Humanities & Social Sciences papers   Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

The media and the Internet: Threat or opportunity?

Mark Pearson
Bond University, m.pearson@griffith.edu.au

Recommended Citation

<u>The Media and the Internet: Threat or Opportunity?</u>

<u>Associate Professor Mark Pearson, Bond University</u>

<u>Address to Gold Coast Media Club, Gold Coast Arts Centre, July 14, 1995</u>

Where do you think you'd find these things if you really needed to access them?

 The share price for Zeolite

 The weather in Nairobi.

 Program details for a Croatian film and

 Photographs of women in G-strings and in steamy shower scenes.

 The value of the Cyprus pound.

 The world mosquito-killing record, as set in Finland.

The Internet? .... No, actually all those things appeared in this issue of the Gold Coast Bulletin.

It's amazing what you'll find in your daily newspaper.

I'm a great fan of newspapers. My whole career has been built upon them. Production-wise it's easy to see why they're called the daily miracle. I still can't fathom how those two rolls of paper arrive on my front lawn every morning... the human and physical resources that have gone into them ... the efforts of correspondents in Finland relayed to news agencies, where sub-editors process copy and send it thousands of kilometres to other news agencies who forward it to newspapers where it is selected, edited and placed alongside photographs and advertisements which have been through equally complex processes. And somehow it's all printed and transported and passed through many more hands before it arrives next to my letterbox and I have to fight my wife and 14 year old son to read it.

But that still doesn't mean I'm interested in the weather in Nairobi or the value of the Cyprus pound. I find enough in the newspaper to keep me buying it and its advertisers must find enough buyers in the newspaper to keep sponsoring it.

There are a few lessons for us here when we start to think about a new technology like the Internet. And this talk's devoted to three of those lessons:

1. The value of information is relative. What's trivia to me might be important to you. What's fun to me might offend you.We can't impose our own values on other people's information.

2. All media have their advantages and disadvantages.

3. No matter what the medium, the audience comes first.

And I'm going to apply all of that to the Internet: discuss the material we find on it, talk about its pros and cons; and take a look at the demographics of its audience.

I'm going to try to do all that without using the hype that's being bandied about when it is discussed. We'll assess it as a medium, decide whether it's useful to us, and have a bit of fun along the way.

1. The Internet as a Medium

Technological developments such as the telegraph, radio and television prompted changes in both the gathering and distribution of news. But only the advent of the computer and advances in telecommunications have redefined mass communication. The convergence of media, computing and telecommunications is allowing audiences a degree of independence and interactivity not possible with traditional media.

Newspapers, magazines, radio and television were all one-to-many communication media, with single products or programs being distributed to mass audiences. Presenting news to such audiences was a matter of determining the topics of greatest interest to the largest number of readers, listeners and viewers. Audience choice was limited to the selection of the medium and the news product. From that point on audiences had to take what they were offered. The new media allow for a significantly greater degree of choice and interactivity, prompting questions about the suitability of mass media techniques of reportage and distribution.

What are the new media? Obviously, the "new" media will change with time. Newspapers comprised the "new medium" of the 18th century; television the "new medium" of the 1950s. To me, the new media are those which involve some convergence of traditional media to offer audiences a greater level of choice and interactivity. Examples include the Internet and its permutations (such as the World Wide Web and on-line discussion groups); broadband distribution services providing interactive television services in homes; and virtual reality technology offering the user some electronic experience which appears real.

The Internet is the linking of computers at thousands of academic, governmental and commercial institutions worldwide into a wide area

computing network (WAN). Figures are in dispute, but conservative estimates put full Internet access at more than 30 million and simple electronic mail access at 120 million world-wide.

But it's built on chaos. The whole system - originally a US defence initiative - was premised on the notion that no single link would be crucial to the network, so that if any single computer was taken out by a military strike the other nodes could still communicate. It's this interconnectivity that makes the whole network so difficult to count - and just as difficult to regulate.

