
DIGITAL NEWS – BRINGING JOURNALISM TO THE COMMUNITY

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Online development in the area of media and communication has taken many forms in the last decade. Information technology (IT) has enabled many areas, which were traditionally physically orientated, to emerge and explore a new dimension of interaction. This project provided an opportunity to examine how the introduction of new technology into regional media and communication brings into question the traditional roles of the journalist, editor, graphic designer, and audience in the production and 'consumption' of written material.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the issues that arose during a particular IT project and how these issues relate to regional media and communication. It does this by looking at the nature of the interaction between the world of IT and journalism. Such an interaction occurred in this case through collaboration between IT students at Ipswich and journalism students at Central Queensland University Rockhampton campus. The nature of the project enabled a real-life project and situation to be explored, developed, and implemented for the purposes online journalism.

The aims of the project were twofold. Firstly, the ability to develop an online environment to aid reliable information delivery in the journalism world. By enabling collaboration across the tyranny of distance, while maintaining ease of use and functionality, the possibility for users with non-technical levels of computer literacy to interact is enabled. Secondly, to provide an opportunity for education to assist in addressing multi-disciplinary issues and the development of online collaboration between all parties involved and the end users of the service – the community.

This is to be shown by describing the interaction between two sets of students involved in real-life projects in two physically distinct locations, and by indicating how – through the nature of online communication – they were able to maintain continuity and connection across considerable distance.

E-NEWS PROJECT

E-News was a collaborative project involving students from Information Environments (IE) at the Ipswich campus of the University of Queensland (UQ) and E-Journalism students at the Rockhampton campus of Central Queensland University (CQU) conducted in the second half of 2000. The IE students were required to function as a team of Web designers in order to develop a fully-functioning, database-driven Web site for an external client (shown in Figure 1). The E-Journalism students acted as the client for this purpose, providing the requirements and the content for the site.

Communication between the Web designers and the clients occurred through many forms of technology. Initial communication between the two parties occurred through the medium of videoconferencing, followed by E-mail.

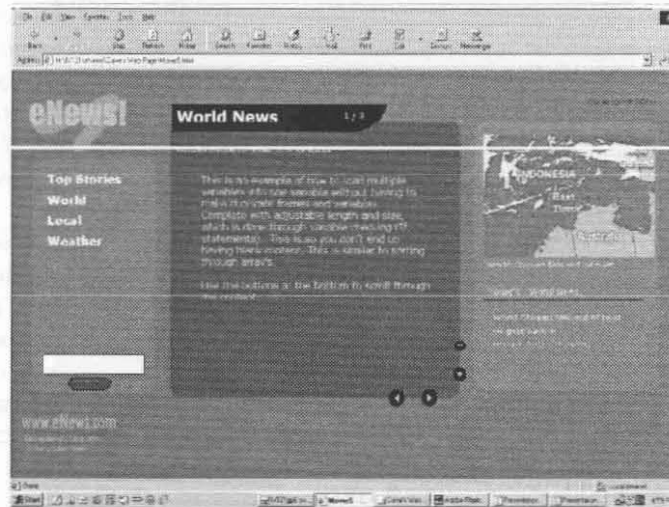


Figure 1. An example of a completed E-News database Web site.

Project aims

The aim of the project was to develop a Web site for the creation and modification of online news stories. The sites were required to be highly usable and easily updateable. Another aspect of the project was to explore the impact that interactive technology can have on the presentation of information that has traditionally been displayed in printed form. This was to be achieved through the representation of a real-life design environment in a 'studio-teaching' model. By teaching in such a manner, students are able to engage the client and gain experience in the nature of the design world. The nature of this pedagogy is effective not only in aiding the instruction and learning of students, but also in creating a realistic environment for the testing of new methods and approaches in industry.

