Journalism in a Digital Age

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The current catch phrase in journalism today is "the defining moment." Simply put, the phrase means how has a story or an event defined a specific medium or brand name. For print journalism, the defining moment may have been the Vietnam War or the Watergate investigation. For radio news, the defining moment may have been the crash of the Hindenburg or Edward R. Murrow's reports from London and Buchenwald. For television news, the defining moment may have been the assassination of JFK or the crash of the Challenger.

More recently, at NBC News, for example, the O.J. Simpson story and the emphasis NBC placed on the events catapulted the network's news programming into first place in the ratings.

For the Internet and the World Wide Web, pundits have rolled out a variety of defining moments: Pierre Salinger's uneducated use of an apparently bogus document from the Internet about the crash of TWA 800, the public mourning over the death of Princess Diana, the millions of hits on NASA's Web site during the Mars probe, and the report of Web gossip columnist Matthew Drudge about the Monica Lewinsky incident.

A defining moment, however, does not necessary mean that the Internet and the World Wide Web have obtained the power to establish a specific agenda for the rest of the media and the public. Only the Mars probe and the Lewinsky case come close to having a significant impact on the issues of the day. In the Mars case, it was only after the huge interest signified by the Web that other news organizations prepared extended reports about the scientific venture. The Drudge report clearly established an agenda for reporting on the Lewinsky matter, primarily by alerting other news agencies that Newsweek had decided NOT to print the story about the alleged affair between the White House intern and President Clinton.

So far, the Internet and the World Wide Web cannot set an agenda, primarily because the audience remains small, and many online publications depend on major brand names as the primary sources of information. Therefore, the broadcast outlets and newspapers that operate the Web sites still maintain control of the setting of the journalistic agendas and the public debate. Still, online journalism stands to dramatically alter the traditional role of the reporter and editor. First, online journalism places far more power in the hands of the user, allowing the reader to challenge the traditional role of the publication as the gatekeeper of news and information. The user can depend on the gatekeeper to select and filter the news in the tradition manner, or the user can drill down to the basic documents of a story. In short, the user can look over the shoulder of the reporter by researching the original documents and easily comparing one reporter's story with those of others by scanning news publications throughout the country. Archives also become easily accessible.

Second, online journalism opens up new ways of storytelling, primarily through the technical components of the new medium. Simply put, online journalists can provide a variety of media--text, audio, video, and photographs--unlike other media. Data searching provides a means to access information unable in other media.

Third, online journalism can provide outlets for nontraditional means of news and information. As A.J. Leibling once said: "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one." The Internet enables everyone who owns a computer to have his or her own printing press.

But first, let's look at the audience for news and information on the Internet and the World Wide Web. The audience provides the basis for any journalistic enterprise. The larger the audience, the more a publication can charge for advertising. The more profitable--in most cases--the enterprise becomes. Even though most surveys show an expanding audience for online journalism, the number of users for news and information on the Internet remains small.

Television remains Americans' number one source of news, according to a recent poll from Roper Starch Worldwide. When asked where they usually get most of their news, 69 percent of adults cited television versus 37 percent for newspapers, 14 percent for radio, 7 percent from "other people" and 5 percent from magazines, the study noted.[1] Only 2 percent of the general public mentioned on-line sources for news. Among households that have Internet access, television was still the top source of news (59 percent) with on-line services mentioned by 15 percent.

Why do other people go on-line? The most important reason for one in three people who use the Internet is to send electronic mail. It is the most popular form of using the Internet. But nearly as many use the Internet and the World Wide Web for research. One in six is looking for specific news and information. One in eight wants business and financial information. One in 12 goes to the Internet for hobbies and entertainment.[2]

A clear division, however, is emerging for those online between younger users and older users with respect to what they seek on the Internet and how they use medium. Nearly seven out of 10 people think it is important to know what it in the news, mainly those over the age of 50. That falls to four out of 10 for those under the age of 30, and only three out of 10 under the age of 30 follow the news every day.[3]

