into the net. The latest financial headline are transmitted to his pager three times a day, and has recently installed a television set in his office to follow the financial cable networks. As for newspapers, they are only for reading on an aircraft flight or on Sunday.
- First-class British Airways passengers will now be able to pick up e-books filled with the equivalent of 400 pages of daily newspapers, current magazines, financial information and perhaps even novels or non-fiction books. Daily newspapers and financial information will be downloaded twice a day. Quite a punch for a 22-ounce, 7 by 6 inch gadget!

'The concept that there is Internet news, and newspaper news, and television news, is disappearing. Every media group will have to find new ways to reach out to its audience.'
Dave Kansas, Editor-in-chief, The Street.com

The news consumption habits of Fleisher, and many other busy executives like him, are sending tremors through the media industry. Information is being hurled from all quarters. The old audiences of print publications and television networks are being fragmented as reading and viewing patterns change.

A recent research by The Pew Center for Civic Journalism demonstrates that five years ago, public access to the worldwide web did not exist. Today, the number of people who say they frequently go online to get their news is 20 per cent. Those who say they rely on the network evening news programmes have dropped from 60 per cent to 38 per cent over the same period. Readership of daily newspapers has also declined, from 78 per cent of adults 30 years ago to 59 per cent.

With more and more people turning to the Internet for their news, corporate communications are concerned. Some welcome a world without traditional 'media gatekeepers' -- the editors and producers who decide what's news and what isn't -- as an opportunity to take their message directly to the public. Others fear that the 'anything goes' character of the Internet will lead to irresponsible reporting and the broad dissemination of lies and distortions.

Under pressure from new forms of media, the argument goes, journalists are being forced to take bigger and bigger risks. They are tempted to stay ahead by overplaying a story. As the New York Times admitted, "today's saturated

market many have created a frenzy that has perhaps led to cutting corners and hyping pieces”.

When truth is casualty

War is the lifeblood of CNN. Bringing the reality of conflict in far-off places to the sitting rooms is what the world’s leading television news network exists for.

Recently, CNN broadcast a startling “scoop” about American war crimes. In 1970, during the later stages of the Vietnam conflict, it said, American forces attacked targets in Laos with sarin, the deadliest of nerve gases. The aim was to smoke out US defectors. A number of Americans and many innocent Laotians were killed. The report cast another pall over the honour of US servicemen. Or atleast it would have done – if it had been true.

Within days of the broadcast, allegations started to emerge that the story was plain wrong. CNN called in an independent lawyer to investigate. After a week’s enquiry, his verdict was damning: the programme’s main conclusions “were not supported by the evidence”.

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From the Financial Times

BOON OR BANE

The emergence of the new media has cast a bright light on the love-hate relationship between corporate communicators and the mainstream press. In particular it has illuminated the fact that media gatekeepers are both the greatest boon and the greatest bane of the public relations practitioner's existence.

On one hand, with the emergence of new media companies can circumvent the traditional media, taking their message directly to consumers via their own information oriented sites. It also means that companies maligned in the mainstream press can respond swiftly and decisively via their own web sites, providing consumers with access to information -- a complete transcript of remarks taken out of context, for example -- and hopefully thereby holding reporters accountable to higher standards of accuracy. On the other hand, the new media can be used just as effectively by a company's critics, enabling information (and misinformation) to be disseminated more widely and more rapidly than ever before, and provide readers with few resources with which to discriminate between good information and bad.

In the absence of controversy, media gatekeepers add value to company news -- because that news has passed through an objective filter. It has a credibility it would not have, had it come from the company itself, what corporate marketers are fond of calling ‘third party endorsement’.

It is clear that the Internet has had a dramatic impact on the way companies communicate. It has created a major monitoring challenge and an opportunity for communications practitioners -- who understand the media.

