

The Ann Arbor Chronicle: Briefing Memo
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Working Group on Media & Governance
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Though The Ann Arbor Chronicle exists because of the online technology that powers our publication, our approach to covering the Ann Arbor community is atypical for an online-only news site. Here we outline the expectations for publications such as ours, how and why we flout those expectations, what our editorial mission entails, and how we're making our business model work.

Expectations of Online Readership

In 2010, it's still worth distinguishing between veteran online readership and possible future readership. In the first category we're thinking of people who've been reading, writing, and commenting on blogs for a good part of the last decade. These are people who might well use an RSS feed reader, or bookmarks in their web browser, to gather local information in a relatively systematic way.

It's not necessarily a priority for The Ann Arbor Chronicle to respond to the expectations of the veteran group. Yet it's important to understand what those expectations are. Among them:

- Rapid access to information. Getting the nugget of news fast is really important to these readers. Why? Because technology makes it possible. If news organizations know that the city council voted to cut firefighter positions, they should tell us right now. In this model, material doesn't necessarily need to be edited by someone other than the writer.
- Simple and brief presentation. We're told repeatedly that, according to market research, people don't want to read more than a hundred words at a time. Why? People value breadth. It's a function of the technology – when there's such a huge volume of information accessible using digital technology, it fuels a need to condense, and summarize. People want to know something about whatever is going on so they don't feel left out of the loop. "Another historic district for Ann Arbor" – that's all some people need to know to trigger joy or outrage.
- Unfettered ability to express opinion everywhere. Robustness of comment threads are seen as a metric of success. Readers expect online publications to invest considerable resources in managing and moderating comments. Again, it's the technology that makes this possible – a commenting module is part of any online content management system. A publication that offers its material online without the option for readers to comment on it risks being shunned for that reason alone.

Flouting Expectations of Veteran Online Readership

The Chronicle flouts each of those expectations. Some specific examples:

- We're slow. A story we write about a city council meeting on Monday evening might not be published until Thursday.
- We're verbose. We'll write 4,000 words about a meeting of the Downtown Development Authority.
- We don't care much (only some) about comments. Comments are enabled on our main stories, but not on any of our briefs.

We flout these expectations of veteran online readers not because we're contrarian, but because those expectations do not necessarily align with our editorial mission. And it's because of our editorial mission – providing depth of coverage not available elsewhere – that we're being embraced by both technologically-savvy readers as well as those who never thought they'd feel comfortable using a computer, but who are now going online just to read The Chronicle. One reader told us he's lived in Ann Arbor for more than 20 years, but only since reading The Chronicle does he feel he really knows the community deeply.

It's somewhat ironic that just as the technology available has driven expectations of veteran online readership, it's exactly the same technology that is crucial in realizing our editorial mission, which is at odds with those expectations.

Editorial Mission: Facilitated by Technology

Take our slowness, for example, which is related in part to our verbosity. We're committed to taking the meetings of public bodies as our "unit of analysis" for an article. We report a meeting in its entirety, so we never attend a meeting wondering if we can get a story out of it. A public body met – that's a story. Part of the rationale for reporting a meeting as a whole is that we believe the decisions made at such meetings should be understood in complete context. For example, it's important and relevant to us that a vote on the redevelopment of a parcel of land previously envisioned as a transit center was made at the same meeting when the council received a presentation on a new commuter rail line ... though no one made that (lack of) connection explicit at the meeting.

And part of the rationale for meeting reports – instead of multiple standalone articles out of the meeting – is based on an imagined audience of historians and archivists who will follow in 100 years, or even just one year from now. For the historian who rummages around in the archives and finds an account about how the city council voted on a redevelopment proposal for a land parcel, it's important that

they have at least a chance of brushing up against a description of a transit presentation made at the same meeting.

What makes it possible to deliver a comprehensive meeting report that goes past 4,000 words is the technology: the digital medium. The vertical scrollbar is there for a reason, we think – and we use it.

But the commitment to coverage of meetings is more than about being comprehensive. It also reflects a commitment to reporting communications by government officials that are made at public meetings – to the exclusion of whispers made into a journalist's ear outside of a public meeting. At one of the first public meetings we covered, a government official offered to give The Chronicle a quote. He was a little flummoxed to hear that we didn't need a quote – we'd just written down what he'd said at the meeting.

Our editorial stance is this: If you're a public official and you've got something to tell the world, then say it at a public meeting. A public meeting is a context where there's a risk that a colleague of yours will challenge what you're saying – that's why it counts for more than a private phone call to a reporter to whom you want to give a "scoop." At its heart, our coverage is an attempt to highlight the importance of governmental openness and accountability – reporters should not be privileged to any information that isn't available to the average citizen. That sentiment is reflected in one of The Chronicle's slogans: "It's like being there."

