Newspapers: Print vs. Online

What is the fate of small town newspapers?

Mary Harris
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Executive Summary

The Big Rapids Press is facing a dilemma that many newspapers across the United States is facing: Whether or not to discard the print edition of the newspaper and go online, or keep printing a print edition and face the newspaper industry leaving us in the dust. There are a variety of studies, reports, and opinions on the subject but one thing remains clear: No one knows what will happen. Larger newspapers are reporting a decline in readership and sales and unless the smaller newspapers change to accommodate their readers, they will start feeling the effects as well. The experts are as confused as the rest of us as to how the newspaper industry will survive let alone flourish in this new technological world of the Internet, but many feel that there is little choice but to explore what it has to offer. We are facing a competitor [the Internet] that can use the text, audio, and video. Not everyone is keen on using the Internet however, many advertisers for instance, but with the newfound popularity of the Internet, the newspaper industry will have to change its stripes to better serve its readers.

The majority of readers still prefer reading an actual newspaper, often along with an online edition. It is thus advisable that The Big Rapids Press start to explore venturing out onto the Internet with the creation of our own online newspaper. That is not to say that we should abandon the print edition of our print newspaper, nay, we should run the two editions side-by-side. Moving to a fully-online edition of the newspaper is too risky at this time. There are too many unknown variables and many newspaper readers may be slow to change their reading habits. Providing an online edition is a safe and reliable means to determine what our average reader tends to prefer and then we can meet those needs. The Big Rapids Press has a long and proud history of giving our readers information that is fast, accurate, and reliable. Let us improve this pledge by providing the best service we can.
1.0 Is the Internet Taking Over?

Small newspapers are considering the possibility that the Internet may take over media as the general public knows it. The future of newspapers is unknown, but it is possible to make certain predictions based on the available facts from research, trends, and newspaper readers preferences indicate. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, print newspaper circulation is declining, advertising in print newspapers is dropping drastically, and major newspapers around the country are laying off employees. Based on these facts, traditional newspapers are not going to last much longer, not without changing to meet the changing needs of its readers and the demands of its advertisers. With the growing popularity of online news material online, it is newspapers responsibility to change its shape to accommodate reader’s needs.

A newspaper has two options regarding the way it can change in order to better serve its readers. A newspaper can go from a print edition to an online edition entirely, or move to an online edition but still keep the print edition of the newspaper. Britain has already experienced a change in how a majority of its newspapers operate. According to the Sunday Business nearly all newspapers are published digitally which, “Provides an online newspaper with exactly the same layout, design, and pagination as the printed product” (“Newspapers Look to Digital Edition”). Yet according to the same publication, “Some customers dislike viewing content online and miss the feel and design of the printed product.” The quote brings about the most important question a journalist or business manager can ask: What does the customer want? With the Internet still new and the business aspect of it still being sorted out, it is in the best interest of this company if the newspaper goes online but still keeps the printed edition of the newspaper. It allows customers to choose how they want to view content and find the method that works best
for them. Many customers may decide they like just one, both at the same time, or may change their opinion on the matter over time.

2.0 The Decline of Print Newspapers

Printed editions of the newspaper have been around for ages, but now they are starting to decline. Barb Palser says that this is nothing new because people are beginning to use the term “newspapers” differently:

Many of them are using newspapers as shorthand for the types of journalism the best papers represent: Serious investigative and foreign reporting. Muckraking and watchdogging. Daily community news that nobody else covers. When editors protest the terrible things happening to newspapers, they're warning us that quality journalism is in jeopardy (“A False Rivalry”).

Many print newspapers, and people who support the print editions of a newspaper, complain about the Internet. They feel that the Internet is taking away print subscriptions and they focus their efforts on getting those numbers back up while finding that the newspaper’s Internet site (if they have one at all) suffers as a result. Palser argues that there is a rivalry between online and print editions of the newspaper and this rivalry is damaging both editions.

