Acting globally, thinking locally: how five Iowa newspapers developed news content and business strategies for online delivery

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Acting globally, thinking locally: How five Iowa newspapers developed news content and business strategies for online delivery

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ABSTRACT

A comparative case study design is used to investigate the online strategies of five Iowa newspapers, including Web content, policy, and how the company evaluates success. The influence of the organization on strategy and Web model is also considered. The corporate structure of the cases ranges from a rural privately held weekly (circulation 4,212) to a regional employee-owned daily (circulation 64,062), to a statewide, chain-owned daily (circulation 154,268). Findings indicate that the newspapers investigated are transitioning from the early stages of online news delivery to more formal tactics regarding their online presence with early integration of the online product into company policy and newsroom practices. Multiple business models are in development, while newsrooms struggle with added demands for Web-specific content placed on current staff, stagnant personnel resources, and ethical ambiguities when dealing with online reader feedback. These general themes are discussed in the context of organizational and technological change.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Online news has set the world of journalism on its ear. A decade ago, newspapers were just beginning to explore the possibilities of near-instant delivery of content through the World Wide Web. Today, thousands have a presence online, and millions of Web users read news on the Internet every day. Increasingly, to not have a presence online is seen as a strategic oversight, while the variety of options available can induce managerial vertigo. The relatively short timeline of online news expansion and the rapid growth of online readers have caused traditional media organizations to rethink their mission and processes, struggle with the added expense and complexity of online editions, and return mixed results.

Some fans of online news have predicted that the medium will become the new norm for distributing news and advertising information, effectively rendering traditional newspaper publishing obsolete. While this may be unnecessarily apocalyptic, the Internet has made enough of a splash in the journalism world that investigation into the thought-processes and organizational rationale is needed to shed light on the dynamic—if not fully understood—implications that the Internet brings to the practice of journalism.

Online news and diffusion

Much academic research into online newspapers tends to track the diffusion of computer and Web-specific technologies while focusing primarily on large national or regional publications. Given the youth of electronic newspaper editions this is understandable, yet it draws broad generalizations in terms of the experiences at medium and small dailies and nearly excludes weekly publications altogether. (Dibean & Garrison, 2005; Maier, 2000; Niebauer & Abbott, 2000).

Diffusion of innovations studies examine how an innovation spreads among the members of a social system over time (Rogers, 2003). The theory provides a useful perspective for studying the adoption of Internet sites by news organizations. Especially useful is the ability of diffusion research to track attitude change and the time at which
decisions were made. Considering the expense and risk of moving information to the World Wide Web, perceptions of the technology and its use by leaders in the field must affect a newspaper’s decision to go online. Because it is centered in the social change that occurs in the adoption of an innovation, diffusion theory is especially popular among studies investigating the spread of ideas through populations and organizations.

Everett Rogers (2003) classified adopter categories into five groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (or late adopters). Diffusion research has shown the distribution of these groups follows a normal distribution, or an S-curve when plotted cumulatively (p. 272). Additionally, each group typically accounts for a percentage of the total number of adopters: Innovators, 2.5 percent; early adopters, 13.5 percent; early majority, 34 percent; late majority, 34 percent; and late adopters, 16 percent (p. 272). An innovation is considered adopted when the 50 percent threshold is reached.

Adoption is not automatic, as each innovation is either helped or hindered by several factors. Diffusion theory suggests that each innovation is judged based on its relative advantage, compatibility with norms and current technology, degree of complexity, trialability, and the ability to observe the innovation at work for someone else (Rogers, 2003). Organizations add to this list of attributes such factors as flexibility in implementation, the need for approval by authority, and the culture of the organization. Research into the organizational adoption of technology implies that new media technologies impact job satisfaction for a time, change job roles and skills required, and decrease the time spent on creating content (Mierzejewska & Hollifield, 2006).

Starting in the 1980s, proprietary services offered by America Online, Prodigy, and CompuServe delivered electronic versions of newspapers until the movement toward the World Wide Web in 1994 (Garrison, 2005). From the beginning, online news proved to be a formidable competitor in the world of news providers. In September 2000, more than 360 million people over 12 years of age were online, accessing more than a billion Web pages on
5 million servers (Gunter, 2003). That same year, the number of U.S. households online outnumbered those subscribing to a daily newspaper (Garrison, 2005). By 2006, 73 percent of adults in the United States were online and broadband Internet connections had reached 42 percent of American homes (Madden, 2006).

Along with the general population, newsrooms moved to adopt computers as well. By 1995, 64 percent of daily newspapers were using some sort of online service for reporting (Garrison, 1997). Later, 95 percent of large newspapers were enlisting computers in their reporting (Maier, 2000). Still, technological diffusion within individual newsrooms was limited to “a small core of technologically adventurous reporters” (p. 105). As late as the turn of the century, information about computer adoption at small dailies was limited, and almost entirely lacking for weekly newspapers. Niebauer and Abbott (2000) found that a majority of Iowa daily newspapers had adopted computer technology for pagination and business tasks. While weekly papers lagged behind only slightly in adopting computer technology for in-house tasks, they were not generally used for external communication.

The dramatic increase of Internet users set many papers scrambling to set up Web sites of their own. At the end of 1995, only about 750 online newspapers existed worldwide. A year later, that number more than doubled, with half of the 1,600 operated by U.S. newspaper companies (Levins, 1997). By 2002, online newspapers numbered 2,959, though the growth has begun to stabilize; in 2002, just 50 new sites were reported (Garrison, 2005). A quick survey of the Iowa Newspaper Association database lists 101 of the state’s 281 weekly newspapers with an online presence, with the vast majority of the state’s daily newspapers offering the same (Find an Iowa Newspaper, 2005).

From this evidence, as well as the trends appearing nationally, we can assume that the positive diffusion of Internet news delivery methods by newspapers in Iowa has mirrored national trends toward Internet delivery of news. It seems logical at this stage of the Internet’s influence on the newspaper industry to move beyond the chronicling of technology
into a better understanding of how news organizations come to grips with the apparent upheaval within the industry. News and business managers are faced with a variety of online business models that have emerged: pay-to-view, completely free access, reader registration, and limited online content, to name just a few. As we shall see, little is known about the reasons that local newspapers take to the Web, yet they do so in great numbers. This research will attempt to shed light on the organizational factors that drive the migration to online news, investigate the decision making process at work in a variety of corporate settings, and try to glean a few lessons about what Internet strategies might achieve success at smaller news organizations.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Media management research is often guided by organizational theories. These range from structural theories focusing on nonhuman organizational factors to agency theories, more concerned with human influence (Mierzjewska & Hollifield, 2006). The lines between these theories are vague, however, due to the intervening human element in all aspects of the organization. Media management research is also distinguished by the nature of the products the industry creates. Rather than dealing in tangible goods and services, media companies offer information products that are characteristically different in their economic and societal roles (p. 40). Perrow (1986), summarizing Selznick, also suggests that there exists a difference between mere organizations—dedicated to the efficient process of administrating people toward identified goals—and institutions, which people become dependent upon and identify with. The distinction isn't complete, however, in that institutional leaders must use organizational means to direct its members “with a high sense of identity, purpose, and commitment” (p. 167). It is clear that media companies in particular exemplify this dualism.

Scholars working to understanding organizational change have proposed several metaphors for the group dynamics at work during the upheaval of shifting structures. In the early formation of the organizational literature, Lewin (cf. Gade, 2004) suggested an organic model of the organization in flux, describing the process as “unfreeze, change, refreeze” (p. 17). Others described a pendulum as a model of change (Bergquist, 1993). Both of these metaphors stressed that the changing organization either solidified into a rigid structure at some point (refreeze), or would be reversible (the pendulum). Modern scholars like Bergquist (p. 11), suggest a new concept and another comparison as the old order for American companies (in this case, newspapers) moves into a highly volatile postmodern state of constant change.

In this metaphor, water has three states of being: solid, liquid, and gaseous. By extension, organizational structures exist in related states of order and chaos. Contemporary
organizations exist on the edge of order and chaos in a liquid state, better approximating the postmodern world exemplified through the fragmentation of business and nonlinearity of the World Wide Web. In the emerging postmodern business world, then, Bergquist (1993) suggests that modern organizations will include elements of the premodern (singularity of vision), the modern (efficient and large in scale), and the postmodern (chaotic and fragmented).

In “Managing in a Time of Great Change,” Drucker (1995) outlines three sets of assumptions made in order to arrive at a theory of business: about the environment in which a business exists including society, the market, customers, and any technologies involved; about a company's mission; and about those things that the company does most effectively. When combined, these assumptions form the basis for how an organization places itself in its particular market, and forms a basis for adapting to change. The assumptions that form the business model, he continues, must also be regularly tested against reality, against one another, and within and throughout the organization itself.

Some business theories continue for a long time. In the case of newspapers, the industry built a successful business model over 150 years. No plan lasts forever, however, especially if postmodern theorists are correct. Rather than being caught with a rift in assumptions, Drucker (1995) suggests organizations take “preventive care” against stagnation, concentrate on early detection of warning signs, and, when change takes place, take on a rethinking of theories in order to put an organization back in line with a market's realities (p. 32).

First, it seems, a newspaper must determine its market, no matter how unclear the boundaries of Internet markets may be. Since the World Wide Web breaks down the traditional geographic market boundaries of print media, the creation of online markets must factor in highly complex economic factors. Chyi and Sylvie (2000) found determiners of online market have four dimensions: 1) content, with publications defined as local tending to
deliver primarily local news, whereas a national and international publication defines itself by delivering national and international content; 2) advertising, with the range and scope of a newspaper’s advertisers determining the limits of its market; 3) marketing, with a publication’s market determined by where the company chooses to promote its product; and 4) audience, with a return to geographic market delimiters based on where readers live. These factors should be, therefore, present in strategies implemented by news organizations seeking to capitalize on new media’s role in readers’ lives.

Regardless of a media organization’s role as institution, then, a rapidly shifting business climate, urged on by speedy communication technologies impacts the media greatly. Given the public’s identification and reliance on media products, news organizations in particular face considerable challenges as a shifting marketplace directs the business while technology shapes both organization and content. With the objective of identifying Internet models and strategies in use by Iowa newspapers, the process by which strategies came to be adopted, and the methods by which newspaper decision makers measure the effectiveness of online editions, an inquiry into the relevant literature should help to formulate questions aimed at a better understanding of the highly volatile climate of online news.

**Shifting ground**

Journalism depends on readership to be worthwhile, in terms of both economic and content reasons for publishing news. Internet diffusion has increased exponentially since the early days of the medium in the late 1980s. In 2002, 9 percent of the world’s population, or 544 million people, were Internet users (Rogers, 2003). Surveys conducted at the end of the last century indicated that 82 percent of Internet users check newspaper Web pages, second only to e-mail usage in reasons for using the World Wide Web (Strupp, 1999). A more recent study indicated that news remains among the most popular Internet activities (Lin et al., 2005).
An added wrinkle in the overall picture of newspapers has been the shrinking number of publications, and the dynamic shifting of newspaper ownership. In the early 1950s, independent families owned 1,300 of the 1,785 newspapers published in the United States. By 1980, independent papers numbered just over 700, replaced by publicly traded media conglomerates that dominated the market (Neiva, 1996). In the 1990s, daily newspapers changed owners more often than they had in the previous two decades (Lacy & Martin, 2004). The media ownership picture in Iowa (a prime example of the impact of consolidation on rural markets) reflects the national trend. From 1911 to 1998, weekly newspapers in the state declined from 912 to just 340 daily and weekly papers (Niebauer & Abbott, 2000). Pressure on the Federal Communications Commission by the newspaper industry to further deregulate market share indicates that the movement is yet to be completed (Walker, 2003).

There are some indications that the future of newspapers hasn’t been completely written just yet. Cho, et al. (2006) suggest that contrary to the conventional wisdom that the industry is a dying breed, newspapers may just be shifting and changing their focus and publication. They find that, while over 300 newspapers stopped publication between 1987 and 2003, well over half instead became weeklies or merged dailies. New dailies started publication, offsetting much of the losses by those that folded. In sum, newspapers lost just 48 markets over 17 years. Meanwhile, other sectors of the industry can be seen as growing. The total number of weeklies increased 2 percent, and readership of those papers increased by 9 percent between 1996 and 2003. Sunday circulation rose by 20 percent as the number of papers published that day increased from 562 in 1965 to 917 in 2003 (Facts about Newspapers, 2004).

Whether one considers the sun as rising or setting, the industry is clearly in transition, and much energy has been focused into online outlets as another way for traditional media to reach readers. Overall, media have been unable so far to find a successful Internet business
model, a fact that has hindered the development of online news beyond the initial rush for some sort of online presence (Garrison, 2005).

**Content**

Online presentation of news differs from traditional mass media in the level of interactivity and feedback it makes available to readers. As a medium, the Internet presents information nonlinearly, at least in part (Deuze, 1999; Massey & Levy, 1999; Paul, 1995; Pavlik, 1997). Traditional newspapers offer a variety of entry points for readers through the juxtaposition of many stories on a single page but are still typically read from top to bottom, or at least in sections starting from the front. Web users are able to switch from a story midway through to access information on yet another Web page, a feature that adds complexities for the writing and presentation of news (Gunter, 2003). This also gives readers more options for personalization or individualization. By inserting hyperlinks into online text, readers can access archived stories, read original source material, or contact journalists with the click of a mouse (Deuze, 1999).

Personalization also extends into the ability of users to select news that is of interest to them online, excluding other information, effectively customizing an electronic newspaper. This kind of information interactivity is known as ‘pull’ content. Another, known as ‘push’ content, is derived from asking readers to select a series of topics that are of interest to them, and then supplying them with news stories that match the content selected at regular intervals (Deuze, 1999). Early in the development of electronic news delivery, PointCast software allowed subscribers to download articles to their computer as a screensaver. Users showed a preference for browsing information on their own and left PointCast technology as “the most uninstalled software in the world” (p. 378).

For journalists, the Internet’s ability to provide personalized, nonlinear reporting with possibilities for streaming video and audio opens new doors in terms of presentation style. Known as convergence, traditional text can be blended with moving images, sound, and links
to more information all within the same story. Deuze (1999) sees this melting of forms as a feature primarily geared toward journalists rather than audiences. Convergence gives audiences choices, but the technology allows journalists more freedom to present news in a variety of ways. Surveys of online editions have pointed out that new technologies are not being used to their full potential, with interactive technology showing positive diffusion among newspapers, though the types of features vary among national, regional, and local newspapers and none of them present an overwhelming amount of such elements (Dibean & Garrison, 2005; Dimitrova & Neznanski, 2006).

Most of what makes up news Web sites consists of stories recycled from the traditional media (newspapers and television broadcasts) and posted online in a process known as “shovelware” (Deuze, 1999). While the 24-hour news cycle available to online audiences suggests a move toward constant publication, online editions have yet to move significantly beyond electronic versions of the parent newsprint publication (Dibean & Garrison, 2005). There are some examples of movement beyond dumping wire reports and offline content to the Internet, though trends in staffing could hinder the process. Larger newspapers have been among the first to innovate on the Web, although some smaller companies have found ways to take advantage of the technology to enhance or bolster their print counterparts. Abbott & Niebauer (2000) warned that the online experience of small daily and weekly newspapers might be very different than that of large circulation newspapers. Indeed, a survey of mid-sized online publications found that the smallest newspaper in the sample (albeit just under 100,000 subscribers and hardly mid-sized by all but national standards) more easily provided the requested information (Dotinga, 2000).