"A critical segment of the `news of the future' audience does not have the basic level of interest to be engaged with the news," says a recent survey. And those who do are turning to the Internet while the traditional readers of newspapers and viewers of television news are growing increasingly older. "The habit of picking up the daily newspaper religiously is found only among those over 50," the survey also says. "Network television news is joining newspapers as a medium for older citizens.... TV network news may be in danger of becoming an anachronism in the next century."[4]

What do people want to know about?[5] Crime stories interested all age groups in recent surveys, and these reports received the highest rating among all age groups. All groups have roughly the same interest in sports and science, but after that the taste in news varies widely between those under 50 and those over 50. Many media outlets cater to the older audience. For example, less than two out of 10 of those between 18 and 29 ranked local government news as important, while more than three out of 10 of those over 50 ranked local government as important. Those over 50 ranked health, local government, religion, politics, and international news as important far more often than those under 50. Younger people, particularly those 18 to 29, showed greater interest in entertainment.

News Interests by Age

	Total %	18-29 %	30-49 %	50+ %
1. Crime	41	43	39	40
2. Local community	35	28	36	39
3. Health	34	27	29	45
4. Sports	26	30	24	24
5. Local government	24	14	22	32
6. Science & technology	20	19	20	19
7. Religion	17	12	13	26

8. Political news	16	10	13	22
9. International affairs	15	10	11	24
10. Entertainment	15	24	13	12
11. Consumer news	14	12	12	18
12. Business & finance	13	10	13	15
13. Famous people	13	16	10	15
14. Culture/the arts	10	9	9	11

--*Pew Research Center for The People & The Press*

A recent Gallup survey found that Internet use pervades almost every aspect of the lives of people age 18 to 24 in contrast to an older generation classified as 35- to- 54-year-olds.[6]

The younger age group looks to the Web for many aspects of their private and personal lives, including entertainment, socializing (via online chat rooms), recreation, plus news and information.

The survey found that 82 percent of 35- to 54-year-olds used the Internet for news and information versus 65 percent of those in the 18 to 24 age group. By contrast, 75 percent of the younger group turned to the Web for entertainment versus 45 percent of their elders.

I spoke with two experts about what people expect from news services and how effective Internet news services were. At Individual Inc., a Boston-based news service with an estimated 400,000 readers, president and chief executive officer Michael Kolowich sees some systematic guidelines for providers of news services.

News consumers want filtering. "It's defensive. Make sure I don't miss anything important," he says. Newspapers generally do a relatively good job at this requirement, while radio and television do not provide enough specific information.

Finding, or the ability to search for data, is important. One day some information may be unimportant, but the next month that story may be critical to a decision. Newspapers have archives, but they often are not immediately available to readers except via expensive computer databases such as Lexis-Nexis.

Browsing. "I put myself in the hands of someone else whom I trust," Kolowich says. "I trust this editor or this news organization to inform me or tell me what's important or entertain me. A gatekeeper and a guide." All media can perform this function, depending on the individual.

Communing. "Put me in a community that shares an interest," Kolowich says. "Sales people almost inevitably use a general interest topic as a conversation starter" such as the weather or a news story.

Tom Phillips, who oversaw most of Starwave's creations as senior vice president, now heads ABC and Disney's cyberspace news and information operation. "We can't replace Peter Jennings because people still want the comfort of that image and that voice," Phillips says. Neither can cyberspace replace the editorial quality of the *New York Times*, he adds. "We can't do video as well as TV, audio as well as radio, or images as well as magazines."

But the strength of digital journalism, he argues, is the ability to integrate various media. The World Wide Web can provide news stories, photographs, audio, and video. "This medium does a reasonable job at everything," he says. In addition, the Web can provide data that are searchable and immediately available. Phillips sees digital news and information taking away reading time from newspapers and viewing time from television. More important, however, is that the World Wide Web can reach users at work, a place

where few have access to a newspaper or a television. "We are already expanding the reach of media into the workplace in a way the media were unable to do before."

