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Trends in the online newsroom: A study of the Straits Times Interactive

N. Keshvani
Queensland University of Technology,

Trends In The Online Newsroom: A Study Of The Straits Times Interactive

This paper examines the impact of online technology on work practices, management policy and online consumer's expectations from the Singaporean national daily Straits Times Interactive which was launched in 1995, making it one of the pioneers in this new medium at a stage when the commercial use of the Internet was in its infancy in the region. Based on online newsroom trends, implications on journalism education are considered and teaching tools suggested.

Nisar Keshvani

fineArtforum.org

John Katz, First Amendment Centre scholar and *Wired* media critic, describes the WWW as "almost a living organism that it is replicating and growing and expanding beyond the range almost of human beings to control it" (Kees 1999). The WWW has grown at a faster rate than any prior communications technology. Radio hit the 50 million mark in listenership 38 years after its introduction, and television took 13 years to achieve a similar figure, however the WWW surpassed that in just four years (Aikat 1998: 95).

Pavlik and Sagan have developed a three-stage descriptive model to classify the evolution of WWW-based publications. At stage one, content is simply transferred from the original publication to the Internet (1997: 30-38). WWW-based publications which loosely fit into this category are Queensland's *The Courier-Mail* and *The New Paper* in Singapore. Their WWW presence is a stripped-down version of their print newspaper.

Russell Neuman makes a salient point: "a great deal of what draws serious institutions of journalism to the Internet and the World Wide Web, it would appear, is more of an economic defensiveness than a professional enthusiasm" (1995: 63). This lack of a professional enthusiasm towards developing novel content

has resulted in some cases as "shovelware", print stories reproduced wholesale on the WWW. In 1996 Pogash found most online newspapers produced shovelware, "with few changes other than key words painted with hypertext blue that offers readers links to stories with greater depth" (1996: 26).

Pavlik and Sagan (1997: 30-38), say stage two of WWW-based publishing occurs when the journalist creates original content and augments it with limited interactive attributes. These include hyperlinks (where readers can instantly access another website with a click); interactive features such as search engines, which locate material on requested topics; and a degree of customization — the ability to choose what categories of news and information you receive.

Established WWW-based publications such as *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe's Boston.com* are currently in stage three, characterized by original news content coupled with a combination of interactivity, audio and video designed specifically for the WWW. At stage three, publishers rethink and experiment with new forms of storytelling. "Often this is immersive storytelling, which allows you to enter and navigate through a news report in ways different from just reading it. Sometimes this might be done through new technology" (ibid). Lasica (1997: 48) says this new technology may force publishers to abandon their "pulp mindsets" and realise that if users' needs are not gratified, they will be led to products which can deliver real-time, personalised news and information.

Despite predictions that the WWW would force traditional newspapers out of print, Fidler (1997: 131-135), Director of Knight-Ridder Information Design Laboratory in the USA, says that newspapers are well positioned to emerge stronger. He says that newspapers can regain their position as key information providers if they evolve and "mediamorphosis" will take place as social, economic and environmental pressures force a rethink in strategy.

To be competitive with other forms of media, digital print media must combine the interactivity of personal computers, and the compelling qualities of television without sacrificing the readability and ease of using paper .... they must be comfortable and convenient to use while lying in bed, riding on a subway, dining in a restaurant, or sitting in a park bench. (Fidler 1994: 132)

Research Scope And Method

The research explores how The Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), managed the implementation of its online news service, *The Straits Times Interactive* (SPH) and the WWW's effects on journalists' practice. The methodology falls under the broad

umbrella of ethnographic research (Bouma 1996: 178). A mixed or multi-methods, triangulated (Denscombe: 83-86) approach was employed to develop in-depth case studies (Jorgensen 1989: 19).

The following methodological tools were employed:
- An audit of the macro environment ;
- Participant observation;
- A content analysis comparing the print and online versions of the newspapers for the period 19 - 31 July 1999;
- In-depth interviews with staff including editors, journalists and web content producers;
- Email follow-up interviews;
- A Reference Group.

This case study focuses on the product (the publications - both print and online), the producer (journalists and editors) and the publishers' policies. Within this framework, a particular focus of the case study was the changing work practices within the 'online newsroom' environment.