What online features are in use by Iowa newspapers? Is their use of the Web fundamentally different from the national trends illustrated here?

Tracking the use of Web-specific features has proven problematic for researchers, as the technological landscape changes and the readership of news organizations are rarely
homogenous. Dimitrova and Nezanski (2006) suggest a three-stage model of online news consisting of progressively greater levels of additional content: shovelware, augmented (additional content, photos and hyperlinks), and converged media (video, audio, interactive graphics) as a way to conceptualize the level of online features present. By understanding that change is a factor with regard to online news, how have Iowa newspapers’ electronic editions changed technologically over time?

**Online models**

Since, in theory, every Web site has as many potential readers as online users at any given time, the incentive for news organizations to develop a Web presence is obvious. At the same time, this can create problems for traditional news sources as readers select one medium over another within a limited timeframe for consuming information. Studies of displacement between online and offline sources have shown mixed results, however (Lin et al., 2005). With the online ground continually shifting, readers appear to be still finding their way among online and offline sources with a variety of possible forms from which to choose.

Online newspapers also have a choice as to the level of service provided, and the differences between printed publication and online presence. Garrison (2005) suggests at least four models for the function of online newspapers: the 24-hours-per-day news model, the community bulletin board model, the supplementary news site model, and the exclusive news site model (p. 15). The 24-hour model places the Web site in the position of operating under a continuous deadline schedule, a decision that requires major investment by management to staff and maintain such an effort. Under the community bulletin board model, a site geared primarily toward national coverage makes a point to offer community information to readers within the traditional distribution area, as was done by the *Boston Globe* (p. 16). A supplementary news site takes advantage of the vast space available online to add material to stories that appeared in print. Content under this model is typically different than that of the parent publication and may also operate on a 24-hour deadline.
schedule (p. 16). The exclusive news site offers content not available anywhere else. There have been few examples of a printed publication offering Web exclusives, due to the expense of creating Web-only content and the lack of money generated by online editions (p. 17).

While the majority of online editions offer content for free, a growing number are opting to sell online subscriptions, at least for a portion of the site’s information (Sullivan, 2003). *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, boasts more than 150,000 subscribers, though so far has been unable to make money from its Web operations (Gunter, 2003). As of yet, readers have not embraced the idea of paying for information obtained on the World Wide Web. Just 1.2 percent of online readers indicate they would pay for content online, while decidedly more (16.6 percent) would agree to register with the site to gain access (Sullivan, 2003). Still, there is no guarantee that either of these answers will last, considering the string of unsuccessful ideas in the short history of the Web: “the failed videotext model, the failed paid Internet model, the failed free Web model, the failed Internet/Web ad push model, the current portals and personal portals model, and the evolving digital portals model” (Garrison, 2005). How are Iowa newspapers presenting their product online? Are these model descriptions appropriate for small, mid-sized, and weekly newspapers? What factors influenced the decision to implement a specific online model?

**Advertising and market determination**

Basic economics suggests that in a market in which several firms supply identical products, price becomes the only differentiation between products for consumers. According to Lacy & Martin (2004) newspaper competition creates a market somewhere between oligopoly, in which a market has competition from just a few firms, and monopoly, in which one firm controls a market. Readers do not just select a newspaper based on price, but on a combination of factors including the quality of relevant information, both editorial and advertising. Advertisers look for a suitable vehicle for information about their product, a pool of potential buyers, and the cost of buying space in the publication (p. 19).
Advertising revenue was not always the dominant force in newspaper publishing that it has become, though it has played a significant role. The early business model of American newspapers in the mid 1800s was one in which the medium served primarily elite customers who could afford a high subscription rate (Picard, 2004). Over time, newspapers sought a wider audience and began to rely on advertising dollars to offset declining subscription prices. By 1880, newspapers divided advertising and subscription revenue equally. Economic growth and social change continued this trend into the later half of the 20th century, when American newspapers began to seek greater profits as capitalism and commercialism took greater control over operations and news content. The newspaper industry now receives more than 80 percent of its revenue from advertising (p. 58). Advertising-based media are dependent upon the ability of readers to have direct access to advertisers (McQuail, 2005).

Newspaper circulation, therefore, has traditionally followed the geographical boundaries of retail zones (Lacy & Martin, 2004).

Online markets are different than those developed by traditional media companies for generations and may be difficult to define due to blurring boundaries and shifting technology (Chyi & Sylvie, 2000). Some traditional print media outlets are turning to online markets even to bolster readership of the flagship publications (Day, 1995; FT launches online marketing drive to boost newsstand sales, 2005). Competition, as understood with traditional geographic boundaries, forces newspapers to invest in improving content to attract readers, develop circulation, and provide incentive for rival journalists (Lacy & Martin, 2004). Online editions, however, are in the odd position of competing with “nobody and everybody at the same time” (Chyi & Sylvie, 2000, p. 74). While online practitioners report offering exclusive content for their perceived market, their publication still competes for readers’ time with every other Internet site, as well as traditional media outlets (p. 74).

The move toward online distribution of news among newspapers changes those boundaries as the Internet’s global scope of potential readers theoretically serves to enhance
the paper’s pool of possible customers for advertisers. At the same time, new media threaten newspapers by supplying the same information traditionally supplied by newspapers: classifieds, personal ads, property listings, and employment opportunities (McQuail, 2005). Some see the Internet’s range as a boon to the newspaper industry, likening it to the impact postal service had on circulation as a means to expand readership (Thompson & Wassmuth, 2001). More recent indications show that even small fluctuations in retail earnings cause newspapers to bear the brunt of limited advertising dollars. Recent years have seen a slump in national advertising among media in general, due in part to a preference for Internet and direct mail advertising (Whitman, 2005). Predictions for the Internet’s impact on local advertising have not been upbeat, either. As the largest revenue producer for newspapers over 70,000 in circulation, classified advertising accounts for one third of all newspaper revenue. In 1998, online classified advertising amounted to just 1 percent of the classified market. By 2003, that share was expected to increase to 6.4 percent (Carlson, 1999).

Chyi and Sylvie (2000) suggest that, unlike more established business models in the traditional media, models for making money online are driven by individual newspapers finding their “own way toward profitability or failure” (p. 76). Given that the overwhelming content of online editions is shovelware, repurposed from the print edition to a Web product, Internet newspapers, especially those tied to a printed publication, are selecting markets that echo traditional boundaries. How has the creation of an online edition affected Iowa newspaper companies? How do these organizations perceive the economic forces at work in their markets?

Newspapers are aware of the shifting business model and more often operate as corporate ventures—complex bureaucracies operated by management rather than individual owners (Demers, 1996). Evidence shows that these corporate models tend to put more emphasis on profits than individual owners. However, as a newspaper becomes more corporate, trained managers serve as a buffer between the newsroom and “capitalists,” (p.
237) and chain newspapers are found to be more rigorous editorially, though their focus on the local community does seem to suffer. Online journalism, however, seems to place a premium on local news and information (Cochran, 1995; Phipps, 1999; Thompson & Wassmuth, 2001), though no clear shift in priority has been shown. How has the organization shaped individual online solutions at Iowa newspapers?

**Digital employees**

The digital newsroom allows for increased flexibility in both the physical arrangement of workspaces and the skills required of professionals (Gunter, 2003). While some publications have created special newsrooms for online content producers, the economic reality for most newspapers does not allow for redundant staffing (p. 104). In most cases, a “converged” news desk that “handles stories regardless of medium and distribution platform” is more practical (Bressers & Meeds, 2005). At the same time, online producers are not often given equal footing in news meetings (p. 16). Indeed, with the proliferation of computer software tools vital to the structure and maintenance of online editions, specialists trained to operate such equipment have “established a foothold in modern newsrooms but frequently lack journalistic credentials” (Gunter, 2003, p. 104). Singer et al. (1999) found larger circulation newspapers with larger online staffs, though only larger papers had dedicated online employees.

Surprisingly, a majority of American online journalists report cutbacks to their newsrooms, despite an expanding audience, with the bulk of online investment by media companies in information-processing technology rather than staffing (Facts about Newspapers 2004, 2004). Online journalists independent of the traditional parent organization are rare in modern newsrooms with the trend toward a part-time online staff, and traditional reporters filing some additional content. Trends in newsroom employment show consistent declines in staffing within the traditional media, a sector that has not recovered from the loss of 2,000 jobs in 2000 (Facts about Newspapers, 2004; Saba, 2005).
Time will tell how convergence affects the job of working journalists, how the team concept will continue to grow, and how well corporate newspaper managers will manage the boundary, but news businesses appear hesitant over putting resources directly into their Internet divisions and, apparently into newsroom resources. How does the role of technology and industry hiring trends affect personnel in Iowa newsrooms?

Readers’ roles

Printed publications have at least one instant method for recognizing the success or failure of its products among readership: circulation. According to Lacy and Martin (2004), a newspaper increases its circulation by serving more people, and being more useful to readers. This, in turn, stimulates advertisers to seek subscribers’ attention within the newspaper.

Online audiences, however, are notoriously difficult to pin down, as reliable and complete market data is not available (Gunter, 2003). Even generating solid numbers concerning the amount of original traffic a Web site attracts is a task that may yet be difficult for Web publications (Ledbetter, 2000). Several measurement tools have been developed, though they lack specificity: simple tallying of Web hits, which may not accurately reflect unique visitors; page views, which are little better than counting Web hits; a sampling method similar to television rating systems, which (depending upon the sample group) may exclude much international traffic; recording of “unique visitors” which tracks individual reading habits but doesn’t supply demographic data about readers.

On the other hand, publications that require subscription or payment have overcome this issue and collect data about readers’ every move with precision. This, in turn, has the potential to generate revenue as advertisers seeking specific demographics can be promised certain audiences (Garrison, 2005). Online registration and subscription, however, has yet to provide positive financial or readership returns, as Internet users generally show little intent to pay for content (Chyi, 2005). Other newspapers have opted to offer print subscribers access to the online edition for a fee, though at a reduced rate than Internet-only readers
What information do Iowa newspapers seek from online readers? How is this data put to use?

**Using strategy to understand change**

Many attempts to explain organizational change depend on process models that outline the method by which change unfolds over time. These can range from models describing change with a broad brush—conception of a need for change; transitioning the organization; and operating within new practices and procedures (Dawson, 1994)—to those prescribing specific stages including vision, strategy, culture, planning and implementation (Burnes, 1992). In order to monitor the strategic approach taken by business, many studies have been conducted using the Miles-Snow typology. It suggests a method of classifying business strategy based on three premises: that organizations will, over a period of time, develop a systematic approach to change; that four different approaches can be identified; and that each strategy, when properly implemented, can be successful (Zahra & Pearce, 1990).

The four strategic approaches are classified as Defenders, Prospectors, Analyzers, and Reactors. Defenders set policies designed to protect and maintain control over a niche market within their industry. Prospectors seek out opportunities and look to create new products. Analyzers exhibit properties of both Defenders and Prospectors. Reactors do not seem to have a conscious strategy, and are considered a dysfunctional group. Research into the typology has not proven, however, that any one type of strategic approach (including reactionary in some industries) has proven to be more or less effective in practice. Further, differences in how each type implements strategy are not well known and may suggest problems with the classification structure (Zahra & Pearce, 1990).

Buchanan and Storey (1997) suggest that, while these models may serve to illustrate change, the actual process is “a much messier reality” (p. 139) full of backtracking, missteps and re-evaluation. Further, they suggest that much of the organizational development
literature overplays the role of the change agent as a director of change. Instead, they argue that change within an organization should be viewed as a carefully orchestrated ebb and flow of multiple actors who support, follow, and resist the process, and who select and change these roles at will. Further, systems theory conceptualizes the idea of “equifinality,” suggesting that multiple paths may exist toward the same end and that finding a “perfect fit” of process models is less important than recognizing the role of individual players in an organization as it works toward its goal (p. 143).

Ultimately, as change takes place and rigidly structured systems begin to fall away, companies begin to recognize roles and actors and seek to change the culture of the organization. Changing culture is a decidedly difficult and multifaceted process that can’t be done “on Internet time” (Kleiner, 2000, p. 19) Instead, Kleiner suggests technology-dependent industries often find themselves dealing with cultures of ‘hype’ and ‘craft.’ Hype cultures represent the people who typically work in the realm of capital—seeking it out and creating new ventures. At the opposite of this stands the culture of craft, which must deliver on the promises made by the hype culture. To combat this, Kleiner suggests moving to a team-based management strategy, which allows for smaller groups and quick readjustment as factors change. In these flattened hierarchies, team leaders must “manage the boundary,” (Hirschhorn, 1991, p. 18) mediating between teams and the company, bringing the ideas of team members into line with company policies and vice-versa, fostering communication, and negotiating for resources.

While many have trumpeted the benefits of an online presence for the newspaper industry and business as a whole, no clear picture has developed in terms of how successful such ventures actually turn out to be. Some warn that in the rush to be “fast and first,” newspapers risk resources without “fully understanding either the obstacles involved or the true potential outcomes” (Bressers & Meeds, 2005, p. 19). Many factors are at play as organizations examine whether or not to adopt new technology: increased cost, investment in
equipment, and changes to existing organizational practices (Gunter, 2003). Some suggest that organizations generally lack formal plans concerning technology adoption (King & Grover, 1991). While the expectation of financial returns is one obvious incentive to go online, an unclear strategy concerning technology might create a “follow the leader” effect, with competing companies pressing to get on the World Wide Web and not be left behind (p. 37). Flanagin (2000) suggests that organizational social pressures significantly impact early adopters of Internet sites, though the effect is lessened on later adopters. Online decisions were not made haphazardly; considerations were made for the increased flow of information within the organization and outside with their customers. Ultimately, though, adoption decisions were found to be based largely on the “faddishness” of new technology (p. 637).

Clearly, newspaper companies find themselves at a crossroads of reinventing their product and business model in the face of widespread change along several fronts. Technology, driven by industry and consumer choices, increasingly shifts the influence from print to electronic publications. Newspaper ownership concerns manifest themselves in staffing concerns and corporate pressures for profit while increasing the need for mid-level managers to bring company goals to fruition. Meanwhile, the institutional function of media in the lives of its consumers makes the struggle for newspaper companies more than just an exercise in organizational restructuring; it represents a reworking in progress of the future of the Fourth Estate.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The research questions were addressed by conducting multiple case studies describing each of the online models discovered to be in use by Iowa newspapers, the reasons why each paper came to employ its current model and how corporate structure impacts decision making for the online publication. Wide variation in online newspapers hints that publishers and newsrooms alike are groping for answers when it comes to their Internet editions. As such, a comparative case study approach was chosen to gather data for this study. Yin (1984) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; [especially] when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). Comparing case studies can allow for comparative analysis within the study of institutional and organizational phenomena (Perrow, 1986).

Study design

Case study research may be best described as a strategy rather than a unique methodology, in that multiple methods are often employed in the building of each case and can include various kinds of data to create a more accurate, holistic picture. Van Maanen (1983) cautions that while qualitative and quantitative methodologies are different in terms of “form, focus, and emphasis of study,” they are not mutually exclusive (p. 10). Rather, each informs the other to create a more complete picture.