Let's take a look at how one newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, has put together its digital publication. The Tribune is one of the few newspapers in the country that has reporters who work exclusively for the Internet edition. The reporters write stories, take pictures, operate video cameras, and create digital pages. The Tribune Internet edition, which debuted in March 1996, contains most of the information from the print version--news, sports, job listings, real estate and automobile advertisements, weather, stocks, and television listings. For its readers, the Internet edition offers in-depth stories, special technology reports, games, discussion groups, and everything someone would ever want to know about the Chicago Bears and the Chicago Bulls. The Internet edition also provides audio interviews and information from the company's radio station, and video from the Tribune's 24-hour-a-day news service, Chicagoland Television.

The Tribune is one of a growing number of commercial on-line newspapers in the United States, which stood at nearly 1,300 in April 1997.[7] Of these newspapers, four out of 10 are specialty publications that concentrate on subjects such as business. Three out of 10 deliver a full range of news on a daily basis. One in 10 is a non-daily publication, and about the same number offer only limited services, meaning that the publications do not update stories as frequently as the printed newspapers or provide a limited range of stories. Slightly less than one in 10 are promotional sites with no regularly updated news.

For the past 20 years, Tom Cekay has been what's known as a "gatekeeper," a critical role in the way a medium sets agendas. That means Cekay is an editor who determines what gets through the "gate" into the newspaper for the reader to see. For years, the gatekeeper has been one of the most powerful people in the media, highlighting particular stories, promoting trends, sorting the journalistic wheat from the chaff, and some would argue restricting the flow of information. Will that role change in the digital age?

"The traditional role of the editor stays the same. Do the readers need to see this? Is it intelligently done? Is it sophisticated reporting? Is what the newspaper wants? So, in many respects, the role of the editor is very much the same as the printed edition," says Cekay, who has worked for newspapers in Oregon, Ohio, and Illinois.

The original research on journalistic gatekeepers began in 1949 when David Manning White of Boston University persuaded a small city news editor to keep all of the copy from the Associated Press, United Press, and the International News Service from a one-week period. The editor, who was given the name "Mr. Gates," agreed to provide written explanations why he had selected or rejected items from the newspaper. About one-third of the time, Gates rejected stories because he did not think the story was true. Two-thirds of the time, the editor rejected stories because there was not enough space in the newspaper, or he had already chosen similar stories for publication.[8] The editor did allow that he had a few personal opinions that could influence his decisions. "I have few prejudices, built-in or otherwise, and there is little I can do about them. I dislike Truman's economics, daylight saving time, and warm beer, but I go ahead using stories on them and other matters if I feel there is nothing more important to give space to. I am also prejudiced against a publicity-seeking minority (Roman Catholics) with headquarters in Rome, and I don't help them a lot. As far as preferences are concerned, I go for human interest stories in a big way. My other preferences are for stories well-wrapped up and tailored to suit our needs."[9]

In 1966, a second study showed that Mr. Gates made roughly the same decisions. He used fewer human interest stories in 1966 than in 1949, but the editor used more international stories. Asked for his definition of news, Mr. Gates replied, "News is the day by day report of events and personalities and comes in variety, which should be presented, as much as possible in variety for a balanced diet."[10]

Researchers found a set of factors that often determine what news gets into the media. Cekay finds some--but not all--of the gatekeeper's role applicable to digital journalism.

