# Web Journalism

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About a decade into it, few doubt that Web journalism is distinct from print or broadcast media. The technical differences as well as the differences in presentation and content are obvious. Deeper distinctions are either emerging or are in the process of developing.

When the broadcast media took shape, it adopted many principles and practices of the print media. At the same time, it had its on strengths and limitations that encouraged its growth as distinct media.

Online media heralds the convergence of what were seen as components of print and broadcast media-- text, graphics, audio and video. It is carried by a new technology that has linked virtually every corner of the world. The synergy helps it to surpass everything that the media world has seen so far.

While the print and broadcast media are constrained by space and time, the online media is in possession of seemingly endless space for publication. It has a global reach and the content is one line for 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Apart from convergence, a district feature of online media is hyper linking— the technology that culls information from all over the world and bestows the user with a kind of omnipresence. Billions of pages of information, millions of pages of news reports, are now online that the reader can access with the click of a mouse.

This brings in the distinction between online news and Web journalism. In his introduction to *Online Journalism: A Critical Primer*, Jim Hall notes that "The print journalist is effectively a story teller and the nature of story demands the series of filters and blind entries determined by the conventional structure of the 'inverted pyramid' if it is to attain its end. Increasingly the online journalist abjures that historic role to act as guide and commentator to primary sources…. As readers become their own story tellers the role of 'gatekeeper' is largely passed from the journalists to them."

Thus, the gate keeping functions of media has been eroded with the advent of online media. However, journalism exists only where there is gate keeping and some kind of cross checking and filtering. (Hence the difference between online news and Web journalism).  The new technology definitely has diminished the agenda setting capabilities of media as the readers have direct access to different sources, especially the primary sources on the Web. The hyperlinks allow the readers to leave the narration (of a story) any time and follow different paths. This is why Hall says that the role of gatekeeper's gets passed on to the readers.

However, all the readers do not have the skills to be the gatekeepers and online media is not necessarily the portal without guards.  Value would accrue to a news site when gatekeepers are present. Journalists can make sense of a barrage of information on a given topic and add perspective. This can even be done using hyperlinks selectively and prudently. Better analysis and depth are possible on the Web than radio and television. As technologies improve and mature, news sites can even surpass print with the use of hyperlinks, online data, database driven Web sites and other innovations.

## Interactivity

Interactivity of the Web, including choice before the readers to wander off from a given story through hyper linking, reduces editorial control. The reader's behaviour will be unpredictable when the story is offered with hyperlinks. Apart from following the hyperlinks, he has the choice of switching to another publication instantaneously. Very often journalists, on their part, cannot even present a whole product as readers will be entering a site laterally through search engines or hyperlinks to read a single story. Even a whole story may not be looked at. These kinds of problems exist even in respect of print media. However, a reader would not easily throw away a newspaper he has brought for reading. Though stories may not be read in full, the journalists at least have some control. They can keep the reader interested through skilled narration. This would not work well with the Web as most readers only scan material on the computer screen. (This is mainly because of the spatial rigidity and low resolution of the screens that reduces readability. The situation may improve with advances in technology). Here, presentational elements like sub heads would help to retain reader attention as he scans through the material. Pictures may not be of much help. An eye

tracking study by Stanford University and the Poynter Institute suggested that visitors scanned for text and links rather than visuals. They did not even care much for animations.

Yet, interactivity has its advantages. You get feed backs, sometimes almost instantaneously. This never happens in the print as feedback is always limited and delayed. If the Web site provides for unmoderated feedback, reader responses appear as soon as they are posted. On several occasions, reader inputs can enhance the report itself.

It is possible to offer tremendous amounts of background and other information to those readers who are looking for in-depth material through external links and links to the publication's archives. Background and archive material could be offered in a multi deck fashion where the decks could be traversed back and forth using links or the back button of the browser. (Archives material can have links to the home page and even sections though a link back to the original report would be impractical unless some new technology makes that possible). The linked stories can go on like thousand and one nights until the reader gets tired of it or is satisfied.