Singapore Press Holdings

The Straits Times Interactive (STI) is the WWW version of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) broadsheet flagship publication, *The Straits Times* first published on July 15, 1845, and is the most widely read newspaper in Singapore with a readership of 1.2 million (SPH Online 1999). *The Straits Times* strives to be an authoritative provider of news and views, with a special focus on Singapore and the Asian region. It has eight bureaus in Asia, one in Washington, and a worldwide network of other contributors *(http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/about/staboutus.html)*. It also runs a fully operational sub-editing and layout team from its Sydney office (SPH Annual Report 1996).

SPH captured 49 per cent of Singapore's S$1.27 billion advertising share market from 1997-1998. *Asiaone,* SPH's online news portal, secured approximately S$1 million in advertising revenue (SPH Annual Report 1998, p.4 - 21), but the cost of going online was not reported. The company has a diverse business interests, ranging from property to film and video post-production, telecommunications, multimedia, as well as Internet and cable television services. SPH's strategy since 1995 has been to establish itself on the information superhighway. It began by developing an Internet presence for its core newspapers through *AsiaOne,* launching Singapore's third ISP, *CyberWay* and operating *MobileOne*, a local mobile and paging network. SPH then acquired a 20 per cent stake in Singapore CableVision, the only local cable

service (SPH Annual Report 1995: 3).

In 1999, SPH sold its share of *Cyberway* and successfully acquired the licence to operate the Republic's fourth ISP - *DataOne* (Asia). SPH and Keppel Telecommunications & Transportation jointly own *DataOne* with long-term plans to acquire ISP licences in Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand. The two groups are shareholders in *MobileOne,* and project customers will be able to get on to the Web via handphones soon (The Business Times, 8 June 1999). SPH's most aggressive move yet, is the incorporation of a wholly owned subsidiary, *AsiaOne Internet Pty Ltd* to handle all its Internet ventures. *AsiaOne* took over SPH's Multimedia division.

AsiaOne (http://www.asia1.com.sg), SPH's website was launched in 1995 with a web portal strategy, long before the term was commonly used. It acts as a gateway for SPH's products and services. Additional services include web hosting, development and consultation services targeted to private enterprises hoping to maximise their online presence. At time of writing, *AsiaOne* revamped its site and repositioned itself as a "comprehensive portal for news and e-commerce". Besides content from the SPH stable of newspapers and magazines, it launched other services and features including classified advertising, auctions, job opportunities, financial services, data services, e-shopping, free e-mail and various lifestyle sites (Velloor 1999). This move is in line with current industry practice which dictates that offering such services goes a long way towards attracting 'eyeballs' (online readership), thus creating a loyal consumer base and profits. This also indicates SPH's strategy to develop quality content and switch from a 'news publisher' to 'information content provider' mentality.

Birth And Growth Of STI

SPH led with its core newspapers onto *AsiaOn*e by launching *The Business Times* (June 1995) followed successively by *Lianhe Zaobao* (August 1995), *Computer Times* (September 1995), *The Straits Times* (November 1995), *The New Paper* (December 1995), *Berita Harian* (March 1996). STI was one of the first papers in Southeast Asia to go online. Its pioneer editor Paul Jansen recalls its genesis:

"It was in late 1994 that the Internet came to our part of the world. I kept hearing about its potential but I was busy preparing for the 1995 National Day Supplement. The moment I was done, I put together a proposal on how we should create an Internet version of our paper in a fashion that I thought would put us on the world map. The idea was to add value to the information we

already gathered." (Jansen pers comm, 27 July 1999)

Work on developing the paper began in September and Jansen's aim was to launch the paper in late 1995. The team expanded to include staff with specific skills -- a backbencher (sub-editor), two IT personnel and a layout artist joined the team. Jansen recalls the days when the team had to learn HTML from scratch. "We invested in S$1,000 worth of books and spent time to learn the basic tags to manually code the stories. We didn't have WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) HTML editors then" (ibid).

During Jansen's editorship from 1995 to 1998 (he is currently *Straits Times'* Money Editor), STI experimented with a number of web techniques. On June 7 1996, STI for the first time webcast Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's speech -- "Will there be a Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew?"-- at a Singapore Press Club/ Foreign Correspondents Association Lunch at Raffles Hotel. Other milestones include the first live webcast of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally speech. Cleverly avoiding the high bandwidth required for a video webcast, STI transmitted PM Goh's speech live via RealAudio (an audio streaming software), showed pictures as he spoke, and displayed text of his speech as he completed it. There were special sections to landmark important news events such as the 1997 Hong Kong handover, the South-east Asia Games, the launch of Lee Kuan Yew's book, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas,* and the *SilkAir* plane crash in Indonesia.