Pedagogy

The pedagogy underlying the 'studio' approach has its theoretical origins in social constructivism and has been influenced by the work of Lebow (1993), and of Jonassen, Mayes, & McAleese (1993) and Jonassen & Reeves (1996). The studio approach places the learner at the core of the teaching and learning experience, and, like Simon (1960), emphasises the importance of learner activity and interaction as viable mechanisms to support learning. According to the studio approach, "what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does" (Shuell, 1986). In a break from the transmissive mode of delivery, characteristic of many lecturing situations and increasingly evident in the design of many content-driven

online courses (Brown, 1997), the studio approach creates a more fluid and responsive learning environment in which students are actively engaged in the learning process.

The project-based approach of the studio provides an environment for learners to:

- plan and develop their own learning projects,
- apply the skills and knowledge learned in concurrent subjects to the specific real-life scenarios provided by the projects,
- work collaboratively with other learners to develop knowledge and understanding,
- work with mentors and coaches,
- work as mentors and coaches.

The projects provide realistic and relevant contexts, which encourage ownership and voice in the learning process. They also provide opportunities for authentic assessment by assessing not the number of facts or concepts that are memorised and reproduced under examination conditions, but the learner's ability to use and apply the knowledge acquired in the learning process in the types of settings and situations where it is ultimately destined to be used. Transfer and application are also important outcomes of learning in the studio-teaching approach.

The role of technology in the pedagogy

Technology is used in the studio, not to deliver content, but to move the classroom focus from the teacher to the learner, and to create a more active and engaging climate for the learners. Oliver (1998) argues that such a shift will

encourage learners to develop their understandings and their capacity to think and act critically. Students are encouraged to use hardware and software to create new information environments and the Web is used to support communicative, collaborative, and cooperative activities among students and teachers.

The studio aims to foster creativity, reflection, articulation, and reasoning – all of which are important lifelong learning skills and valuable graduate attributes. The purposeful use of technology and of group work is central to these aims. Through this approach to studio-teaching and real-life projects can be applied with both the students and the client can benefit from a rich, industry-orientated format. The nature of these outcomes is explained in the following section.

Final product

In accordance with the nature of the studio pedagogy, the IE students were briefed about the nature of the project, the technical attributes, and the context of the material to be displayed. Over the eight-week duration of the project, the clients informed the development of a design brief for the project, the creation of initial-concept designs, and the selection of several preferred designs which were short-listed through an online presentation. From this point the IE students formed into Web-design production teams. The structures of these teams, were similar to professional Web design production teams, consisting of graphic designers, project managers, interface designers, programmers, and other relevant members (DiNucci, 1998).

Communication with the clients utilised a technological approach, with initial communication between the two parties occurring through videoconferencing. This enabled initial introductions between group members, the formation of conceptual ideas, and project understanding between both parties. This level of discussion and the establishment of understanding was comparable to that achieved through a physical meeting. By 'breaking the ice' through video feed, a familiarity between the clients and the designers began to develop and continued through other less physically constraining forms of communication. From this point, most communication and discussion occurred through E-mail and bulletin board discussion. During the group-development process the client reviewed the designs online via Web sites. The clients provided feedback to the individual Web site production teams through the medium of E-mail.

The constructed Web sites went live at the end of the eight weeks. The end result was an online design presentation to the clients, involving the clients conducting user testing on the sites. For user-testing purposes, the journalism students utilised the site as one would work with a real site. The 'journalists' split into groups and uploaded an assortment of news stories over the course of the following weeks, including images, video footage, and sound files.

The final sites consisted of two major sections: the public Web site displayed the articles, and the administration section enabled the uploading of articles and associated files by journalists. The administration section required a login to access (see Figure 2).