The case study’s method of examining different kinds of data sources helps to minimize problems with construct validity. Construct validity in qualitative research applies to the ability of the research instrument to limit subjective judgments in the analysis of data (Yin, 1984). In other words, construct validity refers to how accurately a methodology allows inferences to be made from the “land of observation” to the “land of theory,” while minimizing subjectivity on the part of the researcher (Trochim, 2002, para. 1). Yin (1984) suggests six sources of evidence to increase validity in case study research, both internal and
In this study, four sources are applicable: documentation, archival records, interviews, and direct observation. Having key informants review case study reports following data collection can also strengthen construct validity (p. 139). Such a review not only allows participants the opportunity to correct errors in describing a phenomenon, it also affords them the chance to offer supplemental data that may have been overlooked. In fact, secondary reviews did clarify newspaper operations, especially those undergoing significant transformation.

Human subjects review was sought for this study from the Office of Research Assurances. Because of the methodology and subject matter, the research was deemed exempt from review.

**Case study protocol**

A multiple case study approach was employed in order to effectively describe the variety of online models and organizational processes in use at newspapers around the state of Iowa. Investigating multiple cases is comparable to conducting multiple experiments and, with this in mind, the research design was structured to allow replication between cases (Yin, 1984). This is different from standard sampling techniques that aim to gather data from a random selection of respondents representing a population by gathering data from a wide range of respondents or subjects that represent a population to claim generalizability of results (p. 52). When the same information is gathered across case studies, data can be more effectively compared. While the results are not intended to be generalized to a large population, they allow for a deeper understanding of a phenomenon as the data are cross-validated from one case to the next.

Yin (1984) suggests creating protocols when conducting multiple case studies to establish analytical rigor and to increase reliability. Because case study researchers gain access to social situations over which they have little or no control and operate within the time schedules and contexts of those being observed, protocols help ensure the reliability of
results. Such protocols include data gathering procedures for use in the field using instruments such as interview schedules, checklists for recording observations, and the method of analyzing obtained documents. Protocols help guarantee that observations are accurately made and recorded while in the field, aid in collecting data from a variety of sources, and ensure that procedures are replicated between cases.

In-depth interviews are well suited to investigate topics of interest, especially how and why a particular phenomenon occurred or is taking place (Yin, 1984). In the present study, interviews conducted for each case were a primary source of data. These were conducted during meetings with decision-makers at newspapers identified as employing an online model. Rubin & Rubin (2005) stress the importance of finding interviewees who are “experienced and knowledgeable” (p. 64) to ensure the collection of the best available information. In this study, newspaper publishers, editors, and online staff members who have the most to do with the development and application of their paper’s online presence and content were interviewed.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation refers to the navigational technique of using multiple reference points to locate an object’s exact position (Jick, 1983). In research, this is equivalent to incorporating qualitative and quantitative data to increase accuracy and to better understand the phenomenon under study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). More than this, collecting a variety of data can add to the construction of a holistic picture of a phenomenon being investigated by incorporating details within a context (Jick, 1983). Because the weaknesses and biases of one data collection method are offset by others, triangulation has been shown to emphasize the assets and neutralize the liabilities of each methodology (p. 138). In this study, the collection of various forms of data including observations, quantitative data, interview responses, and reports assures that the findings accurately depict a phenomenon and illuminate the decision making picture of professionals working in the field.
Choosing the cases

The Iowa Newspaper Association maintains a database with contact information and links to newspapers in the state. Based on preliminary discussions with the executive director of the association, several models were identified as being practiced by newspaper companies. These organizations served as the base sample for this investigation. Such models included sites created and administered by companies contracted to host newspaper Web sites, sites for chain-owned papers which follow structures developed by a parent corporation, unique online newspapers developed by newspapers in-house, those which supply content for free, and those that charge a fee for access.

Using the target technique (Felstehausen & Lamm, 1975), initial participants were asked to identify another newspaper they perceived as using a different approach to present online news. From there, additional online newspaper models and their corresponding organizations were targeted for study, until no new models were identified. The goal was to discover the range of Internet models currently in use rather than to determine the number of Iowa newspapers applying any particular model.

Cases collected

The five Iowa newspapers that became case studies were from a range of sizes and locations around the state. Two companies were locally owned and operated, with the remaining three owned by chain companies of various sizes (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper name</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harlan Tribune (Tues.), Harlan News-Advertiser (Fri.)</td>
<td>4,212 (both papers)</td>
<td>Harlan, Iowa</td>
<td>Tribune Newspapers, Inc. (Family owned, operated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tribune</td>
<td>11,153 six days (Tues.-Sun.)</td>
<td>Ames, Iowa</td>
<td>Midlands Newspapers, Inc. (Subsidiary of Omaha World Herald)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yin (1984) warns that the analysis of case study data is among the “least developed and difficult aspects” of the methodology (p. 99). To strengthen the analysis, he suggests a clear outline of how data will be organized so that they can be compared within a reasonable time frame while addressing potential issues of validity. As such, a case study report guide was included in the case study protocols to provide a standardized approach during the analysis stage. Soon after each episode of data collection, the findings were synthesized into a report. These reports contained written summarizations of interview responses, observations, and quantitative data gleaned from office reports (i.e. sales data, annual reports) as well as diagrams depicting the proximity of online and print staff within the newsroom. These reports were sent to the interviewees for review to increase accuracy. Reports were then compared across cases to highlight different approaches as well as illustrate similarities.

The case study method aims to create a description and explanation of a phenomenon that fits each case, allowing for the detection of trends across cases (Yin, 1984). The number of variables involved and the volume of data collected, however, must be organized following a categorization scheme that will evolve from data collection. Protocols, reporting site visits into reports and soliciting clarification from interviewees helped to standardize data collection and enable a systematic analysis.

The target technique turned out to be rather unsuccessful in this case, due to the level of uncertainty about online practices among management at the newspapers studied. The rapidly changing technological and marketplace dynamic suggested that trade publications
and infrequent discussions with other professionals formed the majority of Iowa newspaper managers’ views of the online news market in and outside of the state. Managers at chain-owned newspapers had a wider view of the industry and suggested other papers within their organization, but these were outside the scope of this study. Most agreed that the preliminary cases picked (and subsequently examined) represented the range of possibilities. Most editors were surprised to hear that other papers had different approaches, and wanted to learn more about problems other companies had faced and the solutions that arose.
CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY REPORTS

Harlan Tribune, News-Advertiser

Name of newspaper: Harlan Tribune (Tues), Harlan News-Advertiser (Fri); (Tribune Newspapers, Inc.)
Location: Harlan, Iowa
Date of visit: June 7, 2006
Print circulation: 4,212 (both papers)
Online newspaper URL: http://www.harlanonline.com
People interviewed, position:
  Alan Mores, publisher
  Bob Bjoin, editor

Web model

Tribune Newspapers, Inc. operates one Web site for its two weekly papers. The site is hosted by TownNews, and is designed around one of the company’s templates. Advertising dominates the page borders, and stories are shovelware from the print publications. Access to the online paper is free, though content is limited, a decision made to protect print circulation and profit. Harlanonline now offers a paid archive, which features more of the print publication content. The paper offers weekly, monthly, six month and yearly packages ranging from $5 - $26. The paper has not yet decided whether to offer a discounted pricing package to existing newspaper subscribers who pay $44 a year to purchase the newspaper. Online subscribers will get news for free for 3-5 days, then have to go into a paid archived system for news older than that. Paid subscribers will receive in addition all law enforcement reports, courthouse news and full obituaries. The paper recently learned that neither funeral home is putting life histories on their Web sites. Harlan Newspapers has maintained a five-year database of life histories which all will be put on the Web for the paid archive model.
Development of model

The Harlan Tribune was one of the first weekly newspapers to use the Zwire third-party (now Townnews) hosting after looking to achieve an online presence. “We went through all the growing pains with them,” Bjoin said. “It just seemed easier at the time to work with a company that had a long term commitment in the topsy turvy world of online providers.” Mores said a key factor was Zwire had contracted with the Iowa News Association (INA) to offset the startup costs, aid in technical support, and help sell advertising. Bjoin was part of the INA committee that helped choose Zwire as the company that the INA would contract with.

Harlan went through all the Zwire test models in the early stages to see what was effective and not. Originally, ad sales teams from Zwire would go through the community which had signed with Zwire and sign up local advertisers at either $200, $150, or $100 per month. Other papers reported their advertisers were pulling out shortly after the team left. “Six months later, the advertiser looked at their bill and said, ‘What am I doing? This is ridiculous. It’s an unknown medium, Pull my advertising,’” Mores said. “We lost nobody, because we’re charging $25, $35, $45, and $75 per month.” Over seven years, we’ve only had maybe two or three advertisers pulled their Web site ads.

“What you see are nearly the same people who were there when we started. Low rates, however have kept profits low. Lately, there has been some preference from advertisers to fix their location on the site, and not rotate with other advertisers. [The paper charges more for advertisers to be placed in a rotation.]

“We want it to be a non-issue when [an advertiser] gets their monthly bill,” Mores said. “And then we promote the hell out of it in our paper.” Minimum of a quarter-page, closer to a half page per week is used in the paper promoting advertisers’ experiences and Web traffic data.
Additionally, the paper was helped online by the Iowa Newspaper Association, which offered assistance to member papers in the mid-1990s, when many organizations were considering a move to the Web, but lacked capital and experience to do so. “That whole Internet buzz, it was so hot, but it was so lame, too,” Mores said. “Nobody was on [the Web] but everyone thought they needed to be there no matter how bad their presence was.”

The city of Harlan made the investment to improve the communications infrastructure in town in 1995 as a way to offer competing cable television which helped push the Harlan Newspapers into going online and preserving their local news franchise. The city went $1 million over budget in the project, but the public supported wiring the community as it got them 75 channels of cable TV for half what the local cable company was charging. Wiring the community helped the paper’s online subscriptions to grow. “What we took for granted in 1995, now everyone takes for granted,” Mores said. “We had instant access, we were downloading videos, what little were out there years before other communities.”

“We had technology in our local hospital that Omaha hospitals couldn’t read. We could send x-rays electronically that the teaching schools in Omaha couldn’t read because they didn’t have the technology,” Mores said. “We were so out there.” Harlan Newspapers considered becoming an Internet service provider. “I’m glad we didn’t,” Mores said. “We would have gotten buried.”

Despite the early steps into the online forum, the paper has not moved beyond the shovelware stage that it helped originate in the 1990s. “There is something to be said with the consistency of it,” Mores said. Harlanonline uses dotPhoto as a third-party provider of photo reprints. Users can upload photos to the site for printing or order copies of the Harlan Tribune’s news photos. Mores said the dotPhoto site is “notorious for changing their template and not telling anybody…Imagine hundreds of thousands of men and women trying to figure out what to do now.” He prefers a more stable model, retaining a look and feel that readers learn to use, which is reflected in the Harlan Web site.
The decision to not put all content online was a “financial and time decision,” Mores said. The company had considered moving to a paid access model early on, but chose to instead limit online content.

In 2006, Harlan Newspapers again planned to move to a paid model for online subscribers. This was abandoned for several reasons. First, the move was not an immediate priority in the face of other needs such as a new press addition, new pagination software, new computer upgrades, and the purchase of a back-up imagesetter and processor. Next, the company faced indecision on how much to charge online subscribers, and how much free time the paper was willing to allow readers before forcing them to subscribe. Instead, the company has chosen to move forward with a paid archive in early 2007. TownNews promises that integrating the print and online subscriber lists will be easy. Mores is skeptical and forsees problems with access and tracking subscribers. Instead, the company is likely to price online archive rates attractively for both print and online-only readers. Mores said he expects that 300-400 potential subscribers will fit into both the print and online subscription category.

Zwire has reported that Harlanonline was one of the top-viewed papers in the system. Bjoin attributes that to people who have moved away from Harlan checking back to the hometown paper, and also the success of Harlan’s high school sports programs.

Mores said that the paper has no plans to use specific reader data collected through subscription information. “In the world of spam, we’re not going to do any of that,” Mores said. Subscribers are sent a mass e-mail with the front page embedded with hyperlinks to go to the paper’s Web site. This is done after print publication twice weekly and the stories are loaded from the paper to the Web site.

“It’s the typical community newspaper balancing act,” Mores said. “You try to be all things to all people, but you just can’t be financially.” Mores and Bjoin said many of the conversations they have had with other weekly newspaper publishers and editors suggest that
few have online editions or dedicated staff. “I think they realize there’s a minimal return in it and didn’t want to lose subscribers.”

Mores and Bjoin don’t expect to lose readers by maintaining a primary role for the print publication or by charging for access to some parts of the online product. “We’ll catch the people who aren’t subscribers to the paper right now…more than we’ll lose subscribers to the newspaper because not everything is on there,” Bjoin said. Mores said a paid online model would still not make everything (inside photos and local correspondence) available to online readers primarily because of the strain on personnel. “It’s just too much data,” he said. “Bob [Bjoin] would be spending an inordinate amount of time for data that only would pertain to a very limited audience.”

**Role of organization in online decisions**

Owner: Tribune Newspapers, Inc. Steve & Alan Mores, independently operated. Mores and editor Bjoin make all of the online decisions. “We don’t have to answer to anyone,” Mores said.

**Online content**

Zwire notified the paper that they were removing national news from the site. The Harlan papers haven’t had it on there in a long time. “We took that off there a long time ago,” Bjoin said. “Which goes to the concept that we’re a local paper, that’s why people subscribe, it’s a local Web site, that’s why they go to look at it,” Mores said.

Breaking news is occasionally put online: a major fire or accident gets an online “teaser” of what will appear in the print publication. When news is put online, it’s the full story from the print publication. No additional information is presented in Web-specific features (audio and video). “[Online] is a reflection of our print publication, but it’s not the whole,” Bjoin said. “There’s just not as much online as are in our print publications,” Courthouse news, police reports, sheriff reports, most inside stories do not go online. Local
court and police information will “definitely” be part of the subscriber-only paid package, Mores said. “We felt that this was the most valuable archivable data we had,” Mores said. “That an employer could search your or my name and immediately know what you had been charged with. We just set that aside as an important part of the product that we hadn’t put up there. When we go to the paid model, it will be there.” Front page stories and most sports are currently available online.

Advertisers are very loyal to the online edition. Nearly all of the current Web site advertisers are the same as were in the original site development seven years ago. “It’s very affordable,” Mores said. “We woefully undercharge for the ads,” Mores said. Low rates have meant that advertisers remain faithful to the paper’s online edition.

Harlan Newspapers, Inc. is looking forward to making all of their pre-1990’s stories available in a searchable database and is contracting with Smalltown Newspapers (a Seattle company) to scan all of the print publications since the early 1800s and make them available online. There is an online database of stories posted to the Web site from 1998, but not the “heart and soul of the community…the who-had-dinner-with-what and whatnot and that will be provided with Smalltown Newspapers,” Mores said.

**Community involvement/feedback**

Readers are able to submit comments to a guestbook on stories or use the feature as a community bulletin board. This feature is not often used, however. Mores said it is “surprisingly limited.” Bjoin mediates all online feedback. Mores said that people fear putting e-mail addresses online, even to respond to stories. “Older folks—no way,” Mores said.