RESEMBLANCE TO OFFLINE COUNTERPARTS

The reality, at least so far, is that online media bear a startling resemblance to their offline counterparts. That's not surprising, considering that controlling the most influential online news outlets are extensions of traditional media. Of the top ten online news sites, as ranked by PC Magazine, all but two are owned by mainstream media conglomerates such as Time Warner (CNNfn, CNN Interactive, Pathfinder) or Capital Cities/ABC (ABCNews.com, ESPNNet SportsZone). The exceptions are NewsLinx and The Street.com, which has quickly established itself as the Internet's most powerful financial news source. Many observers believe the Internet will create opportunities for new media empires to grow to rival existing networks. *For corporate communicators, however, the questions are less about who owns the media and more about whether the rules of news gathering and dissemination will be different in cyberspace.*

Microsoft has said that within a decade it expects 20 to 25 percent of its revenues to come from media properties.
How long will it be before Bill Gates replaces Rupert Murdoch as the modern era's most powerful media baron?
How long before AOL can claim to be 'where more Americans get their news' than any other source?

CONTENT

While many sites particularly those operated by existing news organisations originally simply reproduced copy that was already available through print or broadcast outlets, almost every news site now includes at least some original content. In some cases, newspaper web sites regularly scoop their print counterparts. In other instances, they provide a wealth of background material that cannot fit into a print publication but can easily be accessed online.

The New York Times, for example, allowed its Internet edition to scoop its print version during the Atlanta Olympics. After a bomb exploded at the Games in the early hours of the morning, *Times* editors ran with an AP report, under a single column headline, because they were unable to confirm independently many of the facts in time for the paper's deadline. Following a 5 a.m. news conference, the online edition of the *Times* had a much more complete account of the events online by 6 a.m. and photographs from the scene were online by noon.

New York's Middleberg & Associates, which has been at the forefront of communication on the Internet, conducts an annual survey of the media in cyberspace, estimates that about 50 percent of online media content are original. "It's no longer just a matter of taking an existing title and putting the content online," says Don Middleberg, President, Middleberg & Associates. "Companies are extending their brands online, developing original material that adds value to their existing products. CBS MarketWatch has 25

journalists producing original material. The Street.com has more than 40 journalists. There's an explosion of original content on the web."

QUALITY & DEADLINES

The quality of reporting in the best online publications is generally high, experts say. Companies like *ABC* or *CNN* have brands that are established and they are not going to do anything online that might undermine the credibility of their brands. And these are the sites consumers are turning to because in cyberspace just as in the real world, consumers want to get their information from people they know they can trust.

While that may be true today, there's no guarantee that it will continue to be true tomorrow. The Internet has made a dramatic difference in the speed with which news is delivered -- a deadline is whenever a reporter feels he has enough information to go with the story -- and that creates dangers and difficulties for communicators.

"The biggest danger is the tendency that all reporters want to get the story out first," says Middleberg. "In an era of instantaneous publishing, it's all too easy for stories to get published without the same kind of rigorous checking you generally see in print publications. That means communicators have to be much more responsive." *You can't assume you have until tomorrow to get back to a reporter, because the story could be online in an hour.*

One implication for public relations practitioners is that they need to be prepared on certain occasions to talk to reporters even before they have all the information they would like to have. *The need for speed will outweigh the need for total certainty, at least in crisis situations.*

CORRECTIONS

Another issue will be corrections. "There's good news and bad news," says Middleberg. "The good news is that editors are prepared to publish corrections or add quotes to a story even after it has been published, which is something that rarely happens in the print world. The bad news is that they think that's enough, so they won't notify readers when a story has been corrected or updated. Since people won't go back and read the same story twice, many people will only see the version with errors in it."

Most experts expect to see considerable changes as the new media figure out what is possible and what the public cares to see. According to journalist Christopher Harper, author of *And That's The Way It Will Be*, "The Internet does pose a frightful danger to the way journalists for decades have reported news, keeping the public away from original documents, records, and sources. The Internet provides many readers and viewers as much, if not more, information than many journalists, who still shudder at the thought of using the new technology."

Several online news editors envision a greater **level of interactivity**. Elizabeth Osder, who edits *The New York Times* on the Web, says, "We want people to hang out. We want them to sit in a comfortable armchair, give them cigars and then talk. We don't want them to talk to us about the news. We want them to talk to one another." The *Times's* first effort to encourage such dialogue was not a great success, however. When readers were invited to discuss the issues raised in the 1996 election, "We thought we'd get a real dialogue going, Then we got stuff like *you suck and you suck more*." It was ridiculous."

In contrast, Indiatimes.com 'chats' with celebrities have become high visibility columns in the mainline paper. As a journalist at Times of India says, "we have already started getting numerous calls to feature guests in the chat section".