Though much depth can thus be achieved, in practice, the nature of the screen puts a severe limitation on how much the reader can see, and how much he would be willing to scroll and go through. Effort is needed on the part of the reader to wade through the material offered. Apart from screen resolution, the multiplicity of choices makes the task of the reader difficult. Interactivity is central to the New Media that he cannot be passive like when he is watching television.

Hence, the editor's job becomes one of assisting the reader in his interactive exercise. She at least makes some selections for him when thousands of related links are available. Here, she should be doing better than search engines. Otherwise editors would become extinct. The editor here is handicapped by the fact that she will have lesser knowledge of her would be audience compared to her counterparts in print or broadcast media. Knowing the reader and targeting is next to impossible because of the global reach of the media. She can only produce pages with a set of readers in mind. But it can turn out they are not the ones who visit the site or not the only ones who are interested. Increased scope for reader comments on the Web interface solves this problem to some extend. Many news sites now carry a large number of reader

comments. Some allow them to post instantaneously without moderation. The comments may give some indication as to who the readers and where they come from.

Technology too can help in this respect. The log files give considerable information as to who the visitors are and what they were looking for. Online editors should make it a point to go through at least the log file summaries. Learning to peruse the raw log file itself could be an advantage. Some papers collect reader profiles by asking for registration of visitors. However, this has the disadvantage that some readers would keep off the site just because they do not want to register.

Advertisers too face the problem of targeting on the Web. Some of them have even developed intrusive technologies to collect reader profiles and reader habits. These technologies, however, invite charges of privacy intrusions especially when it is not done with the knowledge of the reader. When advertisers on news sites are doing it, it may not make a difference if the news sites themselves do it. However, an international consensus on best practices in this respect is yet to evolve.

## Convergence

The Web has made convergence of text, pictures, graphics, audio and video possible. News sites can now combine all these to present news stories. Many have predicted convergence happening in newsrooms with reporters writing text, recording sound and reporting in front of camera while the editors handle all the three. Yet, a proper journalistic form for using all the three media (print, audio and video) to tell a story is yet to emerge. Either different media is chosen according to subject or a second or third media used to supplement the first. They often remain separate on news sites, though technically it is possible to combine them as a multimedia presentation. Sight and sound are means through which man understood the world and communicated with his species. There is something 'primitive' about it. Writing on the other hand is a sophisticated tool developed by mankind in its process of cultural evolution. Sight and sound combines well. Text added to it could be jarring though functional as the news bar on a television screen. They will not become an integrated experience.

## Unlimited Space and low costs

As in other parts of the world, Web editions of print media and Web only news sites exist side by side in India with distinct characteristics of their own.

Newspapers in India have started their Web editions in the nineties as in other countries. By late nineties, most English and many vernacular newspapers had their presence on the Web. However, newspapers started considering the Web editions as serious part of their business only by the turn of the century. Most have not yet thought it necessary to make use of unique feature of the New Media. Several of them just carry the news and photographs that appear in the print editions. Frequency of updates is low and the offerings are predominantly the previous day's news. Newspapers are yet to make full use of the potential of the Web even with respect to use of the unlimited space available at low cost. With newspapers going in for more and more editions, news from different regions did not reach all the people even within a State. There had been reader complaints about this localisation of news. Newspapers often get requests from politicians and others for State wide and national coverage that they just cannot honour for want of space. Many readers also want to get the *local news* from other parts of the country. Several Indian States have their people working in other parts of the world who are interested in *local news*. Still *local news* is in scarce supply on the Web as far as the newspaper sites are concerned. As they gather local news as part of their print operations, it requires little effort to upload it to the Web. The process can even be automated. There is also no much attempt to offer comprehensive coverage of events, beyond what the print media can offer.

Web only editions made their appearance only in the later part of the development of the Internet. Rediff.com was one of the early entrants in India that came in with an outstanding design rather than outstanding news coverage. It cannot be considered purely as a news site as it offers other services such as Webmail. However, it gradually improved its news coverage employing its own staff and agency copy. At the same time it diversified into online shopping and other areas reducing its role in online journalism.

Latecomers such as Tehelka.com, which came in with poor design and sensational stories, did not survive. (Efforts are now on to relaunch it). This was partially on account of official harassment. However, business success eluded Tehelka as well as

others. Some are surviving limiting their costs to the minimum. This affects their ability to cover events and make frequent updates. They also try various 'gimmicks' to attract views. One site for example had a slide show of movie stars on the front page. Others are on the look out for new revenue streams. Consequently, credibility suffers.