Traditional feedback such as letters to the editor and calls to the newsroom remain the primary method of reader response to the organization. The paper has a general news e-mail address for submissions, but individual staff e-mails have been removed from the online product. Bjoin said he was receiving 120 to 200 e-mails a day prior to that. “It’s was just
trash,” Mores said “The Democratic and Republican primaries killed us with e-mails; don’t they realize we’re just going ‘delete, delete’?”

Some people submit community events or letters electronically, but most is via phone or written letter.

Harlanonline tried to partner with local groups like the Lions Club, local soccer club, little league, to offer free sites with photos, meeting times, contact information, but people were not interested in the offer. “We were really surprised,” Mores said. “Nobody wants to take the time to put it up there,” Bjoin said. Some groups have just opted to put up individual Web sites and not partner with the paper.

**Evaluation**

The Web site grosses about $1,200 per month for the company under its current iteration. Mores said Zwire is good about reporting traffic statistics to the paper, and the Harlan paper uses this to attract and keep advertisers. Mores listed some recent data: 5.35 million visitors since January 2001, more than 600,000 articles read online, 600 subscribers. Every advertiser gets comparison data on all advertisers, how many click-through visits they got and how many page views so they can see who is effective and who is not.

There is no real good way of tracking who or where online readers are located. Only when people subscribe for electronic notice is data collected.

Traffic has softened a little in the last five years. The page view high was 100,000 per month, and now averages about 82,000 to 84,000. “I know when it’s going to go up, though: football playoffs,” Bjoin said. “It always goes down in summer because people are outside.”

Mores said Zwire has gotten much better in the last few years to give data that is more useful. Year-end total information is now collected to save time over newspapers having to total it themselves. Archive, yellow page, classified searches are now all reported. The data are affecting the creation of the paid model as well. Zwire reported 33,000 article
searches per month “meaning that’s a potential profit center if we got half of them to pay $2.95 for a one-month or three-month subscription,” Mores said.

Mores thinks the Web site has been successful based on content available. He said the amount of advertising on the site is “a little overwhelming, personally.” Peers have judged the site highly based on traffic and it has twice won the Iowa Newspaper Assoc. Web site of the year and also garnered a second place in the state. “Those seem to be solid indicators,” he said. “Are there others that are better? Better resources, more people, probably. We’re probably putting more out there than other newspapers our size.”

**Online employees**

Web content is uploaded twice weekly by three staff people, who are content producers for the printed publication. The sports editor uploads sports, and the family living editor uploads weddings, anniversaries and engagements. Bjoin uploads all top stories and manages the online coupons. Bjoin also manages subscriber data. Mores said while selling an ad for the print publication he’ll work on selling one for online. “You’ve just got to work to make this seamless,” Mores said.

Bjoin said there are no pressures for staff to post online. He estimates he is spending 15 minutes twice a week to upload stories per employee. “The biggest pressure is learning to do it at first,” he said. Mores said Bjoin brings years of experience in print news judgment to decide what is going online. Some stories are requested by readers to go online from inside the paper.

There are no full-time online employees, and, with the site generating $12,000 per year, there are no plans to hire any. Zwire receives $250 per month for hosting the site. “I can’t imagine a twin weekly in the state of Iowa…to have a webmaster, unless it is the high school kid,” Mores said. “Those are the kind of stories you hear: ‘We have a webmaster.’ Oh give me a break, then you ask further and they say ‘Well, it’s my son’s girlfriend who is a sophomore in high school.’”
Future predictions

Mores expects the Internet to grow in prominence, especially with a new generation of readers. “Whereas I sit down to read the [Omaha] World Herald and the Des Moines Register, my nephew in Ames logs on to CNN and the Des Moines Register to catch the paper at the office,” Mores said.

The Tribune

Name of newspaper: The Tribune
Location: Ames, Iowa
Date of visit: June 2, 2006
Print circulation: 11,153 daily
Online newspaper URL: www.amestrib.com; www.midiowanews.com
People interviewed, position:
   - Dave Kraemer, editor
   - M. Joseph Craig, publisher

Web model observations

The Tribune operates a main newspaper Web site (amestrib.com), as well as a portal site (midiowanews.com). The portal site collects the Tribune and weeklies that are under its oversight and also acts like an online newsstand, offering links to other papers (including rival Des Moines Register, and affiliates Omaha World-Herald.)

Access is free to all of the Web sites. However, the paper requires visitors to create an account in order to view online content or search archives. Registration forms asked for name, address, and e-mail address. Additional information (not required) includes gender, age, income range (not mandatory), and asks if readers wish to receive an e-mail version of the paper’s homepage. The paper used to require registration to view any content, but this is no longer a policy.
Craig said the paper was primarily interested in zip code information from Web readers. “Everyone is interested in the circulation aspect,” Craig said. “The *Omaha World Herald* started registering people in the last six months. They’re more interested in where they are from than any other thing.”

**Development of model**

Web presence was in existence prior to the time the Tribune was purchased by the *Omaha World Herald*. The current third-party (Zwire) model was in use before Kraemer came to the paper five years ago. Craig came to the Tribune from another *World Herald* subsidiary in Kearney, Nebraska, in 2004. According to Craig, Kearney had the most advanced Web site in the company. In the early days of the Web, some papers in the *OWH* company used the *World Herald* to host their sites. Now, most papers in the chain use the third-party Web provider Zwire (recently purchased by Hometown News) for design and hosting. “It’s not so much a policy as it is the easiest thing to do,” Craig said. The Tribune’s Web site was redesigned soon after Craig arrived.

During our initial meeting in June, it seemed that, while the newsroom was represented in the new Web design, Kraemer is not satisfied with the outcome. “I’m not very happy with the look and feel of it,” he said. “Our mission—as a local newspaper—that is reflected in the site. Our highest value is local news.” Still, he said advertising material comes close to “crowding” the news. “News content is getting squeezed,” he said.

“A lot of people think Zwire is just cookie-cutter. It’s not,” Craig said. The level of design and interactivity currently available to Zwire customers allow for flexibility, depending upon how much the newspaper decides to put into the Web site.

In 2005, the paper created a “Community News Director” position who reported directly to the publisher. The director was tasked with overseeing an overhaul and upgrade of the Zwire account and was also responsible for technical aspects of operating and maintaining the Web site for the Tribune and its weekly papers.
At the time of our June interview, management was re-evaluating the position. Craig suggested that the position originally was not geared toward advertising, but was intended to act as a go-between for the newsroom, management, and advertising, as well as the technical uploading to the Web site. The paper had considered splitting the job into two positions, with one handling the technical aspects, and the other maintaining the go-between role. While the Tribune’s offices are not large, the Community News Director’s office was located upstairs and away from the main newsroom.

During a follow-up meeting with Craig and Kraemer, the outlook about the Web site had changed dramatically. An Internet Manager (with 6 years of experience using the ZWire/TownNews software that supports the paper’s Web sites) had made a big difference in how the paper used the Web and how the newsroom saw its usefulness.

The original Community News Director was recruited from within the newsroom. The replacement employee is more of a technical employee. “The skill-set of a journalist transferred to the Web seemed to make sense,” Kraemer said. The more technical skills of the new Internet Manager, he said, seemed “more organic” in the position, and being more familiar with the technology has allowed for the newsroom to take more control over the online medium and put it to greater use.

Now the paper tries to do as much real-time uploading to the Web site as reasonably makes sense. Reporters and editors are trained to upload, and the staff has seen successes with using the site to expand coverage.

Role of organization in online decisions

The Tribune does not have a strategy that is specific to the Internet. Craig said the strategy, however, is the same as that of the print publication: serve readership, increase circulation, make a profit.

The Tribune is a six-day-per-week newspaper. Prior to this year, the paper was printed Monday through Saturday. The organization now prints a paper Tuesday through
Sunday. In the absence of a Monday newspaper, Kraemer said the newsroom now is using the Web to offer a form of Monday online edition. News isn’t necessarily posted every Monday, but the opportunity is there and is used when breaking news occurs off-cycle.

In June, Kraemer described “organizational inertia” as slowing any changes, however. To move, the newsroom, online director, advertising, and the publisher have to be “on the same page.” “It’s the same as getting any institution to move,” he said. “In any case, our reporters are thinking about online content differently. It’s becoming an increasing priority.” While there is little evidence that this is completely different, in terms of online, the addition of an Internet Manager gave the newsroom the ability to take greater control of content. This has changed the newsroom outlook of their role on the Web considerably.

Though online reader demographics do not play heavily in newsroom decision-making, Kraemer suggested that the paper might consider providing content specific to a certain group, if they are shown to be predominant. He said if Iowa State University students (who represent half of the city’s population from August to May) were online readers, the newsroom might begin catering to them. Still, he reiterated the difficulty in moving the organization based on the “inertia” he feels.

World Herald influence online is similar to that of the printed publication. Kraemer said they have no direct control over content. Still, their influence (especially concerning reader feedback copyright and legal issues—see below) is felt in some restriction of content.

The TownNews/ZWire contract allows the paper to maintain a Web site without investing in expensive hosting and development software. This can be a double-edged sword, however, as was seen in the summer of 2006 when TownNews, while switching servers, lost nearly all of its Web sites. The Tribune was among 1,100 clients who were without their site for about a week. TownNews supplied the papers with regular updates (about every half hour), which became a problem, Craig said, after the problem stretched into a days-long affair. “It was actually kind of scary,” Craig said. “It doesn’t give you warm, fuzzy feelings.”
**Online content**

The *Tribune* operates several Web sites besides amestrib.com, the main newspaper Web site: gocyclones.com, the newspaper’s sports page; and midiwanews.com, a news portal site. The portal offers links (under the heading “Mid-Iowa Newsstand” to the *Tribune*’s holdings, including several weeklies; the *World Herald*; and also competing papers and others from around the state. Sports wire services are available from the portal, along with weather information, links to local libraries, chambers of commerce, Iowa State University, local schools, weather and road conditions, yellow pages, and crossword puzzles.

Craig said the portal page is a way for the paper to aggregate links under the *Tribune* banner. The idea is to boost the paper’s presence when people are looking for any mid-Iowa information, as well as boost the paper’s presence on search engines, which record how many sites a Web page links or is linked to.

“Amestrib.com has always had good numbers of visitors,” Craig said. “If we aggregate links, we’re working our way up the Google ladder.”

Kraemer described the paper’s primary content as “shoveled” from the print publication. All local newsroom-produced content is made available online. Contracts with wire services like Capital News Service, a statehouse news provider, he said, were unclear as to the legality of being published online, so are not posted.

More breaking news is posted online. It has become more of a priority for the newsroom to get stories online, keep posting to the Web.

Weekly papers however, Craig said, remain afraid to put content online because of fear that readers will stop buying the print publication. Craig said breaking news is a new priority for the *Tribune* online. “People want to see it on the Web site and then updated in the paper,” he said.

Kraemer agreed that more breaking news has been made available on the Web site, with in-depth information following in the print publication. Management does not generally
seem to feel that using the Web to break news is scooping the print publication. Breaking news posted online first has generated more hits to the paper’s Web site.

In addition, several features have debuted or remain available online. The paper’s election guide was published first online, and a photo story remains available in pdf page images as it appeared in print. Online election coverage in 2006 was a “big win” for the paper, which posted election returns constantly as they became available from the county auditor and secretary of state offices. “We were beating the [Des Moines] Register,” Kraemer said.

In June, Kraemer said, “What we put up on the Web is what we can put up on the Web. The decision is not necessarily made based on demographics [of online readers].” By January, Kraemer was interested in getting video and audio to the Web site and seemed to feel more empowered about the prospect of using the Web to further newsroom goals for coverage. This is attributed to the addition of a technical Internet Manager.

Classified advertising is presented on the Tribune online page, but it is also hosted by a third party, pennysaver.com. Craig said that his goal is to get all classified advertisements online as soon as possible. “It brings the biggest benefit for the advertiser,” he said. “We’re looking for continuity.”

The paper does not charge extra for classified advertising online. Craig sees the additional visibility as added value for advertisers, not a replacement for circulation in the print publication. “Currently, the newspaper is still the place to go for classified ad information,” he said. “Print still gets them results.”

While much of the paper’s print information is available online, some key features are not. Information such as legal notices, local print-only advertising, wedding notices, obituaries, and television schedules are not available online.

Craig said two years ago, a big push was made in the industry to go to “pay-to-view” models. Big papers, he said, made the move, and more may follow. For smaller papers,
though, that’s not the trend. Still, the local information is what is collected and presented by these papers. “It’s the one thing all those other guys [national online news sites] want. The one thing they don’t have is local content,” Craig said.

**Community involvement, feedback**

Readers are able to respond to stories online. Kraemer stressed that the responses were not a blog and the feedback is filtered by someone in the newsroom before being cleared for online posting. Like letters to the editor, no anonymous responses are posted. Online feedback is only incidentally printed in the newspaper. Letters to the editor may be submitted online and published letters are also repurposed online. Currently, online feedback is not published in the newspaper.

The *Tribune* does not offer regular reader polls. Kraemer described them as “kind of dangerous,” and expressed distrust of polls in general. In December, the paper had some type of poll that had to do with a local controversy surrounding a proposed shopping center. “It was such a hot issue and both sides were seizing for any scrap of evidence of popular opinion in their favor.”

The paper has no policy on responding to readers. Kraemer envisions following the same procedure as answering a phone call made to a reporter, and leaves the decision up to the individual reporter.

A companywide debate is being held over reader feedback and the uploading of content, particularly concerning what, if any, transfer of copyright privileges occurs when readers submit photos for distribution. The parent company currently requires a signed waiver for each submitted photograph. Though the *Tribune* has a reader photo gallery, which is supplemented by a freelance photographer, the waiver restriction inhibits the growth of such a gallery.

With the addition of more regular posting of breaking news on the Web site, Kraemer acknowledged that readers will have to overcome a learning curve when accessing the page,
which changes regularly. “Redesign in a newspaper is not something to take lightly. Why would that be different on a Web site? People get used to looking for things in a particular place.”

Craig agreed: “We know when we move something around in the paper or take something out of the paper that people get upset.” However, he said the readers who access the paper online aren’t looking for the whole paper experience, but are looking for specific information or general local news.

**Evaluation**

For Craig, evaluation goes back to the bottom line. “Are you generating more money?” The only ones who are increasing revenue from online, he said, are those increasing readership or those with “slick” sales people. Ways to increase readership, he said, are to improve the amount of content (e.g. portal sites), or to increase the news on the page.

The *Tribune*’s newsroom evaluation of the Web site includes the number of hits and page views received per day and story. Reports on such data are available to management, though they aren’t a priority in the newsroom. Kraemer said his own evaluation is completely subjective.

Additionally, reader demographic information is not readily available to the newsroom. Kraemer said he doesn’t know who his online audience is, beyond assuming it is some extension of print subscribers.

*Tribune* registration data revealed that half of all online readers are from outside Story County, the primary circulation range for the print publication. Many of these readers, Craig said, are people who have moved away from the area, or spend winters away. He said that the number of people who have print publications forwarded to winter addresses, or who continue to subscribe to their hometown paper once they move away is dwindling. In circulation reports, “AO” (all other, outside the county) subscribers are down. “Those people are going online,” Craig said. “They are still loyal readers.”
Online employees

Regular newsroom staff do online content posting and planning, particularly in the transition to replace the Community News Director. Added features available on the Web come mostly from newsroom brainstorming. “We’re getting tuned to it,” Kraemer said. “Conversations are sparked by seminars and conventions the staff attend.”

