

THE HOLY GRAIL GOES DIGITAL by Belinda Weaver

Newspaper storage has always been a tricky issue for libraries. Unlike journals, which can be neatly bound in volumes, newspapers are bad candidates for binding – the paper deteriorates, the print blurs, the pages are easily torn, and the very frequency of their publication, as in the case of daily newspapers, makes their binding and storage on shelves an expensive option.

For many years, microfilming has been the technology of choice for newspaper archiving in libraries. Though not especially popular with users, microfilm provided a way of preserving newspapers that did not take up as much room as print storage; it also solved the problem of paper deterioration. With the addition of microfilm printers, users were able to get hard copy of the stories or sections they required.

Searching for articles from newspapers was not so easy. Users wishing to retrieve articles from a paper would need first to pin down a date, as the prospect of scanning page after page of microfilm in search of stories was not a feasible strategy. Given the paucity of really comprehensive Australian newspaper indexes, users were condemned to a grab-bag approach. If the story was very recent, chances were they would still find it on a newspaper's Web site. Most Australian news sites make stories available for about a week, after which they are removed. Users do not usually find stories older than a week freely available.

In order to find older stories, users could try searching APAIS (though it does not index newspapers comprehensively); they could use the State Library of New South Wales's Web service *InfoQuick* (<http://www.slnsw.gov.au/infoquick/>), which would at least allow them to date the stories they wanted, if only within the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sun-Herald*; or they could use for-fee services such as Lexis.com or the proprietary full-text newspaper databases, such as the recently launched NewsText (News Limited) or the Fairfax News Store, if they were prepared to pay for access to them.

Full-text databases were a great boon to newspaper article searchers, as keyword searches could retrieve a range of articles on a topic across a variety of newspapers in the database. However, full-text databases did not necessarily replicate the contents of an actual print newspaper. Most newspapers consist of more than in-house reporting; they include material from wire services, syndicated material such as crosswords, columns, cartoons, opinion pieces and articles, as well as advertising and other bought-in copy. Much of this material is excluded, under copyright rules, from inclusion in full-text newspaper databases. Yet this material, the classifieds and the births, deaths, and marriages, might be exactly what the user seeks. Also problematical is the presentation of newspaper

articles in such databases as merely title and text. In newspapers, much of a story's impact depends on its placement on a page, the size and lettering of its headline, the inclusion of photographs or other supporting material, such as tables, graphics, charts, cartoons, drawings and captions. All sense of this is lost in a full-text database. A user can retrieve the words, but not the look and feel of the story, or its graphical presentation. Going to the microfilm would enable this to be regained, but few users would bother once they had the text in their hands.

When newspapers began to move on to the Web, they did not replicate the print version of their papers in any significant way. Though many stories might have been common to both, the appearance of print and Web

versions was very different (and the Web version might have been considerably abbreviated). On the Web, stories were organised into lists with the top story first. The

masthead was really the sole point of familiarity – it was displayed at the top, identifying the brand (though the *SMH* has since dumped its print masthead in favour of a new online masthead, smh.com.au). But few of the print pointers to importance – big headlines, large pictures – were deployed on the Web. The top story was the top story by virtue of its premier position and that was that. Increasingly, further links are now being added to top stories – links to earlier stories, to audio or video pieces, to further story background and so on. But, it is still a very different world from print.

As the Web develops, print and Web versions are diverging more and more. Increasingly, Web versions are taking full advantage of the Web's multimedia capabilities to offer a fuller story 'experience' to readers. Like the full-text databases, Web versions may not include much of the 'bought-in' copy that fills out a print newspaper – the wire stories, the syndicated columns or articles – since they may not have licensing rights to the digital reproduction of such material.

Until now, if readers wanted to read a newspaper impossible to get in print format, they had to make do with the online version, which might not be a wholly satisfactory experience.

Then came 8 August, 2001, and the launch of the digital version of *The Australian*. As Mark Day, *The Australian's* Media columnist put it: "Suddenly, the Holy Grail. This is what we've dreamed of for decades – an electronic form of distribution of newspapers. Not reworked, rejigged Web site information centres under a familiar masthead, but the real thing, page by page, stories and pictures laid out on screen in exactly the same form as the printed version". And that's what the paper was – a perfect facsimile of

the day's paper, in Portable Document Format (PDF), and the print didn't come off in your hands.

Why did they do it? As Day says, "... even with satellite printing in Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, *The Australian* still can't make it everywhere for breakfast. Darwin readers, for instance, must wait until early afternoon, and pay an air freight surcharge. International readers must wait days, and pay very dearly, to stay in touch with the Oz. A single copy in New York costs \$US8 (\$15.50) and annual subscriptions in Japan represent a daily cost of more than \$10. The price at Changi airport, Singapore, is \$12. That a demand exists at these prices shows that online newspaper Web sites have not replicated the content or user experience of the printed version".

Oddly enough, when the paper was launched digitally in 2001, there was no Australian dollar price quoted. The daily price was US \$2 (US \$3 for *The Weekend Australian*, which includes the full colour magazine). All prices were quoted in American dollars, as if the Australian publishers did not believe there would be an Australian audience for their product. This seemed at variance with Mark Day's assertion in August that "digital distribution may become an option for everyone, anywhere, but it's more likely to be taken up in regions where physical distribution is difficult". Surely that would include parts of Australia as well.

To use the digital *Australian*, its users must register and subscribe online. They then download to their own computers the (free) NewsStand Reader program that installs itself. If they do not have the latest version of the (also free) Adobe Acrobat Reader software (currently version 5), then they must download that as well.