- ***Intensity of threshold value***. Events are more likely to pass through the media gates if they are of great magnitude or if they have recently increased in magnitude. Cekay says: "That's one thing we do very well. When it's a major breaking story, this is a perfect medium to put out a lot of information."
- ***Unexpectedness***. Cekay agrees that unexpected stories provide interesting material for any medium, including a digital one.
- ***Sociocultural values***. Values of both the gatekeepers and their readership can also influence selection.[11] "I think news judgment is affected because you appreciate the importance of a story. If you had a serious illness, you realize how people are affected by it. If you're 24, you may not appreciate that people have to deal with things like that. If it's model rocketry, you know there are people out there who care about model rocketry. Otherwise, you're taking your intelligence out of the mix."
- ***Continuity***. If an event or news story passes through the media gate once, it is likely that it will pass through the gate again. Cekay agrees: "That's why it's important to think about what you do the first time."
- ***Cultural proximity or relevance***. The media are most likely to accept news events that have close cultural relevance for the audience. "I want to be very careful about creating a self-fulfilling prophecy where we are saying what the people say they want and in doing so we become an exclusive site that is not for the public at large. I want to make sure we're not narrowcasting. I want to make certain my mother is interested in what we put on this site, and my little boy is interested in what we put on this site. And I want to make sure my neighbor does and the guy on the other side of the state who's a farmer."

Following are the elements that Cekay said he believes do not apply to online publications:

- ***Time span***. Events that coincide within the time frame of publication are more likely to pass through media gates. Digital journalism allows constant updates, so timing plays a limited role in his decisions.
- ***Clarity or lack of ambiguity***. Events whose meaning is in doubt are less likely to pass through media gates. Cekay thinks this tenet plays virtually no role in digital or traditional journalism. "I think that there are few things that are that clear cut that we cover in the news business."
- ***Consonance***. Events that are congruent with an expectation are most likely to pass through media gates. "I am much more interested in the unexpected," Cekay argues.
- ***Composition***. Because gatekeepers look at the day's news in its entirety, some news items are selected merely because they contrast with others. "I don't really worry about that," he observes.

So far, digital journalism has not developed its own rules and procedures, Cekay says, simply because the craft is too young. "I think the instincts we follow are the instincts we learned at the newspaper. I think we are very close to following those patterns, which are tried and true and lead to a good package and a report. But it's clear to me that as we grow with this, we're going to have to stretch that model because we're dealing with a lot more. This is just the infancy of this medium. Right now, we're taking the old formula how do they do it in newspapers, how do they do it in radio, and how do they do it in television."

One significant advantage of this new medium is the ability to let the reader into the process. "We can come up with conclusions on what we see and intelligently report that to you," Cekay says. "What's even better is we can say we're so sure that we are interpreting the news in a fair, unbiased, and proper way that we feel confident that we will give you all the documentation and you can check us. You can see for yourself."

At the Tribune, computer consultant Leah Gentry forged the design of the on-line edition. Gentry's passion is what she calls "nonlinear story telling." What kind of journalist will make it in this brave new world? The year 2000 conjures up an image of a cross between Buck Rogers, Bob Woodward, and Bill Gates. "Buckbobbill is a geek of the first order, who each day intrepidly climbs aboard his spaceship, jets off to probe the inner workings of the high command at Galactic Central, and writes it up in HTML to file it via e-

mail," Gentry says.[12] "They (journalists) see his coming as either the downfall of the free press or the heaven-sent salvation of a dying medium."

Gentry rejects this paradigm and insists that journalists must embrace traditional news values. "The myth of the new media geek, who has no formal print experience, and who writes computer code in his sleep, scares off many who would otherwise aggressively pursue an exciting new journalistic forum. If you examine the evolution of journalistic mediums, then the Web becomes a much less scary place. It took awhile for radio and TV journalists to discover how to use the strengths of their particular media to tell stories. On the Web, we have that same challenge."

What is non-linear storytelling? On the World Wide Web, you have the ability to link from one computer page location to another. Sometimes, stories must be broken into their component parts. Sometimes, the same story must be told from several points of view. That means the reporter may provide a smorgasbord of viewing options. "Journalists who succeed in 2000 will do solid reporting, careful editing, compelling writing, and visual storytelling, using the latest tools available. They'll tell their stories in whatever medium people use. But the tenets of the industry will remain the same."