As discussed, any online editor appears welcome in newsroom conversations, though Kraemer wasn’t optimistic that, beyond an initial honeymoon period, regular attendance at morning meetings would be continued for long.

Future predictions

Craig suggested that print publications have a corner on the market for local information, both news and advertising. “If print publications were to put their content up online, they could put a dent in the national competition (google, Craigslist, yahoo),” he said. “When you’re (local classified advertiser) trying to sell a car, all you care about is that it’s sold,” Craig said. The best bet is often to advertise locally. The paper can offer the Internet as a potential way of selling, but it’s a one-stop for the local seller.

“Nobody’s going to get rich on the Internet,” Craig said. Currently, national advertising is generally more expensive than local. Since Internet advertising in those largest markets is so competitive he expects to see local advertising generate more revenue in the future. “Internet advertising is focused on results,” he said.

Craig said the Internet is forcing a newspaper to be even more interactive with its community. “It always has,” he said. “The Internet has a terrific influence on print publications. Everything is going to get more interactive.”

The Gazette

Name of newspaper: The Gazette
Location: Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Date of visit: July 20, 2006
Print circulation: 64,062
Online newspaper URL: https://www.gazetteonline.com/
People interviewed, position:
   Dave Storey, vice president and general manager
   Mark Bowden, editor

Web model observations

The Web site contains breaking news and links to access paid ‘e-edition’ for local features. Few advertisements are visible. A reader-submitted photo gallery is available. There is free access, with no registration required for Gazetteonline.

The company offers an “e-edition” of the daily paper, which appears as a pdf-like copy of the entire paper, minus pre-printed inserts. As readers mouse over the paper, hyperlinks appear and, when clicked on, open a window with an html copy of the story. On classified pages, clicking on sections opens a new window with an enlarged image of the listings. When available, hyperlinks are imbedded in the listings, which open new windows to Web sites, or engage e-mail programs.

Before January 2007, the Gazette e-edition was free for 7-day print subscribers. Other print subscribers may add electronic access for $4.95 a month. A Web-only subscription is $9.95 a month. The e-edition makes editions for the past six days available, with searchable stories, obituaries and ads, which can be forwarded by readers via email.

After online redesign, e-edition was available free for a short time while the technology was configured to work with the company’s new content management software.

Bowden suggested that the e-edition format, while familiar to newspaper readers, doesn’t take full advantage of the Web’s possibilities. Also, subscriber numbers are low (about 400) for the e-edition.

The Gazette follows an advertising model in which it charges for banner advertisements online, as well as on a CPM (cost per thousand) basis for click-throughs. An
advertiser will indicate a number of thousand clicks it is willing to pay for and when that number is reached, the advertisement is done.

Storey said some advertisers, especially auto dealers, are requesting “guaranteed leads” from their online advertisements as a method of determining costs. The idea is that shoppers seek the dealers through the paper’s Web site and indicate that they responded to an advertisement. Storey said these arrangements are difficult to tally, with both sides having different interpretations of a lead.

**Development of model**

The Gazette Web site was one of the first active sites in the state, coming online in 1994. It was handled by a variety of departments at the paper for about 10 years. At some point, the paper went to a paid access model for its Web site, but discontinued use shortly thereafter. “We lost momentum,” Bowden said.

GazetteOnline was first used to supplement print publication in a traditional online (shovelware) product. The Gazette then moved to daily posting of a pdf-style copy of its print newspaper (known as the ‘e-edition’ explained above). Once the e-edition went online, GazetteOnline became a method for posting breaking news.

Storey said the company is “a lot different” from when he was first hired in 1992 to manage a newspaper company. He said he spends 30 to 40 percent of every day working on online business and related planning.

The Gazette is undergoing some changes in its Web model due to emerging technology and demand in the marketplace.

Storey indicated an “Iowa entertainment calendar” is in the works, which would be available online only and compile entertainment information from around the state, but especially from eastern Iowa, the paper’s primary coverage area. He also said online real estate listings are a possibility.
Currently, Bowden said, the process for posting stories is a lengthy, complicated process that staff members must be specially trained to complete. With the recent loss of the two employees who were trained in using and had a hand in developing the current Web site, this process is even more difficult. “The old technology has been debilitating,” he said. A new system is planned by 2007.

The new software, Bowden said, will make posting online “as easy to post content as it is to send to a printer.” It will also enable the newsroom to begin adding online features that have been problematic because of the current interface. This new technology is expected to come online in the early part of 2007.

Storey indicated that national Web sites such as Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft were competitors online, but felt strongly that a local newspaper remains the gatherer and provider of local information. “We do that better than anyone else,” he said. The process of “monetizing” the Web site, or converting information consumption online into revenue, is still developing, and will continue as the new Web system comes online.

**Role of organization in online decisions**

Gazette Communications works under an employee stock ownership system, with employees owning 40 percent of the company. As such, the company appears to have decent mobility in decision-making and flexibility to adapt to current trends.

Bowden, however, said the decision to post breaking news online without regard to print publication schedules was “a cultural fight” redefining it as a “paradigm shift” in the newsroom and the organization.

As with other companies, the high cost of technology solutions has affected the Web edition.

Storey said new technology for the company averages prices in the six-figures. Due to these costs and the ready availability of so many options, the company must determine “bonifides,” or the best choice for current and future needs. “We can’t just shoot from the
“hip,” he said. As such, the company requires accurate, reliable information in purchasing decisions as well as current market data to inform its buying behavior.

Both Bowden and Storey stressed that the Gazette was a provider of local information rather than strictly a newspaper company. “Technology is defining the message,” Bowden said.

**Online content**

Bowden said the Gazette does not hold breaking news from the GazetteOnline Web site, and seemed to enjoy that some readers might read stories online before receiving the printed publication. “I see broadcast qualities of the Internet: 24-7 availability, on-demand access. I’m not worried about spilling the beans (on the print publication).”

He said there are “very few” print-exclusive stories not made available online, and the newsroom has developed stories especially for the Internet.

For subscribers, a pdf copy of the entire paper is available online, including classifieds and print advertisements.

Interactive and Web-specific features are currently a problem for the paper. Neglected due to the loss of its primary administrators of the “Mojo” software currently in place, the site became “static,” Bowden said. “No institutional memory was retained,” when those employees left the company.

Audio and video, available perhaps through the newspaper’s television affiliate, is not a practical process currently. “We can do it but it’s not a straight line,” Bowden said.

**Community involvement, feedback**

Currently, contact information including phone and e-mail addresses for reporters is made available at the end of every story. Bowden said readers can also send e-mails directly to him.
Not much of this feedback is made to improve the story as written, though some people offer a new angle to the story. Some reader solicitations are made in print and online to make contacts for specific upcoming projects.

Bowden sees the Internet as a two-way communication tool, however, and stressed that any new technology adopted by the paper such as polls and blog commentary will have increased opportunities for reader interaction.

In terms of community information, Bowden said the reality is that a whole generation of people are not interested in process stories. “Younger people care less about civic matters; they have different priorities,” he said. “It’s not bad, it’s not good, it’s just reality.” This has caused a shift in his thinking about what makes news ‘local.’

“Local is relevancy, not geography,” he said. For example, Cedar Rapids has a number of Lebanese citizens. The conflict between Israel and Lebanon in 2006 has made that story a local one for his paper.

“I’m trying to convince people around here of thinking that way,” he said. He fears that by not responding to this new way of defining news, a large portion of readers will be turned off.

**Evaluation**

Gazette Communications has its own research department that conducts readership and market surveys on alternating years. Since no registration is required for GazetteOnline and the e-edition is a unique type of file, specific data tracking individual online readers’ demographic information is not collected at this time. Page views are recorded for individual stories accessed, so limited information can be deduced about story popularity.

Bowden said online readers are growing to expect certain things from online delivery of news and this is creating “a culture of expectation.” Among the expectations, he finds quick and easy navigation, more superficial treatment of stories, reluctance to pay for
information among Web consumers, and customization of news. “They want it stripped down to what they want,” he said.

Bowden said the industry in 2006 is defining a successful publication in terms of revenue. A benchmark is 5 percent of revenue from online sources. His barometer is based on content, looking for local or relevant information for 21st century readers, more efficiently delivered to readers.

“I have to believe success is a better informed citizenry,” Bowden said. “I don’t lose sight of that. But I can’t lose sight of the fact that we’re a business.”

Learning more about customers will make the company more effective. Television’s ratings system, Bowden said, while flawed in terms of sweeps-style coverage and knee-jerk reactions based on ratings data, keeps TV stations in touch with who their viewers are. The Internet, however, creates fear of identity theft and exploitation when personal information is involved. Questions about income range, the number of bedrooms in a home, and how many cars in the garage raise red flags for readers, but are the kind of rich data that can make news coverage more effective.

**Online employees**

Two employees, who are IT administrators for the company’s intranet, e-mail, in-house electronic messaging system, and Web site monitor the Web site. These employees, while located in the newsroom, are not generally a part of news decisions and are not trained as journalists.

Bowden said the newsroom has generated many ideas for Web features. With the limited technology currently available to his newsroom on the Web, however, and the tradeoff in personnel hours for limited benefit, he has discouraged much of this until the new system is available and time can be spent more efficiently with greater payoffs.
Reporters and paginators will likely be doing online feature development in addition to their print duties, he said, with further developments to come as the new online system is available.

**Future predictions**

Gazette Communications mission statement: “Our mission is to be the information provider of choice through a dynamic mix of innovative products and services. We will create and maintain mutually beneficial, long-term relationships with our customers, employees, and the communities we serve.” The Gazette is not specifically a newspaper company, but an information provider.

Five to 10 years out, Bowden sees a printed newspaper as still viable; however, philosophical, physical changes in format, size, and shape will have continued. Stock reports, national and international news may be at risk in the print publication. These features are already at risk today with near-real-time delivery of the information online.

He suspects the newspaper may return to its early American roots of a publication designed only for a more certain (more wealthy) class of people. The Internet has spread the idea that information should be abundant and cheap. “Newspapers are not expensive, but some people perceive them as such. In Cedar Rapids, basic cable costs $50 per month. Our newspaper costs $200 per year.”

The industry will be much more market-driven than today, he said, with transitions occurring at a much faster pace. Bowden suggests that technology will allow those transitions to occur more easily, however, as companies and publications become tighter, shorter, and more efficient.

**The Courier**

**Name of newspaper:** Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier

**Location:** Waterloo, IA
Date of visit: Oct. 17, 2006
Print circulation: 43,000 daily
Online newspaper URL: www.WCFcourier.com
People interviewed, position
  Nancy Green, publisher
  Saul Shapiro, editor
  Nancy Newhoff, managing editor
  Dave Braton, advertising director
  Chris Koop, webmaster
  Lance Jenkins, interactive media specialist

Web model observations

  The Courier has a sophisticated Web site. They are one of the few papers in the state that use interactive media, and prominently present blogs, podcasts, and video features on the site. The site underwent a redesign in early 2006 after the site had become what Courier Publisher Nancy Green said was a “hodgepodge.” A letter from the online team is posted on the site for readers explaining some of the changes. Reasons for changes include organization and navigation. Changes emphasize interactivity with readers, especially within community blogs (with a collection of feedback threads dubbed the “BlogZone.”) The site also features a business directory section, with a searchable database of local businesses.

  “Interaction with the community is a key aspect of our new site, and each article we publish now has a comment feature attached at the bottom for readers to send their input on issues discussed in the story,” reads the online letter.

  The Courier does not charge for access to any portion of the site and does not require visitors to register. Green indicated that the company has no plans to change this part of the model. The emphasis of content online is local, though there are national AP video links at the top of the page and national news links to wire stories at the bottom.
Development of model

Publisher Green is also VP of circulation for Lee Enterprises and has a background in education and educational administration. As such, she is involved in developing training for the company. She has developed an online training module for ad directors and circulation managers at all of Lee’s 56 papers in 23 states.

The publisher’s leadership at the Courier reflects the company’s online aspirations, to a point. “We want our site to be the number 2 source of information behind the newspaper.” While this goal isn’t odd for a publication (to represent #1 and #2 within the market), it still places primary emphasis on the newspaper.

The Courier is one of the few papers in the state that has regular podcast audio features available to readers. One of these, “Mommytalk,” won a Lee Enterprises Innovation award this year. They are popular among readers as well. Podcasts at the Courier were an innovation started by the publisher. She said she was inspired to investigate them while traveling and hearing that NPR made podcast audio available to listeners. She directed her staff to “go out, buy the equipment you need, and start doing podcasts.” Green said “Mommytalk” is a weekly production that is partnered with an advertiser, a regional hospital, and so is an advertising generator for the site.

Advertising director Dave Braton said the corporate method of selling the online product is still evolving. He suggested moving to a broadcast model of ad sales, in which advertisers are sold an audience on a per-thousand basis. Online advertising differs from print also, he said, because advertisers aren’t allotted space on a first-come, first-serve basis, but are often ordered on the page based on who pays the most.

He said the Courier has begun offering advertisers “flight packages” in the same way broadcast stations structure ad buys. Sunday advertisements are paired with three weekdays, with weekdays offered at deep discounts. When an online campaign is included, the paper is able to reach 88 percent of adults in Blackhawk County, its primary market. “We cringe
when we hear [people use terms differentiating between] ‘core’ product and ‘online’,” Braton said. “We use terms like ‘we can give you the number one [print] and number three [online] media in the metro area.”

**Role of organization in online decisions**

Lee Enterprises has invested considerable resources in developing its online presence as a company. Green said that growing online readership and circulation is a major part of Lee Enterprises’ goals (see Top Priorities). “The Internet fills a void left for newspapers as a reading tool for a young generation.” The company has placed a “huge focus on online” and has created its bonus structure for sales staff and business managers around growing circulation online and in print. “This is not a sidebar,” Green said. “Increasing growth online is our business. We intend to be a player.”

Green said Lee sold its television holdings in 2000 with the plan to focus on medium and small town newspapers and online through its majority holding in TownNews. Lee Enterprises has made another step into control of the online newspaper market through its recent purchase of ZWire, a major supplier of Internet newspaper sites, through TownNews, whose clients range in circulation from 900 weekly to 300,000-plus daily papers. Lee Enterprises, with seven other newspaper companies, joined with Yahoo in late 2006 in a partnership designed to increase their ability to move classified advertising online while also enhancing Yahoo’s local content.

Additionally, Green said the company is actively involved in building Web templates, around which its papers build their individual sites. Courier online support staff said during the paper’s redesign, they were required to use a company template to build the site, though content is determined locally. In extra pages and locally developed products (like an entertainment site featuring local and regional events) local online staff said they were free to design those sites on their own. For online support staff, being part of a major organization is both a “blessing and a curse.” While the company wields powerful online and Web
development tools, they can be slow to respond, which puts the local technical staff in a pinch for delivering technology solutions in a timely way.

Green credits the organization with uncommon flexibility. “We have the ability to turn on a dime. We’re very nimble,” she said. If something is presented at a CEO meeting on Friday, she said, it can be implemented by publishers on Monday. “Good ideas are shared right now,” she said. “We’re not forced to follow models.” Green also indicated that individual papers are able to access funding for programs through a capital request process.

Green said Lee is making money online, and has developed goals for management to develop online revenue. While some national publications struggle with advertising online, Green said her experience does not indicate that advertisers are abandoning newspapers on the Web locally.