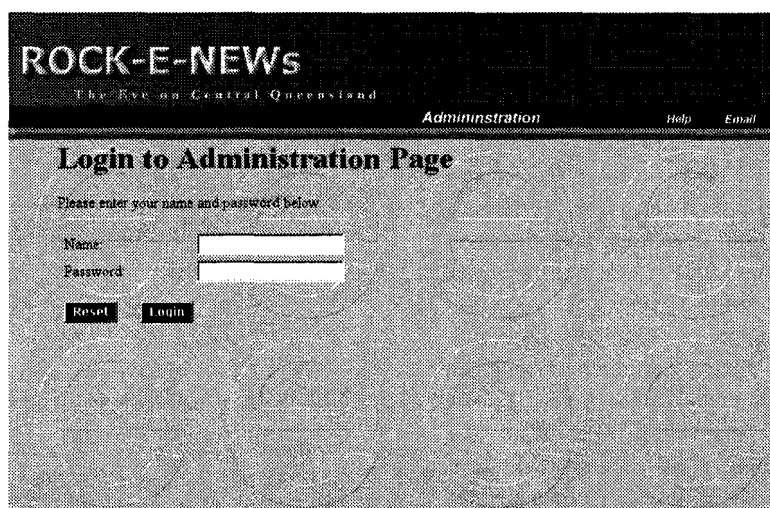


Figure 2. Administration login page.

The screenshot shows a web interface for 'ROCK-E-NEWS' with the subtitle 'The Eye of Central Queensland'. At the top, there are links for 'Administration', 'Help', and 'Email'. The main section is titled 'Add News Article Page'. It contains several input fields: 'Title' (empty), 'Author' (empty), 'Date' (set to '28 September 2000'), 'Category' (set to 'Main News'), and a large 'Text' area (empty). Below the text area are fields for 'Media File' and 'Summary'. At the bottom of the form are two buttons: 'Cancel' and 'Submit'.

Figure 3. Adding news articles

The nature of the administration section enables the journalists to upload, edit, and delete their stories with relative ease, through an easy-to-use Web-based system (as shown in Figure 3). Journalists only need to enter a title, summary, and to cut and paste the story into the text field. Adding the local file name and location on the computer through a series of simple online operations can lead to the uploading of all associated files. In some sites the ability to choose the location of the image was also provided, i.e., next to the header in the body of the article or at the end, depending on the context of the image.

When a story is uploaded, journalists can view the layout of the article with the ability to remove it, e.g., if the layout is unsuitable for public viewing. This enables the journalists to have editorial control over their own work. To assist the journalists in their use of the sites, an extensive help section was created to guide less-experienced users through the process of uploading stories.

Advantages

The E-News system has a number of advantages. The nature of the digital format not only allowed for increased flexibility, but also for greater media utilisation through accessible media. The major attributes, which make the system beneficial, are described below.

The key underlying aim of producing this system was to enable users who only have basic computer skills and understanding to be able to use the Web site with competence, by providing usable layout, well-structured pages, simple uploading mechanisms, and clear instructions. With current trends in computer usage in society, the basic skill set is increasing. A user who can run a computer and browse the Web

has all the skills required to utilise this Web-based system.

Linked to minimal computer literacy is the need for basic computer equipment within the community. This is not to say that every individual is required to have a computer, rather that some of the key players (community figures, such as heads of schools, mayors, community leaders, and so on) have access, with others in the community being able to access the Internet. Whether this occurs through public or private resources is not relevant, as long as the community can be involved in E-News with limited effort. It is in this sense that the community can be and is involved, which ultimately drives the usability of the system.

Synchronous news delivery is made possible by such a system, by enabling users to contribute online and in real-time. A synergy is formed through this level of collaboration with the IT facilitating the community interaction. Future directions for this E-News system will now be further considered in terms of community interaction and involvement whilst also considering the technical attributes and constraints.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The full potential of the E-News system has not been realised in its entirety. The system clearly shows an approach from an IT-specific point of view while being applicable to issues of remote collaboration inside a community. From an IT approach, E-News is flexible, interactive, and adaptable: building upon the secure base of the traditional newspaper. From the community viewpoint, E-News can potentially be of value through bringing journalism to the community and increasing communal awareness.