During the 1996 Democratic convention in Chicago,reporter Darnell Little conceived a historical tour of some of the 25 previous political conventions in the city, starting with the one that nominated Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Little, who received both a master's degree in engineering and journalism from Northwestern, went to the Chicago Historical Society to get a visual sense of how to conduct a tour on the World Wide Web. "The idea was to take people on a tour that was a virtual museum," he explains. There were three parallel streams. There was a tour through six conventions, a behind-the-scenes look at what was happening in Chicago at the time, and archives and political cartoons. "The reporting is the same as working for a standard newspaper--gathering the information and talking to people. But you put it together and write it are differently."

Before writing the story, Little designs a series of storyboards for what each of the main pages will show--a practice used extensively in the film, television, and advertising industries. The storyboard contains an outline of a page's content, graphics, and computer links to other stories. After Little reports a story, he then follows his original storyboards--with adaptations--to make certain that the reporting, photography, headlines, and navigation make the stories easy for the reader to enjoy.

Little tends toward the storytelling of the Wall Street Journal feature articles, which he says works well on the Web. The first page uses an anecdotal lead to draw the reader into the story. The second page broadens the story with the "nut graph"--the paragraph that explains the main points of the story. The other pages flow from these first two pages to allow the reader to follow a variety of links that expand on each report.

The process is called "layering." Because a computer screen contains much less space than the front page of a newspaper, the first layer or page of a digital story contains a headline, a digital photograph, and text that makes the user want to continue to the next layer. The pages are usually less than 500 words with the option for the reader with a click of a computer mouse to follow a highlighted path set out on a guide. But you may want to follow another path. You could read about the 1860 convention and want to learn more about what was happening in Chicago during that period. After searching through the archives of that time, you can proceed to the next convention or even skip ahead to another convention. The layers provide a logical way to proceed, but the layers can also enable you to read the digital page in any order.

"I write the story in chapters," Little says. "What works the best is when you have a design on the Web that is the equivalent of the layout of a magazine. Your eye and attention are focused on one part, which is easily digestible, and it flows and leads you into other parts."

Reporter Stephen Henderson noticed a story about the murder rates in the city. He put together all the information about the murders--the times, the neighborhood, the cause of death, and a variety of other

statistics. He designed a map of the city and allowed every citizen to look for information about his or her neighborhood--again with a click of the mouse rather than a visit to the records office of the police precinct.

He then devised a database for each Chicago public school, allowing a parent or student to determine how his or her school compares with the rest of the city from spending to reading scores. "The medium really shapes the writing. It makes you write shorter and sharper," Henderson says. "When I worked on the city desk, I would go do my story and I might assign a photographer. Then I'd just pass the thing on. Somebody else edits it. Somebody else copy edits it. Another person would read it and decide whether it would go on page one. Someone would decide where the photos would go. Here it's so much more important for me to be there through the whole process, shaping the thing so that it make sense in the medium."

At the Tribune and elsewhere, there are differences in how reporters react to digital journalism and the future. Researchers have found that reporters follow three different tracks concerning their views about the use of computers in the newsroom. The first group, called the "the benevolent revolutionary," is enthusiastic about new technologies. The second group, described as " the nervous traditionalist," is not. A third group, known as "the serene separatist," does not fear technology but sees little impact on the role of the journalist.[13]

The survey results are not exactly what you would expect. For example, the so-called "revolutionaries" strongly supported the notion that journalism "will depend on good writing, good interviewing, and thoughtfulness." Among those described as "traditionalists," a 53-year-old editor interviewed for the survey said he finds new technology "hardly intoxicating--more a pain in the ass with the constant rush of forcing on journalists more than they possibly need or can use." One traditionalist describes his concern that new media will emphasize presentation over information. "Writing is almost irrelevant now." Another reporter complains: "As media become more dependent on high-tech inventions, speed, I fear, will outweigh quality."

A key aspect to setting any agenda is survival. Simply put, how will the Tribune's new media operations make money? It's difficult to pry much specific financial information from anyone. So far, the Internet edition has cost several million dollars since its inauguration. Owen Youngman, the director of interactive media for the Tribune Corporation, seems like a high school science teacher behind his glasses, and his nasal-dominated cadence can put some people to sleep. But his zeal for the future makes this son of an evangelical minister come alive. "My neighbor on one side buys the Tribune because he's a stockbroker," Youngman says. "My neighbor on the other side doesn't. Why? It's not really fulfilling for someone with two kids in school in suburban Chicago. She cares a lot more about what affects her kids. It's not her fault. It's my fault."