MULTIMEDIA CAPABILITIES OF THE INTERNET

In *And That's The Way It Will Be*, Harper cites as an example the story of a flood in China. To make the story relevant to readers in Boston, a news retrieval service offered links to stories about the worst floods in U.S. history and information about the Chinese community in Boston. Further, a graphic that superimposed a map of the flooded area onto a map of Boston could give readers perspective on the extent of the damage.

NICHE PUBLICATIONS

Another issue will be the proliferation of niche publications, some of them much more highly specialized than anything in the market today. More independent news organisations are likely to appear, each a good deal smaller and more specialized than those we see today. From these smaller and probably more efficient news organisations, a far greater volume and variety of news will emerge, aimed at much smaller audiences than today's news departments.

The very notion of mass media will fade into history. News gathering and production equipment will continue to get cheaper and easier to use. The news gathering and presentation process that once required a large staff of technical specialists will be performed quite routinely by lone reporters armed with inexpensive camcorders, notebook computers, and portable telephones.

INTERNET IS AN INTERNATIONAL MEDIUM

One major challenge for companies is that the Internet is by definition an international medium. In Europe, for example, rogue web sites have created problems for companies ranging from Coca-Cola -- accused of collaborating with the Nazis during the Second World War, to Tambrands, which was forced to deny persistent rumors that it was about to be acquired by Procter & Gamble. *An insignificant act in one country can cause a crisis in another.*

Yet according to a survey, only one-third of companies actively monitor the Internet for misinformation, while fewer than a quarter felt they had a good

understanding of what was being said about them online. "The first step is monitoring," says Middleberg. "Companies need to have people devoted to scouring the web, checking out rogue web sites and e-zines and discussion groups."

LURKING & SEEDING

Says Middleberg, "Lurking is nothing more than hanging out in newsgroups, not participating but just observing what is being said. If you see false information being spread, you can step in. That's seeding. It involves very carefully posting messages that set the record straight. You have to be very sensitive to the environment you are operating in. You have to be absolutely up front about who you are and who you represent. Any subterfuge will only raise suspicion and damage your credibility.

Communicators are also developing plans that help them communicate with and through the new gatekeepers. By monitoring news groups and other discussion forums, it is possible to identify credible, knowledgeable sources of information. Companies can then attempt to build relationships with those people, just as they would with editors and producers in the traditional media.

While most of what is printed at rogue sites is silly, not harmful, some stories do start to spread. As commentary on the company becomes louder, more strident companies may have to step in to protect their reputations. One way to deal with it is to contact the rogue webmaster and present him or her with the facts. Another way is to address the charges either at the company's web site or at a special site set up to deal with that specific issue. As a last resort clients may resort to seek legal redress.

If companies have generally been slow to respond to the challenges posed by the Internet, they have been even slower to take advantage of the opportunities. While some companies are using the Internet in crisis situations few have taken advantage of their web sites to take key messages directly to consumers.

WEB USERS WILL NOT GO ONLINE TO READ AN ADVERTISEMENT -- THEY WILL VISIT WEB SITES THAT CONTAIN VALUABLE, UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION

More and more companies are developing online news bureaus, intended to provide reporters with access to press releases, photographs, press kits, and a host of additional information. Companies such as General Motors, Nissan and Bell Atlantic, all of which have online news bureaus, say they are sending out fewer press kits and receiving fewer telephone calls. Jeff Gluck, web master of Bell Atlantic's News Center, says he expects the Internet "to become the main tool of our trade within the next five year. It will never replace face-to-face communication, he says, but it will relegate fax."

Car companies, which typically distribute hundreds of elaborate press kits each year, replete with technical data, black and white photography and color slides, are the biggest beneficiaries of online press kits, saving as much as

US\$200 every time a journalist goes online rather than requesting a physical package.

THE FINAL WORD

Organizations can use their web sites as broadcast centers that transmit unfiltered messages directly to their audiences. This newfound power can be rather intimidating for corporate marketers who must assume an unfamiliar role as content editors.

They must understand how to develop relevant copy that subtly reinforces an existing relationship between the brand and consumer. Web users will not go online to read an advertisement. They will visit web sites that contain *valuable, up-to-date* information.

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop - Your Practical Interface With Media, held in New Delhi on August 24, 1999)