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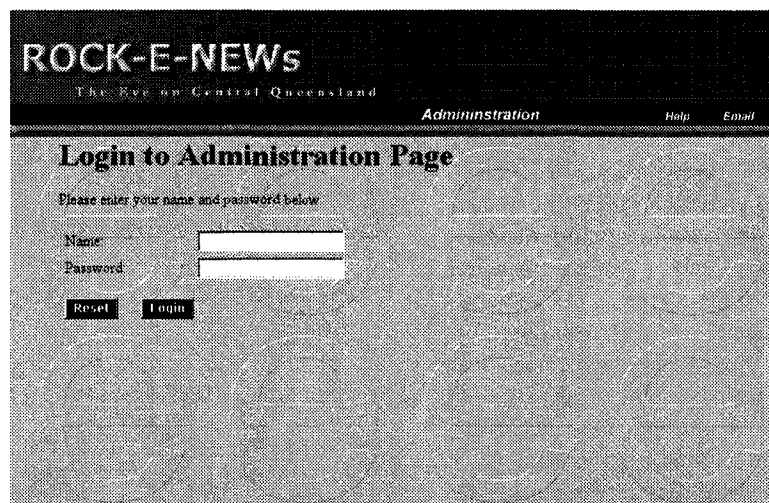


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Information technology

From an IT viewpoint the E-News approach has very few constraints. The system employs a considerable level of flexibility enabling such attributes as multiple file types and cut-and-paste, reducing the need for a content editor through real-time, synchronous operation (further explanation of the role of editors continues in the discussion related to community). There are two types of system management that can occur: moderated and unmoderated. Essentially the role of the editor comes into question depending on which of these options is chosen. The real benefit of E-News lies in the flexibility of the system, enabling information-demand by the readers, combined with delivery-on-demand by the contributors.

The system described above may be seen to blur the lines between bulletin boards¹ and online newspapers. The expiry date of news articles is short in the traditional sense. Old papers can be discarded over time, after the 'static' material becomes obsolete. E-News can change this approach in two ways. Firstly, the E News system with its dynamic format results in the material having a longer lifespan. Secondly, there is no preservation of stories and discussion. The analogue to letters-to-the-editor may be implemented as a bulletin board. Essentially, readers may post comments related to articles that in turn may be replied to by other readers. Such an interactive discussion is called a 'thread'². Through adding aspects of bulletin boards and online newspapers, a richer environment can be created by merging the two systems. This encourages the news service to not just disseminate news but to also encourage community involvement.

Utilising threads can be taken one step further. Stories can be linked to other articles that contain relevant information, expanding the body of supporting knowledge that both a contributor can rely upon, and a reader can obtain. Viewing these 'threads' and previous discussions can help a person understanding and on awareness of the context of other articles posted. By moving to more editorial control, the ability to enable threads between discussions, and the linking to related articles, can be

achieved. Through maintaining editorial control, contributors need to have an above-average computer skill set – in particular the need for skills in linking articles or discussions through hypertext. This inverse relationship between level of moderation and skill-level required can be shown in Figure 4.

One advantage that an online newspaper provides over traditional printed newspapers is the capacity to archive old news articles. The potential exists for further changes to traditional approaches by forward chronological linking through post-hoc modification. In a traditional newspaper, cross referencing between stories occurs, but unless the reader has access to the existing story (i.e., having bought that newspaper previously), the link is only of minimal benefit. Through linking in a digital sense the previous story can be read and the context further understood by the reader. This of course can occur as forward chronological links as well, that is, to a relevant article written after the one being currently read. This requires post-hoc editing.

A further issue resulting from an electronic news system is the ownership of an article. In an IT sense this comes down to those who posted the article. A further ownership issue is who should be able to edit the articles – the contributor or other associated parties. This ties back to the issue of overall site management with an editor or contributors as editors. The effects of digital delivery results in challenging the roles of not only journalism but also its relationship to the larger community.

¹ A system that enables users to send or read electronic messages, files, and other data that is of general interest and addressed to no particular person.

² A thread is a set of posts on a newsgroup, composed of an initial post about a topic and all responses to it.

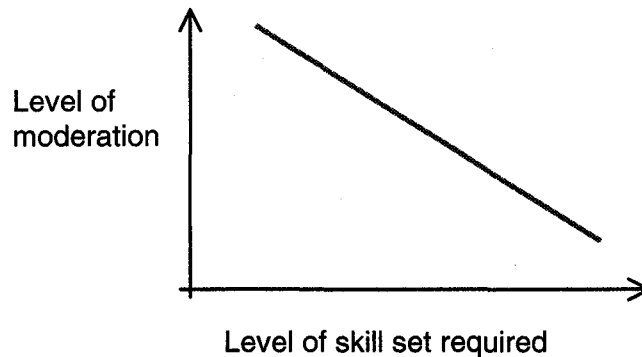


Figure 4. The trade-off of skills to centralised editorial control.