The most exciting part of the Internet today is the world wide web of computers using a common language to publish material to computers with different architectures throughout the world. Hundreds of traditional media outlets - newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations - are now producing Web versions of their products.

Other new players are creating tailor-made services for Web presentation. And hundreds of thousands of individuals are publishing their own Web pages as a hobby.

Whereas a newspaper might have previously been competing on the news stand against a handful of other newspapers and scores of magazines, on the Internet it is competing against hundreds, perhaps thousands of other newspapers and magazines and millions of independently initiated documents and multi-media presentations, each of which has varying relevance to its separate readers' needs.

This makes the function and purpose of a traditional media provider problematic from both a communication and an economic perspective. For example, how useful and viable is the entity known as The *Age* newspaper when published in an electronic form on the World Wide Web? At the same time, how useful and viable does the print version of the same newspaper continue to be to its traditional audience? Such questions strike at the heart of the dilemma facing traditional providers as they confront the ramifications of a large-scale move towards the new media.

At the same time, traditional journalism can be enhanced by adept use of new technologies in reportage. New resources are now at the finger tips of the journalist wanting to use the Internet for reporting. Computer aided reporting involves electronic access to government documents, court reports, articles, and specialist opinions, adding to the depth of coverage of an issue and the discovery of angles on stories which might never have been contemplated. So, while new media might represent a threat to the medium in which the journalist currently works, the journalism itself can be enriched by using the new media proficiently.

Newspapers and the journalism which evolved through their pages owe their very existence to a technological innovation which, when harnessed by the intellectual pursuits of modern humanity, has provided the catalyst for the spread of knowledge. That invention was the printing press. The evolution of the printing process from the archaic machinery of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through the era of hot metal type to computer typesetting and finally to electronic pagination and distribution has affected the time frames within which newspaper journalism has been expected to be conducted and the audiences which it has been able to reach.

The introduction of the telegraph, radio and television each brought their own challenges to media practices.

The fleeting 1980s technologies of videotext/teletext news services were a flop because they expected audiences to sit in front of television sets and read text over which they had no control.

The new media make no such mistakes. They are premised on interactivity and user choice. The theory is you get the information or entertainment you request ... when and where you want it. The mass media is becoming individually tailored. That's the main point of difference of both the Internet and the broadband interactive services promised with the next phase of digital television.

So, what does it look like?

Here's a new publication I started with my students last week: the first daily journalism student production targeted exclusively at a Web audience...

Explain background to Bond student project. **(OHPs1-3)**

(explain how it beat SMH with main news by 16 hours and television stations by 4 hours). People in Anchorage can be reading our news hours before Australians are accessing the mainstream media.

Ours is one site of more than 2000 Australian sites on the World Wide Web. There are more than 5 million of them internationally. Just like the daily newspaper, there's a lot of guff out there in cyberspace. There's the trivial and the bizarre...

(Read two from .net directory)

(Explain toilet one.)

There are entertaining sites:: (Sound and video clips from the latest movies, fan club pages, even interactive chess - Daniel).

There are educational sites, places to do courses and research material for projects and essays. (Ancient Egypt page, Library catalogues, interactive classrooms.)

But is it useful???

Explain my usage: checking references, politicians' names/contact numbers, multi-media course outline.

But for Mrs Allen over the road ... probably not just yet. As the sites build up locally I could see her accessing catalogues, getting quotes and ordering products by email, downloading and printing a map of Fraser Island for her next trip, booking her camping permit there, and dragging some puzzles off the Net to entertain her kids on the long drive there.

For Mrs Allen, it will be a matter of being educated as to its possibilities. For her children, it or some version of it will be second nature.

You've seen our fairly modest news production. Here's the kind of product being produced exclusively for Web distribution...

[OHP: Hotwired home page.]

2. Commercial potential

Commercial use of the World Wide Web can take three main forms:

a. Passive presence

A Web site used for PR or low-key corporate presence. This might simply give information about the company and its activities and structure.