Palser states that online and print editions of a newspaper should work together in order to increase the newspapers effectiveness and not get caught up in trying to outdo each other, especially when the online edition and the print edition are of the same company. Palser makes three points towards this argument (A False Rivalry).

1. The future may not depend on the print edition of the newspaper and it is important to recognize that the online edition is not shallow or cheap.

2. All media is connected, when one is affected, they are all affected.
3. The Internet provides wider distribution, which means more growth can be obtained by that newspaper.

Others claim that the print edition of the newspaper it is not dying and is not likely to. Larry Kilman said that “Conventional wisdom holds that the rise of digital media must mean the "decline" of newspapers,” is wrong and it is simply a myth (Print Screen). Kilman urges readers to consider some facts (from 2008) about newspapers which include:

- Over 550 million people around the world buy a newspaper every day.
- Newspapers consist of 30 percent of the entire advertising industry.
- There are two million newspaper employees worldwide.
- There is over $6 billion invested in technology for newspapers.

Kilman states that newspaper circulation is on the decline, but so is virtually every other activity available to man. He argues that this is due to too many activities and little time to accomplish everything. With mediums such as television and the Internet, which offers so many options and alternatives, one might think that newspaper readers might decline or may not remain consistent, but this is not the case. Despite the alternatives available to newspaper readers, 64% of people who use the Internet regularly reported that they have not changed their newspaper reading habits. Many people are reading newspapers online, and in print, and this is not likely to change overnight. Kilman stated it best, “Their [newspapers] traditional role in democratic societies is to provide the necessary information needed to make decisions, and to act as a watchdog against corruption and other wrongdoing. That has not changed in 400 years,” (“Print Screen”). Newspapers, regardless of the form in which they are produced to mainstream society, are not going anywhere anytime soon. The chart below represents the preference of newspaper readers.
3.0 The Key to Going Online

Research shows that the readers who prefer the print edition of the newspaper still access the newspaper on the Internet. According to UPI News Track, reader preference is changing from the print edition to the online edition of the newspaper. As a result, newspapers are offering original material on the online edition of the newspaper in the hopes of drawing in more readers and keeping dedicated readers entertained and interested. Editors are creating online message boards and editorial blogs, in the hopes of increasing the Internet’s immediacy. People like to see the comments they post about a story get published right away so many newspapers and websites have a strict policy of not monitoring content before it is published. In this way, the newspaper can’t be blamed for any unsuitable material that is posted through this medium. Instead
newspapers have created a method so users can report an offensive post to the newspaper and then the newspaper can remove the post from the online forum. With the availability of blogs and other activities that foster interactivity, the reader can interact with other members of the community.

The days of going to a bar and listening for gossip is long gone because now people can gossip from the comfort of their laptops. By interacting with the people on the Internet, not only do readers feel more connected to the people who report what is going on in their town, but reporters have better access to story material. Even social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and others help provide reporters with the opportunity to find people and gain access to information they may have not had access to otherwise. Reporters are limited by the knowledge they possess and the access they have to that knowledge. Thanks to the Internet providing a handy way of getting in touch with people and staying up to date on activities and events that are going on in the community, reporters are better able to perform their jobs. And when a reporter can perform his or her job to the best of their abilities, everyone benefits from it, especially the reader.

Interaction with the reader is important, which is why many companies, organizations and newspapers are using Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites in order to get more readership, let people know what they are doing, and remind people that they are out there. Many newspapers are taking this approach, but what happens when that resource starts to take away the business of the organization that is using that site? According to Daily News & Analysis, three well-known newspapers, The Miami Herald, The Chicago Tribune and The Detroit Sun all started online editions of their newspaper to survive after they started having financial problems. The article states that in order to compete with social media sites that can have information...
updated quickly, online newspapers are trying to do the same and meeting with disastrous results. Information gathering, fact checking, and other time-consuming necessities are being forgotten in the newspapers haste to be the first ones to announce breaking news. Not only is the accuracy of the story being lost in the reporter’s haste, but also the average online reporter has to take on additional responsibilities. These responsibilities include taking photographs and recording video or audio, in addition to interviewing sources and doing research. In this way the lines between different types of media such as print, television and radio, is rapidly blurring into one uniform media: online newspapers.