Community

E-News may be considered to contribute to bringing journalism to the community. Through developing an online environment to aid the delivery of journalism, it may be considered to contribute to bringing the community to journalism. The system described has added to existing mechanisms of traditional journalism, and in so doing, has expanded the scope of journalism to encompass not only those knowledgeable in writing, but also the relevant, informed members of the community.

Such community involvement challenges the traditional roles of the journalist and the editor. It is possible to select community members that have trusted status to publish. In such an arrangement, community members would have the ability to write their own articles on local situations or events, or to simply make comments. Essentially, what this enables is a group of 'grass roots' journalists to bring the media back to the community level. This is aimed as an extension of public journalism, which works on not just topically displaying the information but also engaging through readers opinions and values. "The public journalists newspaper is doing what the conscientious citizen would do given the time and resources to do it." (Rosen, 1994). It opens an opportunity to engage in the users' stories through community discourse, which reinforces a reader's sense of involvement and worthiness to state an opinion.

Interactivity

Traditional journalism has a distinct hierarchical of structure, with editorial control being sought across all stories. The traditional role of the journalist is challenged by empowering untrained community members to make contributions. The traditional role of the editor is challenged in as much as the editorial role can be devolved to the individual contributors. This results in the contributors being part of a trusted community who publish to the site. It is worth noting that this approach varies with the ability of all viewers to post discussion and editorial comment adding to stories rather than the posting of articles to which we are referring. Figure 5 reveals this point clearly, showing the overlap in the roles of community, writers, and key community members.

It is possible for a system to be structured in such a way that the approach of traditional journalism is encompassed. From a journalism approach, this requires the editor to moderate stories and from an IT approach it requires a Webmaster to manage the structure of the site. These roles can be encapsulated in one; essentially combining the editor and the typesetter (i.e., Webmaster).

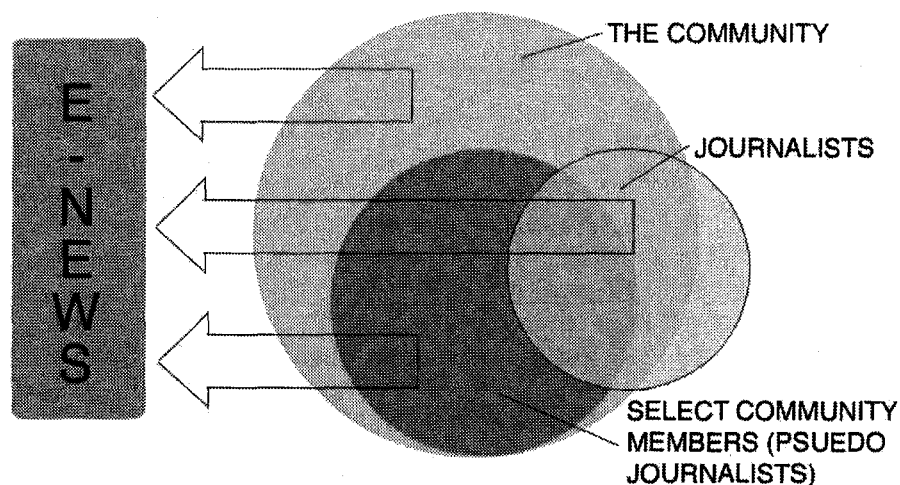


Figure 5. The nature of connections with E-News.

Multiple layering

Traditional news is subtly framed by story construction conventions deployed by mainstream journalists (Fuller, 1997). International newsagency style, which was developed to send stories by telegraph, can be identified in newspapers, and radio and television broadcasts across the world. This style usually demands a lead sentence, which summarises the key points followed by a second sentence, which provides context and a third, which consists of a direct quote (Cappon, 1982). Television reporting adds another dimension by layering on the perceived need for colourful moving pictures.