Actual diplay advertising on someone else's Web site.

 (OHP: MacMillan site).

Explain Infoseek's search page: Cathay Pacific giveaway, Alamo freeways online rentacar, Species, the sci-fi thriller from MGM/UA, Sun Microsystems, Metricom Wireless Data Technologies, MacMillan Information Superlibrary, Internet Shopping Network, NECX Direct computer products, Dealernet - the source of new car information,

c. Designated sales site

A whole Web site specifically designed to sell a product.

(OHP: First National example.)

US market research group ActivMedia has produced one of the first reports on Internet marketing.

It reported there were 588 commercial World Wide Web (www) sites at the end of September 1994. Eight months later, the index listed more than 6,000, an average monthly growth rate of 34%. Even if growth slows considerably, 9,000 commercial websites will exist before the end of August, 1995.

ActivMedia surveyed 195 of these active Internet marketers, and projected the responses to reveal an industry worth more than $300 million.

(OHP: Activmedia graph)

Interestingly, it showed that the average website was generating more than US$7000 per month in sales for the average active marketer, with 18 per cent reporting five figure turnover generated to their websites.

3. Demographics

Cyberspace **(Show William Gibson Neuromancer).**

Cyberspace.... A graphic representation of data

abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human

system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged

in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations

of data. Like city lights, receding...[1]

Gibson's cyberspace was an incredibly violent and masculine place, with the direct neural connection between humans and computers both exhilarating and painful.

virtual community.

The non-fiction cyberspace is rarely violent, often exhilarating, but is notably masculine.

The Graphics, Visualization, & Usability Center at the College of Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology surveyed 13,000 Web users and came up with the following demographic data:

• Average age across all users was 35.

• More than 80% of users were men, but female use was increasing.

• More than half of the users were married or had been.

• 60% of users had no dependents.

• Average income of users was US$69,000

• 70% used their computers for "fun" for more than five hours per week. (Time they might otherwise be watching television.)

• Women did less fun computing than men.

• 30% had been on the Internet for less than 6 months.

• Almost half owned only one computer.

• Only 31% were in the computing profession, with the next largest occupational groups education, professional and management.

• 22% said they would not pay fees to access Web sites.

• 85% of users shared their computers with others.

• About 20% use their computer for work for more than 30 hours per week.

The advertising and marketing people will know much more about that demographic than I do. I'll make two blatantly obvious comments: They're not all tech-heads, or nerds, as they have been portrayed, and they have money to spend. You can figure out the rest.

4. Problems:

Load: technical difficulties of speed and quality.

Access: Information rich vs. information poor

Control: large vs. small players. Delphi on line within month. Microsoft to launch its exclusive Web access under the long awaited Windows 95 release.

Legal hazards

Pornography

Down side - rape in cyberspace, child pornography arrest.

Fun side: teledildonics; erotica.

Rheingold's Virtual Reality (adapted):

There was a young man named Keane

Who invented a bonking machine,

Concave or convex, it fit either sex,

and was exceedingly easy to clean.

But for the moment, we settle for the likes of Playboy and Penthouse.

(Show and discuss Playboy graphic.)

- Can just read it for the articles.

- Speed of transmission: Who comes first?

Copyright: stealing images.

Defamation: WA academic.

Trade practices: consumer fraud.

Common legal problem of trans-jurisdictional infringements.

IN Conclusion ....

Some say this whole web thing is like the gold rush era: the only ones who'll make any money out of it will be those who supply the miners with rations, rum and rump.

Others call it the world's largest zero billion dollar industry.

Experts who claim to predict the future have only one thing in common - they're always wrong.

But I've got a feeling there's gold in them there hills for any media player with a good eye for an audience and the right product to market.

Just remember that audiences are human beings with their own problems and passions. Technology on its own holds no power. The power is in your ability to use it to help people solve their problems and to ignite their passions.

The Internet will prove to be a threat to those of you who don't understand your audiences. And perhaps an opportunity to those who do.