In the newsroom, the enthusiasm for the online product was tempered by a strain on already limited resources. Shapiro reported that despite the company’s drive toward building the online product, this has not translated into more newsroom staff or additional pay increases based on the additional duties required. “In some ways, it detracts from the core product as much as it adds to it,” Shapiro said.

The newsroom remains short four positions, including reporters and copy desk staff, which puts extra pressure on the existing employees for the print product, let alone added online duties. “Right now, I have them stretched pretty tight,” Newhoff said.

“Everything’s top down,” Shapiro said of the decision-making process. “Staffing’s not what it used to be, and we’ll have a morale issue if we move people to online [without making up for the loss in the general newsroom].” Newhoff said Lee requires newsrooms to show increased readership online, which is in turn used to boost advertising sales.

**Online content**

Green said the Internet creates a need for the paper to update often, and “go back to doing breaking news.”
She, Shapiro, and Newhoff all cited the coverage of a change in the presidency at the University of Northern Iowa as a win for the Courier online. By posting news as it broke online, the paper beat its print and television competitors to the story.

Online content at the Courier is repurposed from the print publication, with the addition of podcasts, blogs, and video. Little or no hyperlinking is done within stories.

Online technical staff said they had presented a capital request to the company asking for $20,000 to purchase professional video equipment, including a camera, updated computers, microphones and video editing software. This request was approved. This staff is tasked with maintaining the paper’s Web site and helping to implement new Web features. They said adding new features is exciting, but feared expanding beyond the point of being able to manage all of the site’s content and allowing some to be neglected.

Obituaries (as paid content) are posted online, and are among the best read portions of the online product. The newsroom assumes this is due to people who have moved from the area checking back on the hometown news.

Braton said prep sports are a major draw, with 30,000 unique visitors per month. He also said there is no argument at the paper about having advertisements on the front page of the online paper. “There are ads on the front page,” he said.

Response to online reporting in the newsroom has met with mixed reactions. Some reporters are engaged in developing online features, while others maintain a focus on print-style duties. At the Courier, the managing editor pulls double duty as the online editor, selecting stories for the Web site, uploading content, and maintaining the site’s reader feedback.

Ideally, Shapiro said the online product would be complementary to the print publication, but said the newsroom hasn’t completely embraced the online product because of limited resources.
The *Courier*, as an afternoon newspaper, has taken advantage of the Web’s ability to extend the paper’s publication cycle. Newhoff said at the morning news meeting, she selects a “morning story” from that day’s newspaper to feature online. At noon, the morning story comes down and is replaced by a fresh story for the day. Breaking news is also added as it comes. This gives the impression of a dynamic page without taxing the paper’s resources too badly.

Shapiro said he appreciates the ability to offer readers an additional product online, to tell stories with video, and to present the “whole story” with no space limits and the chance to post original documents online.

The paper hosts a weekly poll on the Web site, typically related to a local issue or story. The newsroom doesn’t use the feedback for anything, but it is well used by readers.

“Any way you look at it, we’re dispensing information,” Shapiro said. “It’s just a different vehicle. I would be concerned if it was out of the hands of the newsroom.” Newhoff said the online publication cannot move out of the purview of the newsroom. “Nobody knows the community better; there’s a measure of trust,” she said.

**Community involvement/feedback**

The *Courier* allows readers to respond to stories and blogs anonymously through the Web site. They are monitored (all by the managing editor) for language and libelous material. Newhoff said the feedback is “worse than Letters to the Editor” in terms of content and personal attacks. Lee has a handbook of best practices that it makes available to its newsrooms, but Newhoff said it leaves a lot of grey areas for online content. “I’m pretty black and white about what I’d put in the paper. It’s not that way online.”

Shapiro said the lack of civility in online feedback is offensive. Editing the content, he said “doesn’t just take time, it beats you down…We need hard and fast rules.” He said after spending a career as an editor and as a gatekeeper of the community discussion, watching readers “trample down the gates” is troubling.
“Lee wants us to do this, so we’re doing it,” Newhoff said. “I don’t know if we’d do it otherwise.”

Each Saturday, the newspaper prints a “Best of the blogs” column culled from feedback posted online. Newhoff said she takes pains to include the more “civil” responses. A new online entertainment magazine allows readers to submit upcoming events. Portions of this calendar also make their way into the print publication.

Evaluation

Green said the paper measures online usage by counting unique visitors, page views features accessed and time spent on the site. According to her, Belden Associates research indicates that, when online users are taken into account, newspaper readership hasn’t changed much. “I’m tired of listening that we’re toast,” she said. Online metrics are similar to the kind collected and monitored for print publications.

Newhoff said the newsroom also has access to online metrics and can use them to make immediate changes to the site. “We have to keep it fresh,” she said.

Based on this information, Green said she and managers create and manipulate content, both news and advertising to optimize the ability to monetize the site. New software not yet in use will collect online readership information continually and create reports for management.

New tracking software is planned for the paper. Technical staff said it would record readers Web browser, screen resolution, and mark page views. Specific ad impressions are already recorded and presented to ad managers and advertisers in a monthly report.

Online employees

The Courier has three full time online staff members, an online manager, a webmaster, and an interactive media specialist. These employees are responsible for overseeing the technical side of the online product, but also can and do suggest content. They
are the technical force behind the paper’s podcasts, and are the recipients of the new video equipment. None of these people are trained in journalism, and do not attend news meetings; they could more accurately be labeled as support staff. In the newsroom, the managing editor serves as the online editor.

The online support staff used to be located directly next to the newsroom, but were then moved to another floor of the building. Plans are to move the staff back near the newsroom soon in order to make room for the paper’s archive. Jenkins said the move should improve communication with the online editor.

The online editor is the paper’s managing editor, who does double duty in choosing stories for the paper and making editorial decisions for the online edition.

Green said the goal of Lee Enterprises is to have two to three online employees in each newsroom. Even 10,000-circulation papers in the company have an employee dedicated to the online product, she said. At the Courier, the online manager is not a newsroom person. The online manager sits on the paper’s operating committee and used to directly report to the publisher, but now reports to the ad manager. The position was under the publisher primarily because it was new and Green said she wanted to have more direct control and knowledge while learning how the job worked.

Since no specific newsroom employees are tasked with online duties, the same reporters who create print content also produce online material. Newhoff said she has picked up most of the extra work herself to keep it away from her reporters, so she doesn’t see much added stress in the newsroom. Shapiro fears that this extra workload may take a toll on his managing editor, however.

**Future predictions**

Green said the passalong rate (readers sharing their copy of the paper with others) is on the rise. She said that shows an interest in the news. She expects to see a move toward the
tabloid format of newspapers, “quicker, easier to handle.” “These are exciting times, it’s not scary at all. This industry has not really been hungry in a long time.”

In the newsroom, the focus on the future was more practical. If the *Courier* is to be innovative, Shapiro stressed the need to engage resources in order to do so. He said the industry would need to find answers to the kind of questions that arise from anonymous feedback. Newhoff said the paper is about ready to create an online staff in the newsroom. She expects to see two different products (online and print) in the future, but it would depend on staffing.

Shapiro said the newspaper, online or print, represents an establishment that carries weight among readers. “I still think the fact that there’s a gatekeeper separates our industry from any yahoo who could put up a blog,” he said.

**The Des Moines Register**

**Name of newspaper:** The Des Moines Register  
**Location:** Des Moines, Iowa  
**Date of visit:** November 28, 2006  
**Print circulation:** (statewide) Daily: 154,268; Sunday: 243,962  
**Online newspaper URL:** http://www.dmregister.com  
**People interviewed, position**

Susan Patterson Plank, vice president, marketing and digital development  
Yvonne Beasley, digital editor  
Patrick McCoy, digital operations manager  
Cavan Reagan Reichmann, online content manager for Juice

**Web model observations**

The *Register’s* Web site features breaking news, updated several times daily at the top of the page. Readers are allowed access to a seven-day archive for free. Paid archives list stories back to 1999.
State weather features prominently and a rotating display of several multimedia and community features are accessible. Despite new features, including the regular updates and multimedia content added recently, the general design of the Web site has remained the same for a considerable length of time. The site does not present multimedia or community blog items well, features that tend to drive the paper’s Web traffic.

The paper offers real simple syndication (RSS) feeds for news, sports and opinion to be delivered directly to readers. No photographs are particularly prominent, though thumbnail images from the cycling multimedia panel indicate the presence of photo albums.

Technical staff said the Web site was nearing time for a redesign to address this new content. This could be done as often as every few months as new features are developed and less popular ones are neglected.

_Juice_, a Gannett “YRP” (Young Reader Publication) geared to 25 to 34 year olds, which publishes a Web site and a weekly tabloid geared toward entertainment and lifestyle information, is more heavily driven by reader feedback and contributions, and places community features more prominently on its Web site.

**Development of model**

Susan Patterson Plank said the outlook of the _Register_ has changed significantly since she was hired in 2001 as director of the paper’s online operations. At that time, the online edition was separate from the print publication. Online was perceived as more of a stand-alone business. Even within the second half of 2006, the focus on putting news online more regularly was ramped up. The hiring of a new executive editor in September 2005 who is “very into online” spurred recent changes. The Web site is more integrated now. Also, content online has shifted from a shovelware [my word] to the addition of breaking news, blogs, video and slide shows, audio, and searchable databases.
Barriers between the print schedule and online cycle are trying to be redefined. “We’re trying to get away from breaking news to where if a story is ready, it will go online before it hits print,” Patterson Plank said.

Patterson Plank said the 24-hour news cycle at a newspaper is often hindered by the fear of putting news online as it happens. This is more like a broadcast model of presenting news. Because of this fear, she said newspapers can “put up a funnel” that limits online content.

Technology can be a stumbling block, especially when trying to implement more innovative Web features. “It’s not hard, but to do progressive things is no cakewalk. It’s a technology and skill issue.” The Register recently hired a reporter from the Ames bureau of a local television affiliate, presumably to add video-related skills to the newsroom.

Technical issues remain a problem in the newsroom. “The technical stuff breaks down all the time.” There are connection problems; Web tools are problematic and aren’t reliable. “In print, we had 150 years to get it right. This is ‘we’re making it up as we go along.’”

Accessibility is also at issue. Added features cause pages to load slowly, limiting some readers based on their level of consumer technology. Juice staff said there were so many trends and options available that it was hard to focus. “We want to latch on to all of them; there’s always some new direction.”

Role of organization in online decisions
Gannett has standards for its newspapers to follow concerning standards for navigation. They also standardize columns, primarily to fit standard ad units for national ad campaigns. Almost all advertising is local, though some national ads are added since Gannett has the ability to sell a national campaign at its many papers.

Online publication breaks down many of the barriers present at traditional newspapers. “It’s a squishy world,” Patterson Plank said. Lines are not as clean as in other
newsroom situations. “Even ‘Who do I report to?’ ‘What is my job?’ That’s a moving target.”

Gannett recently acquired “Planet Discover,” which is described as a “Google for local.” This search engine gathers local information into one site for easy access. It will combine searching of the newspaper’s third party contracted database suppliers with local business Web sites.

As one of Gannett’s larger newspapers, The Register is granted more leeway than other holdings, which have fewer technical people on staff. Company standards were created specifically with those smaller papers in mind.

For technical staff, the size of the Gannett news organization has benefits and drawbacks. The need to standardize across 100 Web sites can limit flexibility and local control. However, technical resources are varied and staff have access to a large talent pool via a company intranet and listserv.

The online product has also added considerable demands to the newsroom, not the least of which is the demand to learn technical processes. All newsroom employees have been required to learn to negotiate the content management software, which for online content is similar to pagination systems. The process of posting a story online has been reduced to a series of commands that reporters/editors must follow, though it remains a lengthy process of “button pushing.” This was described as “dreary-izing” the process for the reporters, though their work is instantly published and can obtain page view information about the stories, which is a motivator.

The digital editor is present in two news meetings daily, a regular part of the newsroom staff, along with at least one other online staff member. They identify what should be online, or suggest special treatment online, depending on the nature of the story. That said, the online staff are journalists and seem to value public affairs reporting “even if it’s not going to get tens of thousands of hits.”
Juice was actually launched online in April 2005, two months before the printed tabloid was distributed. The Juice staffer said that in print publications, he never had to worry about how many copies of the paper were being sold. In online, the staff is much more aware of Web traffic in general and popular stories in particular.

**Online content**

The Register Web site places emphasis on local content, with very little on national. National and international news is available via wire sources at the bottom of the home page, not placed prominently. “By now, we know what people are interested in. That informs our news judgment.”

Reporters are expected to file online updates to stories all day long. The digital editor said reporters’ requirements before online were five briefs, one story, and to contribute to three larger stories during the week. Now, briefs are posted online immediately, and reporters are expected to post their main daily story online as it comes.

Patterson Plank said, “We have conversations with journalists asking, ‘What’s the best way to tell your story?’ The answers come out naturally.”

Certain features have been found to work better online: novelty news items and very photogenic stories that can benefit from unlimited space. Tools available to the newsroom are multimedia, Web forums, frequent updates, source documents, and photo galleries.

Though just in the last two years, the online publication has become a regular part of the news process.

More than ever, reporters are taking photos and video, and collecting audio at the scene. The multimedia aspect of the Web has also changed how some beats are covered and the types of stories that are told.

Community news: Readers are encouraged to post pictures of local events they participate in and, through multiple blogs, post comment.

News is posted online as it comes starting at 5 a.m. until about midnight.
Content delivery to the Web site is handled from the newsroom through an automated process that dovetails with the paper’s print content management system. The copy desk marks content for the Web and the computer system automatically scours the system for any new ‘Web-marked’ content added to the database, and posts it online.

If the Register Web site looks cohesive, it is thanks to the technical staff who work to combine content produced by the paper with third party applications (cars.com (auto classified advertising), careerbuilder (job listings), homesfinder (real estate), apartments.com (rental listings), shopLocal (commerce), and eHarmony (personal advertising). Technical staff said the paper’s Web site was actually a conglomeration of sites built to look like one cohesive unit.

At Juice, the Web site serves as a testing ground for ideas that may show up in the weekly print publication. Often, trendy items that work in Juice are tried as Register features. The demographic and content of Juice allow it to take more chances with style and substance than the daily newspaper. Juice relies much more on reader interaction and blog commentary to inform print features. The tabloid has solicited reader feedback (for example, a recent ‘favorite restaurant’ feature that produced a reader-written main story) to produce content.

Juice used to have regular podcasts featuring local bands. It faded due to lack of interest. Even though the musical subject matter seemed a natural pair to the podcast medium, few people seemed to want to dedicate 5 to 10 minutes to the broadcast. Now local bands are featured on a page on which music can be downloaded. For Juice content, videos are more work than the response from readers would justify.

In all, Juice struggles to pair stories with multimedia. When the staff plans and solicits reader content, it tends to be successful. Regular multimedia features have not done well, or followed a natural schedule. Every month, however, the paper aims to have one issue with a major online component.
Community involvement/feedback

Patterson Plank said the Register’s Web site is ideally a reflection of Des Moines. “We let people talk; we let people argue.” Community members are encouraged to post pictures of soccer games and other events.

“Newspapers historically have stood in the position of authority to tell you what is important. Today, they tell what is important, but also are part of a two-way conversation. more importantly, it’s a conversation that doesn’t even have to have anything to do with us [the newspaper].”