"The *SilkAir* plane crash tested our journalistic prowess. We provided 24-hour up to the minute news, on the latest in the rescue mission and recorded hits from around the world. Distressed readers emailed and rang the STI office to find out the well being of loved ones. We ran passengers lists, help hotline numbers and worked like crazy till the wee hours of the morning." (Raoul Le Blond, Former STI Online Journalist, pers comm, 21 February 1999)

STI and SPH's other online newspapers were amalgamated under the New Media Unit in early 1998. It re-structured and moved away from producing original content and re-focused on transferring its core print paper online well. (This is explained in detail below in Management Policy). In early 1999, 'vertical sections', in the form of *IT@AsiaOne* and *Food@AsiaOne,* were developed. The latter focuses on food, restaurant and wine reviews repackaged into a column from content originally used in the various print editions. Besides being an IT portal, IT@AsiaOne carries a fortnightly column written by the various New Media Unit journalists, discussing trends and events in the IT scene. More such columns are expected to emerge.

Until 1999, *Straits Times Interactive* devoted resources to transferring the print content online. The transfer process takes 6 - 8 hours and requires manual intervention. In most instances, staff need to physically locate news stories and photographs for the WWW. STI aims to automate this process through sophisticated content management software. The implication of this is not yet known. It may free the journalist to concentrate on developing quality content but it could result in job losses. The rigidity of a 'template approach' and minimal freeplay during the designing and page production may also prove frustrating for journalists.

Physical Setting & Human Resources

At the time of the study (July 1999), there were two full-time journalists maintaining STI and three student interns attached to the online newsroom. The interns assisted with production and locating photographs from the SPH image system for the *Life! Section.* By contrast, the traditional print newsroom is divided into various sections - *Life!, MoneyDesk, ForeignDesk, SportsDesk, and Local News.* Like most newsrooms they operate from a huge work space with only low-level office partitions separating them, if at all.

Besides the in-house web-transfer program, all kinds of Internet software are used (either purchased, developed in-house or by vendors). There are few audio/video options on the current site but the Technical Development team, which handles STI's IT support, recognises its potential and plans to enhance STI (See pers comm, 28 July 1999).

Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) said that during the early days of STI, journalists required three main qualities: "They had to be good journalists, who were interested in this revolutionising new technology, and work efficiently as independent operators".

New Media Editor Margaret Thomas (pers comm 28 July 1999) who headed SPH's online newspapers, describes the profile of today's online journalists as "web content managers or web masters who have basic HTML skills with a passion for the Web. They need to have the ability to re-package or re-purpose news and create and source information."

When asked if there is a trend to hire IT professionals and train them into becoming journalists. Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) said, "I don't think it will work. What is happening is you are confusing the box with the content. Giving pretty boxes doesn't result in good content. From the beginning the idea was always to present good content."

Online Journalist's Professional Practice

The professional practice of the online journalist at STI is changing just as rapidly as new media. Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) says that all print news stories undergo seven levels of scrutiny at the *Straits Times* once the journalist returns from the field. They are:

Level 1 - Supervisor assists the journalist in shaping the story based on the outcome of the interview/coverage

Level 2 - Supervisor looks at the first draft and decides if it is satisfactory

Level 3 - Copy editor subs the story

Level 4 - Backbencher (Sub-Editor) decides story placement (eg lead story)

Level 5 - Team leader checks information, house style guidelines and lays it on the pages

Level 6 - It is sent back to teeline for approval.

Level 7 - Night editor does a final check before the pages go to print.

In the print media, the journalist is protected by seven sets of eyes. However, on the WWW the layers are drastically removed and a story can be published online with or without a sub-editor or editor's approval and a round of sub-editing. Adeline Goh, STI Journalist (pers comm, 22 July 1999) explains further:

"The gatekeeper role has changed and you [online journalist] feel more powerful on the Net. Online news can be uploaded in an instant, it is immediate and can be accessed by anyone. Initially I was paranoid about uploading stories as it is such a powerful medium and all it requires is a drag and drop. Journalists need to understand this and should work with caution."

Besides this sense of power, Goh and Koh Su Haw (pers comm, 23 July 1999), Head of *Business Times Online,* feel that there are new pressures facing journalists in this medium. Besides the ability to write, they need to be multi-skilled, keep abreast of technological innovations, and be comfortable with HTML/photo manipulation software. Koh agreed that multi-skilling was essential:

"I see myself as an Internet evangelist, try to spot technological trends and debunk urban myths and the fear most have of new technology. I never feel secure in my job for more than six months at a time. This medium is changing very quickly and it is difficult to define my work. I do different things at different times of the day, being able to flip flop and flip again is an important characteristic of my job."