4.0 Online News: Current Trend or Inevitable Fate?

It is clear, despite misgivings, that many people are attracted to getting their news from the Internet. Thus as newspapers explore going online, it is important to understand how the average reader reads. Otherwise how does a reporter get a reader to read their story if the format is not to their liking? According to the Quill, many of the skills to writing online are the same as in print. One must be accurate and flexible. Stanford University did an experiment, which involved using eye-tracking equipment in order to learn what readers looked at when they go online. The article stated that people read online newspapers the same way they read print newspapers. Readers usually start with their favorite newspaper first, read headlines and article summaries, and then only read the actual story when they find a subject they are interested in. The most surprising thing the study found however was that people were attracted to text before pictures or graphics online. Not the case in print where the pictures are one of the first things that grab a reader’s attention, but the text was more important for readers when viewing an article online. This indicates that while an online newspaper may have many similar aspects of print, the
online format must be different in order to accommodate readers and their reading habits. As more and more people turn to the Internet, newspapers must prepare for the upcoming changes.

The Hesston Record, a small Kansas weekly newspaper, realized that change was coming and prepared for it. The paper reaches a town of about 3,500 residents, but it knew something different had to be done when its subscribers started turning to other news sources and the paper was starting to lose its advertisers as well. The paper decided to suspend its weekly operations and go to a biweekly print edition of the newspaper. The paper also put all of its material online-for a price. There are no reports at this time whether or not the move was successful, but the fact remains that it is not only the large newspapers that are taking the plunge and heading onto the Internet. This is the fate of all newspapers, big or small.

Research shows that big newspapers are the ones that are having the hardest time profiting from an online edition of the newspaper. The smaller newspapers are doing well in comparison to its larger competitors. John Morton, of the American Journalism Review, claims that “The 70 percent of the nation's newspapers with circulation under 50,000 -- generally have suffered less in advertising and circulation losses... smaller newspapers operate in markets far less complex and competitive, online and off, compared with the ones where big newspapers operate” (“Costly Mistakes”). Below is a chart which shows the trends of the amount of money spent on newspapers, for the print and online editions.
Morton claims that smaller newspapers are closer to its readers and distribute to a much higher percentage of their markets' population than larger newspapers do. Smaller newspapers do risk feeling the negative effects the larger newspapers may experience. Morton argues that larger newspapers may not be on the decline if they had comprehended two simple things. Not to let the quality of journalism that is produced diminish and when tough times hit lower profits can be expected and the newspaper needs to have a contingency plan in place to deal with it.

5.0 Recommendation

It is the recommendation that the Big Rapids Press maintain its daily print edition at this time. It is clear from the research indicated above that readers prefer the print edition of the
newspaper for its availability, reliance, and simply because it is a habit for many. Advertisers also prefer to advertise with printed editions of the newspaper instead of risking the insecurity of the Internet. However, with the growing popularity of the Internet and the decline of the print editions of larger newspapers in the United States, it would not benefit The Big Rapids Press to turn its back on the Internet altogether. Instead, it should focus its efforts into maintaining the print edition and look to expanding on the Internet. Half of The Big Rapids Press reaches a rural area that currently does not have Internet connections, but that may very well change in a few years. Despite loyal readers preferring print editions of the newspapers The Big Rapids Press cannot expect that trend to continue forever. When the trend does shift it is better to have an online edition of the newspaper up and running than to be left in the dark at the bottom of the well of bankruptcy. Therefore it is recommended that The Big Rapids Press take immediate action and begin to plan to add an online edition of the newspaper.
Works Consulted