Few India based sites on the Web can be classified as news aggregators in the real sense. However, many sites including several of the Internet Service Providers do aggregate news from other sources at their portals for their customers. They do not qualify as Web journalism. At least one company is providing online news feeds from news sites to other sites. Such service would be effective only if constant updating is being done. There is also the problem that these services may be working in a legally grey area as they use deep linking (unless they have permission). However, there is the counter argument that hyper linking is characteristic of the New Media. Moreover, such links always bring substantial traffic to source sites. Thus, deep linking can be mutually beneficial.

When discussing national sites, a question that arises is whether the news sites are not global. Though the technical answer may be yes, in reality, their reach is not really global. It is possible that several Indian news sites are having more readers abroad than in India. This is simply because the Internet infrastructure is more developed in Western and Gulf countries. Besides, the readers from abroad are mostly of Indian origin.

The Iraq war demonstrated the national reach of national media more than ever. If they were looking at media from across the world, the vast majority of Americans would not have believed the campaign of their leaders that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that the country was collaborating with Al Qaida. (Majority of Americans have Internet access, and according to Pew survey, 77 percent of online Americans accessed the Internet for information on the Iraq war.) A survey by the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland, held in May 2003 among American people, showed that 22 per cent of respondents believed that Saddam Hussein did use chemical and biological weapons during the Iraq war, and 41 per cent thought that U. S. did find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Of course, some Americans dumped national media to visit BBC Online. However, not even the British appeared to be looking at French, German, Russian, Arab or Asian media.

(Asian or Indian perspectives to Iraq war were largely available only from a few sites such as Asia Times and Hindustan Times).

Hence, the immediate future of Indian online journalism is in regional audience. The development of Internet infrastructure in the country would lead to significant growth of Web journalism in India.

## Custom News:

A closer look at the ignorance of Americans about what was happening in Iraq will show that it is more than the plurality of opinion not reaching them. Many Americans are just not interested in what is happening outside their country. The Web will only compound this situation further as news can now be customised. You can shut out what you do not want including diverse opinions. Many news sites now offer varying degrees of customisation. One can ensure that much of what one sees on the news sites pertain to one's narrow interests. This would undermine several journalistic precepts and functions. Agenda setting, one of the hallowed objectives of journalism, becomes impossible as the reader sets his own agenda. He would omit many sections that he may at least have glanced through in a newspaper. Neither headlines and design nor skilled writing would help reporters or editors to add emphasis or attract reader attention. Editors job of prioritising new items vanishes. (Also, there is no need for him to spike an item for want of space).

Besides, search engines and intelligent programs are becoming capable of doing the editor's job though still in an artificial way. Google News (http://news.google.com) now uses an algorithm to select the lead items hour by hour.  As technologies improve, editors would be increasingly handing over their traditional role here to the machine. However, it is to be noted that despite all advances in search technology, human compiled subject directories often score over ranking schemes of search engines.

In this scenario, editors should be on the look out for new options for carrying out some of their traditional functions. Push technology is one that could help the editor in this respect. This enables new sites to sent news alerts to the monitors of computer users. The user is likely to prefer a professional editor working behind the technology rather than an algorithm. Email digests offer another way of pushing news. Many readers like this as the efforts needed from their part to get the news are minimised.

## News at your fingertips:

This will be what future would offer to the public. Already technologies such as Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) have made it possible to access news on the go. In future, more new technologies and devices that push and allow customers to pull custom news would emerge. They may not bring about democratisation of news or plurality of opinion on the Net. Daily news coverage would continue to be dominated by big news organisations. However, alternative as well as specialised news, analysis and opinion on the Net will find many small players despite the presence of Net editions of specialised magazines from print media. The era of small publisher is here, though his reach would be global only in a technical sense. On the other hand, readers, supplied with customised information, may move into a cocoon where they would read only material that reinforces their perspectives, opinions and beliefs. The war for people's eyes and ears will be fought on the Internet while many battles rage elsewhere.

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