To post a comment, readers have to log in using a real e-mail address (an innovation brought about in late 2006), but there is no general verification as is done with Letters to the Editor. “Verification, in my mind slows down conversation.” Newsroom staff, however, seems pleased with the requirement. “We were getting ‘trolled’ to death” by anonymous posters, combined with nearly 500 pornography-related spam messages daily.

After the registration policy, the forums have not seen significant drop-off; in fact, Beasley said more people seem to feel free to comment “without just getting shouted down.” Meanwhile, the tone of the debate has improved. “We worried about registration for a long time. Now I think, ‘What took us so long?’”

The paper does not have an employee continually monitoring reader feedback and blog postings. This is partly due to the philosophy concerning feedback, but also a logistical problem as the paper cultivates between 30 to 40 blogs written by community members, a practice which started in mid-2004.

Community bloggers are not staffers. Some have been recruited actively to provide windows into the community: local business owners is one example. Other bloggers report on several of the communities in the area. Some people approach the paper with ideas. Juice has blog contests that occasionally make their way to the Register’s blog page.
Community bloggers are provided with Web space hosted by the newspaper. “The more community information you have, the more automated the system has to be,” Patterson Plank said. This cuts down on the need for employees to become overwhelmed by blogs, photos, and other information.

Juice has found that giveaways work to entice people to provide feedback and create content. “People want to look at the issue and say they had something to do with it.”

“Readers drive Juice. It is entertainment driven, so it’s easier to do that than with hard news.”

**Evaluation**

Registration appears on the “second visit, third page.” Registration asks for gender, year of birth, country, and zip code. The idea is that if a reader is visiting from a linked page (ex: Drudge Report, Yahoo), the paper allows readers to access the information. If someone digs deeper, registration information is required. This policy is only about 6 months old and is an advertiser-driven business strategy. Currently, the information is simply collected and can be presented in periodic reports that present numbers of unique visitors, page views, six-month averages and prior year data from the same month.

The long-term goal is to be able to tailor content to interest by tracking users, page views, and preferred content. “The trick isn’t advertising to content,” since specific stories can be paired with a certain advertiser. “The trick is to advertise to the person.”

A Web application is in development that will track users in real time.

Community blogs, when taken as a whole, produce “good traffic.” In the past year, page views have increased from 8 to 12 million.

Since news started being posted online at 5 a.m., the paper has seen some increase in visitors (about 10,000 page views) between 5 and 8 a.m. Readership increases dramatically at 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Visitors are up earlier and down later. There is no evidence yet that the extra work is paying off, but it seems to be attracting people to the site.
Online employees

Gannett refers to all employees who work specifically on the online product as “digital” employees. This reflects the company’s vision of including other digital products, like push content delivered via cell phones and handheld computers, and instant message news. None of this is specifically online, but it isn’t a print publication, either.

Patterson Plank is neither a journalist nor a technical employee. Her background is in marketing. She has worked for newspapers for 15 years, with a break to do strategic planning for online businesses. It was from this that she was brought in to the Register. She said it would have been easy to answer how many people worked on the online edition in 2001. Now, it “isn’t clear anymore.” The whole newsroom contributes to the online product now, with special ‘content managers’ tasked with managing the stories, prioritizing news online, and addressing the look and feel of the online edition. “A lot of people touch it.”

The primary editor for the paper’s online edition is Yvonne Beasley. Her background is as a journalist who got interested in the online product at newspapers about eight years ago. Since then, she has worked with online news exclusively.

Other newsroom online staff are a content editor for the Register, and another for Juice. A nightly producer checks that the categories of the online content are correct and that all of the content marked for Web delivery is actually posted online. Another producer works part time. Additional content producers work with the features, sports, and local neighborhood newsroom staffs, and one person dedicated to the photo staff also conducts training in video and audio production.

Patterson Plank said the journalists involved in the operation of the Web site are not specifically technical employees. “Part of the reason they are interested is because they have online skills.” But there is no requirement to have technical skills beyond the basic operation of software that controls the process of marking stories for online and basic Web-editing.
Technical staff consists of three employees: a graphic designer, a systems administrator, and a Web developer. The systems administrator coordinates retail advertising, classifieds, content management, and oversees third-party Web applications (like the cars.com auto classified database which the paper contracts with). The Web developer builds Web applications from the ground up. For example, this person would create automated programs to handle content or provide database access. This technical staff meets weekly with the digital editor.

**Future predictions**

Since the Web site is made up of such a range of different third-party providers, technical staff said there are design and implementation problems. An overall system that managed that content would be a great help, but a huge undertaking.

Content management could allow the whole operation to be restructured, with information producers (news, advertising, multimedia) sent to a ‘hub,’ which in turn sends content out formatted for different products. “Now, what’s in print is almost secondary to what we do.” A print publication will likely continue, more as a “think piece” and a complement to the online publication.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

If early analysis of the World Wide Web imposed a frontier metaphor in describing online business, the cases investigated here suggest a move toward the Wild West. With so many publications of all sizes putting considerable stock in online editions, simply being online is no longer innovative. Instead, the companies examined find themselves in a situation of ambiguous boundaries and little guidance for making their way, save for a few corporate guidelines and trial and error. They seek stability by implementing diverse policies and strategies amid constantly shifting technologies. Perhaps the only constant observed was change, in attitudes, strategies, and the range of tools available for online news delivery.

Web models

While previous studies have portrayed Internet content models (24-hour, community, supplemental) as mutually exclusive (Garrison, 2005), the cases examined here showed elements of all content models existing on the same page to differing degrees. Each case exhibited some form of grappling with online standards: how to best present multimedia, breaking news, and community feedback. While multimedia was often available, no online edition used embedded hyperlinks in stories, though several had posted source material online available via sidebar links.

As Table 2 illustrates, Iowa newspaper Web sites cannot be categorized as simply presenting one content model over another. Instead, the trend at the five cases examined here shows a cumulative approach to content philosophy. While new features may be added, few are taken away. It is also important to note that each of the cases has followed different timelines for introducing Web content. For example, the Gazette has fairly consistently added features over the course of a decade. The Register, on the other hand, has only recently given considerable time and effort to its electronic edition, with the most dramatic changes happening in less than a year.
All of the cases currently operate a free access model for their online editions, with little concern for impacting print circulation greatly. Some differences arose when dealing with archive material, however. Company concerns about impacting print circulation drove the Harlan company plan to introduce a paid archive model. At the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of organization size, the Des Moines Register allows access to a two-week

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<th>Table 2: Web model development</th>
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<td><strong>Harlan Tribune and News-Advertiser</strong></td>
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<td>• Basic ZWire template</td>
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<td>• Free access</td>
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<td>• Shovelware</td>
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<td><strong>The Tribune, Ames</strong></td>
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<td>• Basic ZWire template</td>
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<td>• Shovelware</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Online considered separate from print</td>
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<td>• Searchable databases provide online classified information</td>
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(Note: Content additions are considered cumulative)
archive for free, and then charges for a searchable database through 1999. This example appears to not be a matter of protecting print circulation, but rather an opportunity to generate further revenue as the statewide newspaper of record.

**Online content**

The extensive use of contract database providers introduces an interesting element into the Web solutions presented by these five newspapers. As is clear from interviews, use of an outside company to collect data and administer content saves money while offering information that the paper wants to provide readers. In many cases, readers may not even realize that the newspaper company is not the database provider. This holds true for news organizations of all sizes in this study. While the largest papers were found to have more control over Web design and access to advanced technology including audio and video, the smaller papers might not be able to afford a Web presence at all without the ZWire, now TownNews, software packages. At the same time, providers of database services can present a major struggle for technical staff, who were found to spend a great deal of time making multiple interfaces integrate with the newspaper’s Web site. If the Register staffer’s observation of the need to redesign twice a year to keep up with changes is accurate, such contracts also introduce a level of instability into the online edition. As the Tribune editor remarked, redesign not only stresses company resources, it has the potential to disrupt reader interaction with the site.

Contract suppliers influence over online news doesn’t stop with databases. Templates provided by companies like TownNews provide ease of entry for small newspapers to publish an online edition, as was seen at the Ames and Harlan operations. Such templates limit graphic use and dictate where and what kind of advertisements will appear on the page, however. Additionally, multimedia options can be diminished by the use of third-party software to operate Web pages. Web specific content features in the form of audio, video, and interactive graphics are clearly an issue of available resources. Smaller publications
understand of the potential for multimedia, but do not have the equipment needed or the additional personnel required to produce these features.

No matter the presentation style, the clear focus of online content for all five of the cases examined was locally produced content specific to the geographic region in which the publication is located. National or international wire feeds were not placed in prominent positions and were not listed as critical elements by any of the newsroom managers. These newspapers, which continue to report world news as a major part of their print product, do not echo those news judgments online. As Hall (2001) suggests, global news is often made up of events that occurred in a specific place, covered by local reporters. Through the World Wide Web, readers are able to access these local reports directly. Additionally, people living in a highly mobile society create readership simply by checking in on hometown news online, as the local paper remains “the primary signifier of home” (p. 221).

**Web strategy**

No clear pattern emerged in any case that indicates a cohesive well-understood Web strategy directly leading to the development of current policy or future plans. All of the papers analyzed are actively involved in defining and redefining how they will use the Internet, and have made moves to integrate the online product into daily news and advertising routines. For the past decade, these organizations have experimented with various online methods and, largely through trial and error, have developed piecemeal strategies, which are reflected in the online models and technologies in place. At this stage of the development of online news in Iowa, many companies are regrouping their business around three general themes:

1. Newspapers with Web presence have come to understand themselves as “information companies,” indicating that online publications are becoming institutionalized into the companies’ mission. Corporate goals reflect the importance of the online publication as an essential part of business success. By moving away from the ideas entrenched in the
newspaper business, newsrooms are beginning to dabble in multimedia as well as replacing the once-a-day print deadline with a resurgence in covering breaking news as it happens.

2. While the overwhelming focus in each case was on local content, this is not to suggest that publishers of locally oriented publications are unaware or uninterested in the larger implications presented by online publishing. Internet news sites serve as the ambassador of the community to an ever-widening potential audience. Portal sites and identification with specific communities serve to collect readers trolling for information about a locale. Registration practices can give one-shot readers access easily but can also solicit demographic information from those searching deeper.

3. Technological solutions are necessary to erode the differences between the online and print editions of the newspaper. In order to maximize efficiency and remove bottlenecks created by forcing all online content to a limited number of employees, content management systems can allow newsrooms to maintain editorial control while allowing technical non-journalist staff to create solutions that empower reporters and editors.

A major factor in Internet strategy continues to be the shifting technology required to manage information and create the online edition. Technology continues to be expensive and time consuming while learning how to operate software suites and researching available equipment. Even when outside suppliers are contracted to save personnel and other costs, as in the case with database providers, changing designs and standards present a significant drain on resources. Sophisticated content management systems that boost newsroom productivity are currently out of reach for a majority of newspapers, especially weeklies and those operations held to tight budget constraints by parent corporations.

 Those companies that choose to invest in the technology require accurate, reliable information in purchasing decisions as well as current market data to inform its buying behavior. With a range of options available and an apparent lack of standardization, news companies find themselves making a best-guess at what fits their needs and budget. At the
*Gazette*, which was in the process of finalizing the purchase of such software, the technology costs approached six figures.

**The great divide**

In every case, business managers were more enthusiastic than newsrooms about the possibilities for online publication: multimedia, matching reader interest to advertisers, and the ability to sell online and print simultaneously. Perhaps this is due to the conventions currently in place online, which tend to feature advertising material prominently. One ad manager said, “There is no argument at the paper about having advertisements on the front page of the online paper. There are ads on the front page.” Newsrooms were found to struggle with added demands for Web-specific content placed on current staff, stagnant personnel resources, and ethical ambiguities when dealing with online reader feedback. Editors and other newsroom employees recognized the benefits and possibilities that online journalism provides, but new practices are often not clearly defined and concerns abound about being able to get the job done with a reduced staff. In many cases, it was clear that a top-down management approach was in use. This promised a measure of corporate support for online initiatives, but also seemed to alienate those who were responsible for carrying out the semi-formed instructions that were issued.

Kleiner’s (2000) assessment of hype and craft cultures is potentially helpful to managers in this type of situation. Those managers operating on the business side of the newspaper exhibited classic ‘hype’ symptoms expected from people used to generating and negotiating high capital and being excited about possibilities. ‘Craft’ cultures, on the other hand, were obvious in most newsrooms, where editors and staff were tasked with putting the new technologies and policies into effect. Meanwhile, these editorial staff members struggled with journalistic questions that, they argue, remain regardless of medium. Kleiner suggests that a team-based management structure may present options to overstressed newsrooms by
sharing labor-intensive posting and content creation duties, investing more people in the process while trained journalists have more contact with content and input into policy.

**Talking back**

Reader-driven content continues to be a popular part of online editions. Community interaction at each newspaper reflects a varied mix of approaches to administering reader comments and soliciting reactions from the public. As in the case of the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, it also presents one of the clearest examples of how problems can develop when corporate and newsroom managers do not see eye-to-eye. Indeed, much has already discussed about this type of citizen journalism, which presents two issues for newspaper companies.

First, unmediated and anonymous exchanges have the potential to quickly become hostile and have the potential to put the organization in legal danger for hosting unverified information. To read each posting is time consuming and impractical. However, basic accountability in the form of requiring a valid e-mail address seems to keep postings civil has shown promise in at least one case examined, without driving away readers and discussants.

Second, reader-generated content is cheap for organizations to produce and present. No staffers are required to create information, and automated software minimizes the time staffers must tend to these blogs. This is potentially hazardous, however, in that much of what is posted online is done by non-journalists and does not further the community service aspect of professionally collected and vetted news reporting. Reader discussions can become a valuable part of the local conversation, but too much threatens to undermine the trust built over time in the newspaper’s brand. Further, online policies must include guidelines for newsroom managers in order to prevent problems stemming from ambiguity in how to manage the forums.

Data collected about readers and their habits online were reported as central to business strategy and the monetization of Internet operations. However no obvious standards
for counting visitors have yet to emerge. Some directly ask users to register and supply demographic information. Those who do are most interested in better understanding the geographic location of readers in order to target advertisers. Once collected, no clear picture of how to use the data collected has emerged, however. Periodic reports of page views and visitor numbers are common, and all know there is value somewhere in the data. These numbers are currently used to generate advertiser interest, determine ad rates, and illustrate successes for ad buyers. No newsroom examined had found a way to regularly incorporate this information into coverage of the community. Still, online content editors were familiar with which features generated the greatest traffic, which led them to seek similar stories on a regular basis. At the Harlan weeklies, local football coverage was a major, predictable draw to the Web site. Compilation and management of the information seems to be a stumbling block to any real comprehensive use of reader data. Simply reporting numbers doesn’t offer much value, though the larger circulation papers indicated that real-time data collection software is available and ultimately desirable.

**Market determination**

Advertising representatives interviewed expressed excitement about the possibilities for their business online. Several outlined broad ideas for advertising as well as news online. Advertising staff are beginning to see the Internet product as better served through a broadcast model of sales, offering packages and promising specific audiences to clients rather than the broad numbers traditionally derived from circulation reports. As discussed above, reader demographic data is highly sought after, particularly by advertising managers for obvious reasons. Many online newspapers simply sought ZIP code data in order to better understand the physical locality of readers. Such data would be helpful in determining the market served by a medium.