The role of the online journalist is slowly being understood and *Straits Times* journalists are gaining awareness of the medium and its possibilities. Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999), however, says that this was not always the case:

"There was a fear that stories would be stolen and put online before they were printed. We assured section editors exclusive stories wouldn't be stolen until they were printed. We focussed on updates which everyone had access to anyway. Print journalists did initially wonder how we could upload new stories immediately. Our aim was actually to provide the basics, the major difference is that reporters analyse and interpret information for the print edition, whereas online, we could simply upload new information and announcements in tune with the nature of the WWW."

Online Consumer Expectations

Feedback is an important aspect of STI. There are direct e-mail addresses pointing to the various section editors to allow readers to communicate directly with journalists explained Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999). In his view, today's audiences are much more sophisticated. The number of users has grown tremendously:

"Technology has moved so quickly that readers simply come to expect audio and video clips. Expectations are so much higher that if you don't deliver it is immediately apparent that you are a sub-standard content provider. As long as the reader is exposed to available technology, he comes to expect it."

In terms of technology and site design, STI has made a conscious effort to maintain equitable access. "We try to keep content general and simple in language. We are mostly one step behind technology, and it's not because we are unaware of what is available. Readers come to our site for news and our content, so we do try to reach a maximum target audience," said Goh (ibid). Jansen (pers comm, 27 July 1999) added:

"It essential to know your target audience. As we become more global [through the Internet], the more local we need to be. It's important to have the ability to refocus on the global market and write copy catered to the needs of the new online audience."

Manaement Policy

There has been a switch in management and content policy since STI was launched in 1995. The first three years saw Paul Jansen and his team experimenting with various methods of delivering original content. As mentioned earlier, various senior

journalists from the individual newspapers led their online editions. However in 1998, due to various reasons such as a refocus in online strategy, SPH decided to form a New Media Unit headed by a single editor, Margaret Thomas who managed the four online newspapers explained:

"We didn't see any point in duplicating resources and felt that we could better manage our new media department if we consolidated resources and worked in a single direction. We would enhance and develop our core product taking advantage of its already strong positions." (Thomas pers comm, 28 July 1999)

At that time, the returns gained through advertising revenue, did not justify the costs of investing in emerging online technology and a decision was made to re-strategise and conservatively thread into this medium. During the period of study, more journalists were being hired and the New Media Unit was expanding in preparation for a market relaunch. The researcher was not privy to details but was informed of the move. At the time of writing, the *AsiaOne* website was relaunched and STI was hiring new staff and online journalists specifically to produce novel content for the WWW. By January 2000, a full-time editor, Mathew Pereira, and two other full-time journalists were hired for STI.

Integrated Newsroom Trends

Stage three of online news evolution (novel news content with a combination of interactivity, audio and video features) as described by Pavlik and Sagan will require journalists of the future to be multi-skilled and *au fait* with digital technology, photo manipulation and require basic web skills. These skills will be in addition to the basic writing, editing and interviewing skills required for more traditional journalistic activities. This is reinforced by SPH's profile of its online journalists. Younger journalists are required to multi-task as dictated by their job scope. Besides writing, they keep abreast of technological innovations and are comfortable with HTML/photo manipulation and sophisticated software.

However as the role of an Internet journalist slowly gains importance, there is an indication of an emerging trend -- a re-defined online newsroom role as staff are hired for specific tasks. New clearly defined roles such as web masters, content managers, web developers are emerging. There is a current boom for content producers as websites realise the importance of fresh and quality online content. However this could be a short-term trend, and may not last. Any prediction in this area, would be premature guesswork. As the role of the online journalist is slowly accepted, there seems to be an emerging trend towards hiring younger

journalists with both IT and writing skills. The number of entry-level mainstream journalism jobs is decreasing. Once employed neo-journalists still require substantial 'on the job' training and experience to become editorial decision-makers. However, the online media has created a new job market, open to younger, less-experienced journalists since most print professionals lack such skills.

There is still subtle resistance to the WWW in SPH's newsroom with some journalists reluctant to embrace this new technology. Editors and journalists within the online newsroom recognise the need to think creatively and maximise the medium's potential. Jansen indicates that online journalists need to work harder than traditionally required in print. They need to provide links to additional information, audio or video coverage and sufficient content.