When it launched, the original NewsStand Reader program was large, making download times quite slow for those not on cable or direct connections. For those who needed to download and install Adobe Acrobat as well, the set-up times would have been lengthy. The publisher, News Limited, was aware that users might have problems and sought feedback from users on their experiences with NewsStand and the digital product. Many of the suggestions from users during this initial period were heeded, and many issues have since been resolved. The NewsStand Reader software has been streamlined and the download and installation process is now a lot faster. The price has come down as well since the launch. It now costs US \$0.90 per issue, with *The Weekend Australian* remaining at US \$3. Subscriptions are flexible, and can be customised by the subscriber for anything from a week to a year. Single issues can be purchased. Users can stop and start subscriptions at will, and can be billed via credit card for a full year's subscription. If they decide to cancel, the unused balance will be credited back to their credit card account.

Each daily paper is around 8-9 MB in size, with *The Weekend Australian* about three to four times that. Download times are minimal on a fast connection, but would be lengthier over a modem, especially for the weekend edition. Downloading that over a modem

could take half an hour or more. NewsStand can be configured for automatic download of the paper. It is possible to set up specific download times, such as 4 am, when network traffic is low.

So What Do You Get?

Well, in short, you get the entire newspaper, an exact colour facsimile of the print version, page by page. The print quality is astoundingly good; this becomes especially obvious when print-outs from pages are taken. These are, if possible, even clearer than the print newspaper itself. The broadsheet pages reduce to A4 for printing purposes. This might make the print too small for some readers, but the clarity is so good that most people should have no trouble with it. It is certainly markedly superior to printouts from microfilm of the same pages.

Though it uses Adobe software to display the scanned images of the pages, the NewsStand software adds extra functionality, allowing readers to move quickly via the index to particular sections of the paper, for example, opinion, sport, weather. Alternatively, users can read page by page as one would with a print newspaper. Zooming is simple; one can choose to zoom in, or out, so that one can see the page as a whole, or easily read a section onscreen.

The paper is fully keyword-searchable. Should a reader wish to see a story about Afghanistan, for example, then that word could be entered in the search box, and all occurrences of the word could be seen in turn. Searching can also be done across issues. Internet links within stories or sections are live, so readers can follow up on story-related links.

When the digital Australian was launched, few other papers were in the market for such a digital version. However, in the past six months, newspapers have queued to launch PDF versions. The *New York Times* is now available via NewsStand; other papers available through the service include the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, *The Scotsman*, *The Sunday Times* (UK), the *International Herald Tribune* and *The Press* (NZ). The full range of titles available can be seen at the NewsStand web site (<http://www.newsstand.com/>).

Alan Farrelly, general manager of News Limited's Newsource division, believes that "Australian embassies, consulates, and trade offices are likely early subscribers and marketing will target Australian companies with offices abroad, and hotels catering to international tourists" (Day, 2001). He did not mention libraries, yet the digital Australian is a perfect product for libraries. At a stroke, the digital product solves many of the problems associated with imperfect microfilming and incomplete full-text news services. If a user wants the paper for a particular day, they can get it – and they can search it, for words or names that they want. It includes the whole paper – all the sections such as magazines, liftouts and supplements that are sometimes omitted from microfilm. It removes the need for separate microfilm infrastructure, and more importantly, the product cannot be lost, torn or defaced. Its quality will be as good in six months or six years as it is today.

That papers are lining up to release a PDF version is a sign that the demand is there. In addition to NewsStand, there is another service – NewspapersDirect – in the marketplace. NewspapersDirect (<http://www.newspapersdirect.com/>) has more papers than NewsStand, yet its functionality is not as good, as it relies on straight PDF replication of the print product, with none of the sophisticated searching or indexing services that NewsStand has developed. However, its stable of papers is international – including *Aftenposten* (Norway), *Le Monde* (France), *La Stampa* (Italy), the *Los Angeles Times*, *The South China Morning Post* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.

NewspapersDirect received a massive publicity and circulation boost after the terror attacks of September 11. American and Canadian hotels were able to download and print a vast range of local and international newspapers for stranded travellers from NewspapersDirect; they now see the product as a good service they can offer their customers.

NewsStand does not currently offer a complete archiving solution for libraries. However, it is possible to search across all downloaded issues of newspapers at once, which is a major breakthrough. Search results give the date, edition, page and number of matches for the search term. Clicking on a result opens the selected paper at the point where the term is located. This is a tremendous advance in functionality for people used to ploughing through microfilm.

At the moment, subscriptions are designed for a single workstation; there is no pricing available for networking. News Limited staff are looking at archiving options and hope to announce further services this year. In the meantime, back issues of *The Australian* since its launch can still be purchased from the NewsStand site. Other papers in the digital pipeline include the Brisbane newspaper, *The Courier-Mail*, which News Limited hopes to make available via NewsStand this year.

What the launch of such versions means for existing Web site mastheads is anybody's guess. PDF versions may replace the current online versions. Creating and maintaining a single product rather than two divergent ones would certainly be cost-effective for news operations. "It could mean a sharp curtailing of Web site offerings – and a simultaneous expansion into market areas well outside the circulation constraints that limit the distribution of many newspapers" (Till, 2001).

The digital version might enable newspapers finally to get into the black – to charge for news instead of giving it away as they have had to do until now. As Robin Marshall notes: "Readers who lived away from their local newspapers' circulation area were thrilled to get coverage from home – in some cases, before the folks back home got it ... But the one thing that has been missing throughout is the online ability to read all of the paper – particularly the classifieds and the births, deaths, and marriages – not just the stuff online editors decide to put up. Who wants to subscribe to an online edition of a newspaper when they can't read the whole thing?"

Now that readers can do just that, developments in this market will be well worth watching.

References

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