Newsagency style explicitly shapes story construction while implicitly ordering and informing content selection. This process is recognised by public-relations practitioners who create events, which serve these stylistic demands and are therefore advantaged in the news-making process, (e.g., news releases are usually constructed in news style, so that they can be more easily integrated into material offered as news by journalists. Events can be staged to satisfy news values linked to news style – see Knight & Nakano, 1998).

The Internet allows stories to be multi-layered. An Internet-delivered story can include hyperlinks to other sites providing background information. It can carry colour photographs, audio grabs, and short QuickTime movies. Since all of these additional layers can be created, edited, and lodged on the Web from a laptop in the field, gate keepers who might misinterpret or

even seek to censor the material can be excluded from the process (Stevens, 2002).

Real-time synchronicity

Real-time synchronicity enables the contributors to engage at several levels. This occurs directly, by encouraging interaction through discussion on community issues, but also indirectly by fostering community awareness. This occurs by enabling users to interact (chat) in real-time, encouraging an approach that through its nature is community orientated. In such a site, with contributor moderation, a greater sense of local ownership can occur, thus encouraging the community as a whole to interact and participate in the 'local' online newspaper.

Ownership

The issues of ownership essentially arise from adding and editing articles post-completion. The IT implications of ownership are almost non-existent. The IT can be structured to enable any ownership situation that is desired. The issue resides with the sense of ownership from a communal viewpoint. If communal control is assumed, as discussed in areas above, it is found that post-hoc altering has the following capabilities.

- forward chronological editing to articles is possible.
- additional information can be added to a story, thus enriching the reader's experience.

- information can be updated if it is incorrectly posted;
- essentially, this approach adds to the communal body of knowledge.

So if this approach can be so beneficial to community journalism, what can work against its implementation? In this case who owns the article? While this can be a highly-beneficial approach which enforces the laissez-faire approach, if multiple writers are editing an article who claims the ownership? Can all contributors claim ownership? The potential to free journalism from traditional constraints, is possible through online collaboration, but the issue still arises as to whether this is where the community wants the merging between synchronous discussion and journalism to go.

However, community-based E-Journalism should be seen as a compliment rather than a substitute for traditional journalism offered online. Sites such as SMH.com.au or Washingtonpost.com continue to attract significant hits in part because they offer 'badged' information, which is presented in recognisable and therefore more easily assessable packages. These packages are framed by the publishers' familiar political, cultural, and social assumptions (news values) and contain stories created within journalistic conventions, including notions of accuracy, fairness, and writing styles.

While such journalism stories can be seen as subjectively selected and assembled arguments, there is a qualitative difference between journalism, which should contain identifiable reference points (quotes and undoctored photos) and unsubstantiated rumour or intentional misinformation. It follows that consumers might more easily judge a Washington Post report of President Bush's latest news conference than a Matt Drudge (Drudge Report, 1998) essay based on anonymous tip-offs from the Web.

While all Internet community members should be considered equal, the information they produce should and could not be considered equally informed. One only has to tune to a chat group such as Yahoo's Washington Politics Arena, to see ignorance, arrogance, national chauvinism, and unbridled racism paraded as the free exchange of ideas. In this sense, journalism's hierarchical gatekeepers (editors) can be seen to be responsibly serving communities by excluding vilification, defamation, and intentional rumour mongering.

Freedom of speech demands responsible contributors as well as a discerning public if it is to underpin democratic decision-making. (US Bill of Rights) The Internet provides the public with greater choice but it does not necessarily validate the information it makes available.

CONCLUSIONS

The limiting factor of the E-News system is the boundary that is set by community values and traditional restraints, rather than the IT issues. Through challenging the traditional roles of journalism and the potential for communities to bridge the digital divide, social context and interaction not only reinforce the intra-communal but also the inter-communal across the physical divide.

Another way of overcoming the digital divide is by utilising students to pilot the testing of such systems rather than utilising the scarce resources in the professional arena. This is of benefit due to the nature of studio pedagogy incorporating real-life projects and approaches. This proof of concept testing enables journalists and communities alike to implement this without prejudicing future success through adverse experience.

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