Why Are We Publishing This Now/Here?

A digital medium provides virtually infinite publishing capacity, but there's no obligation to fill it in the way that printed newspapers previously had to fill space on a page. There's no "news hole" to fill online. There's nothing that absolutely must be published on any given day, so there's actually no technological pressure to publish quickly. And that's an overlooked advantage, we think. There's plenty of time to get a story right, with all of its gory background, context and detail.

What's more, it allows a publication to make clearer to readers why an article is being published at a given time. For a printed newspaper, the practical reason a story might be run on a given day is often simply, "We needed to fill some space." That never has to be the reason for publishing something online – yet there's often an artificial push to have "fresh" content.

A more specific reason for publishing a story in a printed newspaper is frequently, "We needed to fill some space right here, on the front page." In a small city like Ann Arbor, it's somewhat rare – maybe once a week – that there's a story that's really "front page news." In an online presentation, there's also no necessity that there be a "front page" of the publication – articles can be presented in the order they were published. This is one expectation of veteran online readers that we use to our advantage at The Chronicle. It's also an expectation that newer online readers do

not necessarily have, so this question is one we have to be prepared to answer: Why is that cartoon on your "front page"?

Staff Structure

Unlike many online publications that at times bypass the editing process, our approach to publishing still includes an editor/reporter interaction – on the front end of decisions about whether to cover a story, as well as in editing a piece after it's submitted. The only two full-time staffers at The Chronicle alternate the roles of editor and reporter. What one reports the other will edit, and vice versa.

Freelance writers and regular columnists are edited by one of the two full-time staffers in a more or less collaborative process. Software makes it easy to track changes, and we ask writers to sign off on editorial changes – to ensure that factual inaccuracies are not inadvertently introduced, and to ensure that we do not trample on a writer's own voice.

As we look to expand the operations of The Chronicle, we'll look first to freelance writers with whom we're already working in a collaborative writer/editor relationship. And it's our expectation that they will slot into the horizontal writer/editor scheme. Anyone on staff might be expected to edit any other writer's work.

Part of our rationale for that approach is that we'd like each member of The Chronicle staff to stay directly connected to the writing, reporting, and editing of the publication. As we add staffers with more specialized responsibilities – like bookkeeping, for example – we will maintain the expectation that these staffers are people who will also write and edit for our publication, to some degree. This approach, we think, will allow us to continue to enforce a vast reduction in overhead compared to a conventional news organization's infrastructure. It will also ensure that everyone is involved in our core mission: Covering the community.

Another way we reduce infrastructure costs is to eschew offices in favor of participation in a downtown Ann Arbor "co-working" space, where membership costs \$100/month per person. This gives us access to the physical space to work and to meet with people outside the organization, plus the collective wisdom of other members of the space – our web coding and design are provided by some of those members, for example.

How's Business?

Now in its 18th month of publication, The Ann Arbor Chronicle has no debt, is covering all of its bills, paying for freelance reporting, and supporting its two co-founders. However, there's no denying that right now, The Chronicle requires those two co-founders to work their bodies and minds fairly raw. A goal for 2010 is to

increase revenues to allow for additional staff, either freelance or full-time, to offset that workload. It would be nice to take a vacation.

The reception in the community has been extraordinarily positive – so much so that we needed to set up a mechanism for readers to voluntarily send in money for "subscriptions." People who had nothing to advertise wanted to support us with their dollars and requested a way to do that. Currently these voluntary subscriptions account for around 5% of our revenues. The vast majority of revenue stems from advertising by local businesses and institutions. What we've tried to focus on selling – for both kinds of revenue – is our kind of journalism.

Our advertising system is not based on impressions or click-throughs, though we can provide advertising clients with that information on request. Instead, the ad program is similar to a print publication: Display ads are sold for a 30-day period, in three positions on the site. An "active" ad in a given month is simply one that is a candidate to be in the mix for random display.

What's Next?

In a market that saw the loss of its only daily printed newspaper in mid-2009, there's been intense focus on our publication as well as on the new online entity formed by the owners of the now defunct Ann Arbor News. Other publications, both print and online, have entered the market since our launch in September 2008. More will surely come. Some of our competitors like to describe the situation as a non-competitive "ecosystem," which is, of course, just a vapid pleasantry. Publications – like anything else – are competing for people's time and attention. And since most publications are still supported by advertising revenues, they're competing on that level, too, in a difficult economic climate.

So the question for us is: Have we managed to carve out a sustainable business and editorial model, providing our community with a resource that's valuable enough for readers and advertisers to support? So far, the answer is yes.

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