SPH has recognised the need to enrich the online experience for users by providing a one-stop information service through the incorporation of web portals. Journalists involved in online activities strongly believe that quality content beyond news will attract a loyal readership, and with this readership, advertising can be a lucrative source of revenue. Issues such as quality content, dedicated domain names and information design are crucial for the paper to create a substantial online brand identity. SPH is experimenting with developing "virtual communities", by offering free e-mail services, web hosting, live chats, news customisation, e-mail updates, online auctions, weather reports, horoscopes and search engine capabilities. Current industry practice dictates that offering such services goes a long way towards attracting "eyeballs" (online readership), thus developing a loyal consumer base and profits.

Implications For Media Education

The online newsroom's evolving nature, and the quick pace of technology has introduced challenges for journalism practice in this new environment. Journalism educators would do well to consider its implications, and how these emerging trends can affect their students. Basic journalism skills such as interviewing and writing techniques, and ethical considerations will continue to remain essential. However students with the right additional skills as well as an ability to write produce clean copy will be very much in demand.

The new multi-skilled web content manager must be able to write and sub-edit copy, be *au fait* with HTML, design, image manipulation software, stay abreast of technological developments and be comfortable both in front and behind a digital camera. Most journalism schools have established student

online newspapers with varied levels of sophistication, which is a positive sign. It would be advantageous to introduce students to basic new media technologies theories, concepts, basic HTML and design applications.

Online newspapers have deadlines, similar to the radio and wire service newsrooms. Online journalists have to deal with intensifying deadline pressures and require the skills to rapidly identify quality interactive material such as image, audio and video bites to accompany copy. To reflect these industry changes, journalism educators can modify the normal "writing news pieces to tight deadlines" assignment by:

• Sending students to cover press conferences and news events. From the venue, students can be assigned to file a brief news story, either by phone or email. They can also be tasked to compiling quick audio and video grabs which can be easily transferred online.

• Assigning the student to file a full-length news piece complete with audio, visual grabs and with hyperlinks and additional information upon return to the newsroom.

Through this exercise, students can be trained to attend and cover "live" news events, file stories to tight deadlines, dictate copy over the phone, while thinking about images and sound to accompany the story. The traditional skills can still be acquired when writing from the student newsroom and extended to include some basic online transfer skills.

The easy access to information and resources online has made it essential for journalists (not limited to print) to acquire information gathering, librarian and web search skills. Working journalists are faced with an information overload that did not exist previously. They are required to gather and sift through information and turn it into stories/copy very quickly. Journalism educators can introduce students to various basic, advanced internet search techniques expose students to the potential of the WWW.

Some teaching tools worth exploring include introducing: an online scavenger hunt exercise where students are required to search for information on the web. For example:

• where were the last ten Olympics held? Who directed the 1940 flick, "The Mark of Zorro"?

• students to search engines, Boolean searches, listservs, mailing lists and discussion groups.

• access to databases, statistical websites such as the *Nielsen Internet Research and Statistics* website <http://www.nielsen-netratings.com>, and;

• encouraging students to understand numbers and

statistics and using them in their news stories.

Newsgathering on the Net: An Internet guide for Australia Journalists (Quinn 2000) is a useful reference guide for educators interested in introducing computer assisted reporting techniques.

Conclusion

STI's ambitious bid to be a pioneer and quality online newspaper was generally successful but cost overruns and doubling up of resources necessitated a redesign of production and management processes. Its initial efforts to provide original content gave way to straight content transfer but it has reverted to providing novel content once again with the relaunch of its new, evolving portal. SPH, and other news publishers will continue experimenting with online news delivery, move away from simple re-purposing to developing extensive "portals", and personalised mobile news through Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs). They may be capable of delivering news (not just bites of news) by the hour to individuals customised to their needs. Publishers will trial different information retrieval systems and search capabilities to capitalise on the archival nature of the WWW, with a view to developing the ideal mix to boost income and profitability. The WWW's evolving nature requires online journalists to re-skill and be *au fait* with new media technological tools. Journalism educators should heed this trend and adjust current curriculum to reflect industry changes by training students to write to rapid multiple deadlines, be multi-skilled, and acquire online research and Computer Assisted Reporting skills.

We are just beginning to witness the automation of the online news production process. Once the wheels have been set in motion, online news production may no longer be limited to the new media or online news departments. This conversion and online news production task may be decentralised to individual newsroom sections and the lines between an online and traditional journalist will diminish resulting in an integrated newsroom. ∎

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NISAR KESHVANI is editor of fineArtforum.org, an international art and technology online news service, and lectures at the School of Media and Journalism, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Email: nisar@keshvani.com