Detailed reports of reader behavior online can be a double-edged sword, however, as was reported at the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*. In that case, auto dealers were demanding
“guaranteed leads” from their online advertisements as a method of determining ad costs and effectiveness. In this case, shoppers would seek the dealers through the paper’s Web site and indicate that they were responding to an advertisement. These arrangements are difficult to tally since both parties have different interpretations of a sales lead, and are hard to prove in either case. The paper’s ability to drive customers via online advertisements or promotions may not be well understood by advertisers, or may be overstated by any guarantee of consumer behavior.

Limitations

As a series of case studies, this research lacks some ability to generalize to the overall practice of online journalism. Further, many more subtleties in each case were overlooked due to the time constraints of collecting comparative cases and the inability to spend significant time tracking management styles, decisions, and outcomes. The focus on Iowa’s industry may suggest opportunities for research into similar rural and mid-American newspapers, but also suggests a narrow focus in the research.

Since the world of online publication is so dynamic, many of the cases investigated here will continue to shift focus, adopt new strategies and discard others rapidly, and indeed have done so even as this study was conducted and written. It is important to recognize that these cases serve as a glimpse into the processes taking place at the time, and that the nature of this emerging business is unclear, even to those in charge of leading the organizations.

Akin to this is the process and development of advertising and digital circulation markets. The apparent shift beyond geographical boundaries online suggests a new world of opportunity for the local paper. Still, returns are hard to track at best, and seem to present new challenges for both business managers who seek to present advertisers with potential customers and newsrooms striving to offer relevant local content in a proper context.

Specific knowledge by managers about other publications’ practices is limited within the state. To a degree, in the highly volatile world of internet practices, companies are right
to be somewhat reluctant to share their strategies, especially when such measures are successful at turning a profit. On the other hand, editorial staff members’ responses suggest that management techniques and sound journalism practices aren’t limited solely to one company. In fact, it was apparent that these managers would welcome discussion in order to best serve readers, improve coverage and understand online practices.

**Future implications**

In many ways, this study has highlighted several areas in which future research is necessary to more fully describe the practice of online journalism at work in Iowa.

*Content models:* The range of content models present on individual online editions suggests that community newspapers remain focused on providing a range of services to readers. This finding calls into question the notion that mutually exclusive content models accurately describe the current practice of online journalism. Perhaps because of the lack of clear direction online, news companies are unwilling to make hard and fast determinations over what the Web site should or should not provide, opting instead to present a range of options for readers. On the other hand, perhaps content in the online medium is best approached from multiple directions, and an electronic newspaper should be many things at the same time. More investigation of these practices would be helpful to better understand why online newspapers look the way they do and perhaps suggest a new way of differentiating between online models.

*Local focus:*

Overwhelmingly, online news is made up of local stories. While newspapers retain a place for world news in their pages, those resources are not often used online. A focus on the local also implies that fewer news organizations are doing original reporting beyond the immediate community. What does this mean for citizens’ understanding of issues beyond their own backyard? In this context, what are the implications of this for wire services, which have traditionally made an array of content available from members and large news agencies? How are the relationships between newspapers and the wires changing?
Attracting advertisers: At this stage, companies using the sales model developed by broadcast media have shown potential to attract advertisers to online news. Packages combining print and media have the potential to be very popular with advertisers in terms of multimedia options. As technology evolves, the degree to which advertisers can target readers will likely grow exponentially. In the face of a generally weak grasp of reader demographics and even geographical location, a better understanding of how online news shapes local newspaper markets will be a powerful tool. This area stands to be very fertile ground for research topics on ethical positioning of news and advertising material, monitoring of reader habits, further refinement of online strategies, and the changing definition of community to name a few.

The look of news: Conventions of organization such as hierarchical positioning of news items, which developed over time with printed publications, are not yet fully realized in online publications. While some standards are emerging, it is possible that if technological incompatibility demands the continual redesigning of newspaper Web sites, readers will struggle to find the information they want and need at these sites. What conventions already exist in online news? How often is too often for a newspaper Web site to remake itself? Is there a difference in how readers perceive a redesign of their newspaper versus the paper’s Web site?

Citizens and journalism: A major feature of operating a newspaper Web site is the opportunity to increase feedback or enhance the democratic process. As we have seen, it also is one of the biggest headaches for newsroom managers tasked with overseeing the conversation. What are the guiding principles at work regarding citizen blogs and public feedback? Does requiring registration really hinder the level of discussion? What are the ethical and legal implications of allowing anonymous postings?

Weeklies: While Iowa newspapers represent a good example of small operations, often under the control of newspaper chains, not all experiences will be similar. Weekly
newspapers still seem to fear online publication as a threat to subscriptions. Meanwhile, more and more small publications are falling under the corporate umbrella and are having online news decisions made for them. Perhaps given the market for these papers, electronic editions may never serve a major purpose for community newspapers. At the same time, with populations becoming more mobile, community newspapers may find new resurgence online. More work with the industry’s smallest publications is needed.

Time will tell how convergence will affect the skill requirements of working journalists, how the team concept may grow, and how well corporate newspaper managers will manage the boundary between corporate leaders and newsroom employees. For now, the newspapers investigated here remain hesitant to put resources directly into their Internet divisions and, apparently, into newsroom resources in general. Editors, it seems, might do well to recognize their role as newsroom advocates and lobby for their divisions as a way to maintain editorial control over content.

Given the rapidly changing technological personnel requirements for newsrooms in the digital era, perhaps this research can serve as a benchmark for offering some solutions discovered by newspapers in Iowa for answering the biggest question in the newspaper industry today: how to incorporate the dynamic possibilities for online news while working within a volatile modern business and media world.
REFERENCES


FT launches online marketing drive to boost newsstand sales. (2005, October 27). *New Media Age, 4*.


APPENDIX A: CASE STUDY PROTOCOL
Cover letter

I’m gathering information about the kinds of online news sites that Iowa newspapers are currently providing to readers and how those decisions are being made. Data gathered from editors, publishers, and online staff of newspapers around the state will be collected with the goal of better understanding online practices among Iowa’s newspapers.

I’ve been in contact with Bill Monroe, executive director of the Iowa Newspaper Association (INA), who has expressed interest in my findings and is helping to suggest potential online models and contact names for this study.

You were selected as a candidate for interview because of your influence over decisions made at the newspaper. I’d like to schedule a time to sit down and talk about your online edition at your convenience. The interview may last around an hour. After our visit, I’ll collect information from your paper into a case study, and I’d like you to review that report to make sure I have accurately recorded your paper’s processes.

This research will comprise my master’s thesis, and may also be presented at a future INA conference. With this in mind, interviews will be conducted on the record so that I will be able to identify potential solutions to online news problems and so other people working in Iowa’s newspaper industry might learn from your experience. Your participation in this research is, of course, voluntary.

Please contact me to set up an interview by calling (515) 233-3881 or by e-mail at mnez@iastate.edu. Any questions you may have about the research can be directed to me or to my faculty adviser, Eric Abbott; (515) 294-0492, eabbott@iastate.edu.

Thank you for your participation.
Interview schedules

Interview schedule for editor

General questions

Who owns this newspaper? Do they have any direct control over your online edition?

How is the paper’s online edition similar to the printed publication? How is it different?

Have you featured stories or information online that wasn’t available in the printed edition of the paper? What kinds of things were those?

Is there any content that is available in the printed edition of the paper that is not available online?

Is the website promoted in the printed edition of the paper? In what way?

Do you use the internet as a way to extend your deadlines to a 24-hour cycle?

How often do you post news online before or after the printed paper goes to press?

Walk me through the process of getting news from the newsroom to the website.

Do you have people who are specifically designated as online staff? If so, how many are there? What are their job titles? Where are they located?

If not, does your newsroom supply all of the website’s content?

How has your staff responded to the online edition?

Are there different or added demands on your newsroom with an internet edition?

Is the online staff a regular part of news meetings?

If yes, do they actively contribute story or content ideas? If no, why not?

Does the site reflect the local community? How?
What would you change about your online newspaper?

What are the benefits of having an online edition? What are the drawbacks?

**Internet model development**

Does the paper operate the site on its own, or do you contract with a third party to operate it? If operated by others, who took charge of operations?

If chain: Is there an online model that is used for all of the company’s papers? How much input do you have locally over the look of the site? Over the content of the site? How is it different from other papers in the company? Are you able to suggest revisions to the internet site?

Do you (or the parent company…or both) have a written strategy statement describing how you use the online edition? If so, who wrote the policy?

If no, how would you describe the newspaper’s strategy for having an internet site?

Who made the decision to first invest in an online version of the newspaper? Why was that decision made?

Who was involved in the process of creating the original internet site?

What online options did you consider?

Who was involved in the decision to (charge/not to charge) for internet content?

Who was involved in the conceptualization, design, and construction of the online edition?

How has the paper’s site changed since it was started?

Why were those changes made?

Were any technologies used early on that were abandoned in later versions?

Did you introduce any new kinds of technology?

What is your biggest obstacle with the paper’s website?
What most concerns you about your online edition? What concerns you about internet newspapers in general?

Where do you see your paper’s website in another 5 years? In 10 years?

**Reader interactivity**

Can readers respond to stories online? What does the paper do with that feedback?

Do those online responses ever cross over into the printed edition?

Can readers respond to polls on your site?

Does the newsroom use the results of online polls?

Are hyperlinks added to stories used on the website?

Where do those links usually go?

Can readers access archives online? Does it cost readers to access it? How deep is the archive?

Is reporter contact information listed online? What information is available?

What have you heard from reporters about having that information at readers’ fingertips?

Does the paper have a policy about reader e-mail?

Do you see the paper’s website as a way to generate local civic interaction?

Has the paper ever partnered with any local groups (chamber of commerce, schools, businesses) to produce online content?

**Evaluation**

How does the paper evaluate the website?

What kind of data do you gather to evaluate the website?

How do you define a successful online newspaper?
Is your online newspaper successful? How do you know this? What criteria do you use to assess success?

How does the company measure success online?

Is there any way to know where readers are located?

Where are your online readers located?

Do you know what web features your readers are accessing on the website?

How is this information used?

**Interview schedule for publisher**

**General questions**

How long has the paper had an electronic edition?

Is the information your paper puts online available for free? If so, does that decision cut into print circulation?

How is the paper’s online edition similar to the printed publication? How is it different?

Is there information that isn’t available online that is in the printed newspaper?

If you charge, do you encourage readers to subscribe to both editions? How do you do that?

What kinds of information do readers need to supply to access your online site?

What do you do with information supplied by readers?

Do you have people who are specifically designated as online staff? If so, how many people have been hired to work exclusively on the web edition? How many have moved from the print newspaper to the web edition?

What kind of special training have you had to provide to staff members to operate the website?
What are the benefits of having an online edition? What are the drawbacks?

Is the website promoted in the printed edition of the paper? In what way?

Does having an internet site make your paper more attractive to advertisers? Does your staff specifically sell ads for the web?

What kind of advertisers are featured on the website? Are they local? National?

How does your website reflect the special needs of your community? Do you provide online bulletin boards or web forums for readers to address their concerns? Do you promote local events online?

Has the paper ever partnered with any local groups (chamber of commerce, schools, businesses) to produce online content?

What would you change about your online newspaper?

**Internet model development**

Who owns this newspaper? Do they have any direct control over your online edition?

Who made the decision to invest in an online version of the newspaper? Why was that decision made?

Does the paper operate the site on its own, or do you contract with another company to host it, etc.? If operated by others, who took charge of the operation?

If chain… Is there an online model that is used for all of the company’s papers?...How much input do you have locally over the look of the site? Over the content of the site? How is it different from other papers in the company? Are you able to suggest revisions to the internet site?

Do you (or the parent company…or both) have a written strategy statement describing how you use the online edition? If so, who wrote the policy?

If no…How would you describe the newspaper’s strategy for having an internet site?

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What online options did you consider?

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Who conceptualized, designed and constructed the online edition?

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Why were those changes made?

Were any technologies used early on that were abandoned in later versions?

What is your biggest obstacle with the paper’s website?

What most concerns you about your online edition? What concerns you about internet newspapers in general?

Where do you see your paper’s website in another 5 years? In 10 years?

Evaluation

How does the paper evaluate the website?

What kind of data do you gather to evaluate the website?

How do you define a successful online newspaper?

Is your online newspaper successful? How do you know this? What criteria do you use to assess success?

How does the company measure success online?

Is there any way to know where readers are accessing the site from?

Where are your online readers located?

Do you know what web features your readers are accessing on the website?

How is this information used?

Are advertisers interested in reader information and habits? Who asks for it? Who doesn’t?
Does having that information make ad sales easier?

**Interview schedule for technical staff**

How many people are dedicated to just working on the paper’s website?

Are you primarily journalists or technology experts?

If tech experts, what kind of journalism training do you have?

If journalists, what kind of special instruction did you need to get up to speed technologically? Has the paper provided that?

Where are your offices located in relation to the publisher? The newsroom?

Walk me through the process of getting news from the newsroom to the web.

Is the online staff ever part of newsroom meetings? Ad staff meetings?

Which part of the paper would you say you are more in touch with?

What kind of technology is the paper using to build and maintain its website?

Are you responsible for posting and maintaining all of the online content?

Does the paper have specific strategies or policies that relate to the web?

How much do you monitor what your website users spend time looking at?

How is that information used? Is it used?

Do you ever meet with other web staff from other papers within or outside the company?

What do you think about the paper’s website?

Do you compare it to other online papers you’ve seen?

What’s good? What are you trying to change?
Where do you think online newspapers will be in 5 years? 10 years?
Checklists

**Checklist for observing physical locations of online staff**

Where are online staff located in relation to the print staff.

Where is the online staff located in relation to the publisher?

  To the editor?

  To advertising sales?

What kinds of technology is made available to print staff?

  To online staff?

**List of potential sources of additional data**

Documents

  Internet strategy statements

  Progress reports, internal documents

  Written evaluations of electronic edition

Records

  Web evaluation reports (web hits, page views, subscribers, registration)

  Lists of personnel (online and print)

  Web advertising reports

**Checklist for web page observation**

Name of newspaper

Online model identified in interviews
Does the website accurately represent the model as described by the newspaper decision-makers? Describe how, if different.

Access free, by subscription, or by registration?

News stories written for web or taken from print edition?

Nature of advertising?

Reader feedback (Polls, e-mail addresses, bulletin board postings)?
Case study report outline

Name of newspaper:

Location:

Date of visit:

Print circulation:

Online newspaper URL:

People interviewed, date, position

General website observations

Development of model

Role of organization in online decisions

Online content

Community involvement/feedback

Evaluation

Online employees

Future predictions
Post-interview case study report review letter

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and discuss your newspaper’s Internet site and strategy. My hope is that this information will help gain a better understanding of the ways in which Iowa’s newspaper industry uses this technology to reach readers.

In order to ensure that my records of your organization’s Internet model and decision-making processes are as accurate as possible, please review the enclosed case study record compiled about your newspaper. Feel free to mark on the sheet to indicate any clarifications you may have and, if necessary, attach additional sheets with further information that may have come to your attention since our interview.

Once again, thank you for your help in this project. If you would like a copy of the research when it is complete, if you have any questions, or would like to speak further, call me at (515) 233-3881, or e-mail mnez@iastate.edu.