Youngman has a specific business plan that he thinks will make the digital operation a profit center after a few years. "The newspaper business is really good at charging a token amount of money for an expensive product. Fifty cents doesn't cover the paper and ink, let alone the transportation, the gasoline," Youngman says. People won't have to pay for items the newspaper wants them to read; items people want to read may cost them. For example, a report on the City Council won't cost a subscriber. A complete year-by-year description of Michael Jordan's career may cost a subscriber.

At many metropolitan newspapers, about 40 percent of the budget goes for gathering, writing, and editing the news. The other 60 percent goes mainly for printing the news, marketing, and delivering the paper to the subscribers. Many production costs could be eliminated if the story on the computers of the reporters and editors went directly to the computer of the subscribers. "I could see a day rather than run those big old printers out there," says Youngman, pointing to the press room, "that if you want the Tribune, I will buy you a laser printer and put it on your kitchen table and deliver a highly customized version on paper every day if you don't want to go on-line."

Classified advertising--long a key revenue stream for newspapers--may abandon printed publications. Simply put, information can be far more easily found on line about the right job, apartment, or roommate than in print. Just go to the classified ads of an on-line paper and enter a search word like "engineer" or "bus driver." The computer will provide a list of possible jobs by city, state, or even nationwide within seconds. An apartment? Simply type in number of bedrooms, square footage, location, and price range. "Newspaper print classifieds are at their peak," a recent study reports, "and from here on out we can expect to see growth slowed each year as new competitors--fueled by emerging new technologies--chip away at newspapers' long-held lock on the classifieds business."[14] In five years, newspaper classifieds may see no growth. That would be have a dramatic impact because classified advertising accounts for nearly 40 percent of a typical newspaper's revenue. If revenues from classified advertising should fall by 25 per cent, the industry's profits would drop from today's 15 per cent to nine per cent. If revenues drop 50 per cent, the profit margin for newspapers would be three per cent. That means a number of printed newspapers would face serious cutbacks, and some papers will go out of business.

As you can see a variety of defining moments lie ahead for online journalism. Even though the expectations for this new medium remain high, it remains to be seen whether the Internet can become a true agenda setter in the years ahead. (http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/papers/harper.html)

[1] *"TV Remains Dominant News And Product Information Source, New Poll Reveals." Roper Starch Worldwide. 28 March 1998. <www.roper.com>.*

[2] *"TV News Viewership Declines." Pew Research Center for The People & The Press. 13 May 1996. <www.people-press.org/mediamor.htm>.*

[3] *"Profile of the American News Consumer." Radio and Television News Directors Foundation. 1996. 6. return*

[4] *Ibid., 24-25.*

[5] *Pew.*

[6] *"New Survey: Generation Gap Online." Reuters. 23 March 1998. <www.reuters.com>.*

[7] *Eric Meyer. "Online Publishing Continues to Grow Rapidly." NewsLink. April 1997. <www.newslink.org>.*

[8] *Pamela Shoemaker. "Gatekeeping." Sage Publications: Newbury Park,1991.*

[9] *Ibid., 46.*

[10] *Ibid., 11.*

[11] *Ibid., 52.*

[12] *Leah Gentry. "Buckbobill." Newspaper Association of America. December 1996. <www.naa.org>.*

[13] *Jane Singer. "Changes and Consistencies: Newspaper Journalists Contemplate an Online Future." Paper delivered at the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. August 1996.*

[14] *Hoag Levins. Editor & Publisher Interactive. "The Online Classified Reports New Cyberspace Advertising Technologies To Impact Newspaper Revenues in 3 Years." 21 November 1996. <www.mediainfo.com>*